

## Take the Cake

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### Ch1 – The Milkman of Human Kindness

The alarm woke her up, and Bella's mind was already whirling with possibilities. She got up and fluffed the quilt on her bed, the rearranged her four pillows just so, then headed into her tiny bathroom for a shower. She stood under the warm spray of water, letting it soothe and wake her, preparing her for the day ahead. Her mind calmed and went blank, waiting for ideas to bubble to surface, which they did. By the time she had washed and dried herself, she knew what she was going to do.

She wriggled into clean underwear, and then tugged on her favourite jeans, teaming them with a white wife-beater and a red button down shirt. Crossing to the bedroom mirror, she brushed and pulled her hair into a ponytail, then plaited the hair and twisted it into a neat bun, securing it with a collection of mismatched hairpins and a couple of brightly coloured chopsticks for good measure.

Sitting on the bed, she pulled on a pair of striped socks, and then her turquoise chucks. When she stood up, she straightened the quilt, and nodded with satisfaction. Stopping at her bedside table, she applied a squirt of her favourite scent, and then flicked the crystal that hung in the window, setting little rainbow prisms dancing across the bedroom floor. Now it was time for breakfast.

The apartment was quiet, just the way she liked it. Juice was poured, bread was toasted and spread lavishly with butter and honey, and then she sat down in an enormous old armchair that was positioned by the window. She curled up in it with her plate and glass, and watched the street below.

The day was very early, but there were already people out walking dogs and getting newspapers. In the distance she could hear jackhammers starting up, and a random blast from a car horn. She yawned and bit into her toast, then reached for her book as she chewed. A quick glance at her watch showed that she still had some spare time, so she opened the pages and stepped into another world.

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Edward lay in bed bleary-eyed, watching his clock tick over, and slapped off the alarm as it began to sound, rolling back over onto his back and staring at the ceiling. It had been another night of interrupted, dreamless sleep.

He got up and padded into the kitchen, discovering to his disgust that he was out of coffee filters, then reached for his cigarette pack and found that it was empty. It was probably time to quit again anyway. He threw the empty pack back onto the table and went into the bathroom.

Standing under the shower spray, he braced his hands on the tiled wall and closed his eyes, letting the water pummel him and run in thick rivulets down his body. His hands clenched into fists. Surely he'd think of something soon. He had to. He couldn't go on like this.

Drying himself off, he picked up his jeans that had been discarded on the floor, ignoring the creases, and pulled on a pair of socks and an old pair of black Nikes. Sitting on the bed, he surveyed his closet. There were more empty hangers than clean shirts. He'd have to do some laundry soon. Hell, he'd do anything if he thought he might get an idea worth his while. He yawned and then got up and carelessly grabbed a shirt to put on, stopping to spray on some deodorant.

He sat down at his desk by the window and powered up his laptop, gazing out into the street. Early morning and everyone seemed to be in a hurry, walking with a sense of purpose. At least they knew what they were doing, unlike him.

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It was time to get to work. Bella grabbed her vintage leather satchel and swung the strap over her head, settling the bag comfortably against her hip. She stopped near the door where she had hung a small square mirror with a deep, flat wooden frame, and foraged in a Chinese teacup for her silver hummingbird ear-rings. Grabbing a waiting tube of lip gloss she applied a quick coat, smacked her lips, checked she had her keys and headed out the door.

She took the stairs slowly, one hand on the railing, the other scrolling through her ipod to find some good music. Groove Armada seemed to be the go today, and seconds later the introductory bass to 'Madder' was filling her head. She pushed open the double doors to get outside and hit the pavement, her steps keeping perfect time with the beat of the music.

A short time later, she rounded the corner and felt the familiar lift as she saw the fluttering red canopy heralding the bakery's presence in Greenwich Village. Although it was still early, a small figure stood at the front door, lifting a hand in welcome as Bella approached.

"Morning, Boss."

"Alice, don't call me boss," Bella reprimanded with a smile.

"Sorry, Boss."

They always greeted each other like this.

"What got you here so early this morning, did you wet the bed?" Bella fished out her keys and unlocked the door, standing aside to let Alice in first.

"Nope, I had a great idea for the window, and I thought up today's quote while I was on my way here. How about you, got any ideas?"

Alice shrugged out of her coat and went behind the broad old-fashioned wooden counter to hang it up out the back. Bella followed.

"Yep, thought it up this morning while I was getting ready."

"Let me guess, in the shower?"

"Yep."

Alice regarded her with a smile.

"What is it with you and water?"

"I have no idea," Bella replied as she switched on the industrial coffee machine, "but I'm not going to knock a system that works."

"If it ain't broken, don't fix it," Alice replied as she snatched up a piece of chalk.

Bella's forehead wrinkled.

"That's the quote? I would have thought you could do better than that," she said, then added hastily when Alice scowled at her, "no pressure or anything."

"I was making conver-*sation*," Alice said, sighing and walking back to the front of the store. She picked up a small wooden framed blackboard, thought for a moment then scribbled on it, made a couple of flourishes, and then nodded. Opening the storefront door, she hung the blackboard up on the waiting brass hooks outside, and came back in.

"What's your poison?" Bella asked.

"Mocha grande," Alice replied.

"Gotcha," Bella nodded, and started to froth the milk.

The coffees were made, and then Bella pulled on an apron and went to work. The kitchen out back was small, but held everything she needed. An industrial sized oven, a large stack of cooling racks, and some mixers. Bella stood quiet for a moment, staring off into space.

"Getting in touch with your inner Zen master?"

Bella blinked and came back to the present. It was Alice.

"Shut up minx, I'm calculating quantities."

"Really? Because any longer and it looked like you were going to start drooling."

"Hey, you want to be able to lick the beaters or not?"

"Yes'm," Alice replied, trying and failing to look deferential.

"Then scat," Bella shooed her away, and set to work with a smile.

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Edward was staring blindly at his laptop screen when the phone rang, jolting him out of his reverie. He answered, and then cursed that he hadn't checked the caller id.

"Cullen," he mumbled.

"I know it's early, but I'm on my way to a meeting this morning and I'm hoping you've got some good news for me."

There had been no greeting, but Edward knew the voice of a stressed Editor when he heard it.

"Marcus," he began, and heard a heavy sigh at the other end of the line.

"Fuck, when you say my name like that I know it's never going to be good news."

"So why did you call?"

"I was hoping against hope that you'd have something different to tell me."

"Sorry."

"Have you got anything?" Marcus ventured after a pause.

"Nothing yet."

"Well, keep me posted. Is there anything I can do to help?"

*Stop calling.*

"I'll let you know," Edward said aloud.

"Okay man. Talk to you later."

Edward disconnected the call without saying goodbye. Since his words had left him, some of his social niceties had gone too, particularly where his Editors were concerned anyway. He slumped back in his chair, scratching at his morning stubble. It was going to be a long day.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Boss?"

"Mm-hmm?" Bella didn't look up.

"People are asking what today's one is going to be. What'll I tell them?"

"You got the board?"

"Good to go," Alice held up a small foolscap sized chalkboard.

Bella dictated, Alice grinned and scribbled madly, then went back out to the front of the store. Bella kept working, grinning as she heard Alice explain what she had written, and looked up briefly as she heard laughter. A few minutes later, she carried out the first tray, handed them over to Alice who began to put them into the cake stands with all due ceremony. Walking back into the kitchen, Bella began to clean up after herself, stacking bowls and beaters in the dishwasher and wiping down the bench ready for the next batch.

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Edward jerked awake, then groaned as his neck began to ache. He'd fallen asleep sitting at his desk again. That was never a good sign. He looked around blearily, wondering what had woken him up, and then heard his cell phone beep again.

He picked it up and looked at the screen. It was a text message.

*Anything? Anything at all? – M*

He looked at his watch. Nearly 11am and so far he'd had one phone call, and a text message. He had to get out of the apartment otherwise the phone was going to ring again. Getting up, he went back into his bedroom and gathered up his laundry, stuffing it into a large cotton carry bag. If he was going out he might as well drop off his laundry. He pulled on an old grey pea coat, stuffed his wallet into his back pocket, picked up his keys and left.

Once he was downstairs, he slung the bag over one shoulder and stood on the pavement looking up and down the street. He'd have to get out of West Soho, it'd be too easy for Marcus to come looking. Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, he put his head down and began to walk.

Words.

He needed to find some words.

The more the merrier.

\* \* \* \* \*

"More?"

"Yep, keep 'em coming. Who would've thought these would be so popular?" Alice said with a wink, "I guess more people out there can relate than you thought."

"Okay," Bella thought quickly, "but we're going to need to order some more supplies in," she said as she shook her head in bemusement. Some days were more surprising than others, and it looked like today was no exception.

She slid the next couple of trays into the oven, then washed her hands and made the most of the momentary lull to head out to the front of the shop. Alice was serving, and Bella moved further down the counter and took a few orders, sliding the coffee orders onto the slot over the barista machine. Alice was busy frothing milk, but scanned the slips and nodded once, indicating that she was on top of things.

Bella smiled and waved to a few regulars, and then picked up a large plastic tub and walked out into the café space, gathering up empty cup, saucers and plates, stopping and making chit chat along the way. Everyone seemed to be happy, and she hauled the tub into the kitchen and began to transfer the cups, plates and glasses into the dishwasher.

"Everything going okay?" she stopped to ask Alice on her way back out to the front of the store.

"Yeah, thanks for clearing the tables," Alice said as she slid out two more coffees to the waiting customers. "Have you thought more about my suggestion?"

"About getting a dish pig? I have, and you're right, we're going to need someone in here giving us a hand with the background stuff."

"Cool, I know just the person," Alice said promptly.

"Give them a call and get them in for a chat as soon as they're able, and we'll take it from there," Bella advised.

Bella went out into the front of the store again and finished straightening up the tables, topping up the sugar supplies and getting everything looking neat and tidy to her satisfaction. She ran her eyes over the café, looking for any imperfections, but it seemed that everything was as it should be.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward had not been paying any attention to where he was going.

He'd dropped off his laundry and just kept on walking, blending in with the morning commuters here and then, and then moving on away from the crowds, heading into Greenwich Village. His Editor was in Manhattan, so there would be little chance of getting caught doing something other than sitting in front of his laptop, an activity that hadn't done him much good over the last month.

He lifted his chin slightly as he walked, starting to pay a bit more attention to his surroundings as buildings began to yield a few more interesting things to look at.

He hadn't been into the Village much over the last few months, and he was surprised to see that some of the retail spaces had changed. What had been a shoe repair store now sold comic books, a music store was now an Indian restaurant, and the travel agent had given way to a bookstore. It seemed that the stores were still all independently owned though, no major franchise names, which meant the area was retaining its charm.

A fluttering red canopy further down the other side of the street caught his eye. He squinted but couldn't make out the lettering. His curiosity piqued, he crossed the street and kept walking.

It was a bakery.

Edward stopped and peered in at the window display in the bay window. A series of bell jars had been set up, some stood on stacks of old hardcover novels, others on folded newspapers. Each jar had been propped on some sort of reading material, no doubt sourced from the bookstore nearby. The cupcakes were little works of art, frosted icing, sprinkles, all manner of decorations.

He hesitated, then glanced at the chalkboard that was hanging on a brass hook outside. He read the artfully written quote, and a wry smile tugged at his lips.

*Ever feel like your guardian angel has just popped out for a smoke?*

Charmed despite himself, he stepped inside.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice looked up at the sign of movement, and gazed at the tall man who stood deliberating in the doorway.

At that moment, Bella who had stopped at a table to chat to a couple of customers, threw back her head and laughed. The sound bubbled around the store, catching the eye of the visitor. His eyes flickered towards the source of the laughter, and Alice watched his reaction.

"Holy shit," she whispered to herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward stood in the doorway, fidgeting slightly as he decided whether he wanted to go further inside or not. Then he heard the laughter. It was such a warm sound that he had walked in before he quite knew what he was doing, his gaze flickering to where the sound had come from.

The woman had a slight build, and pale smooth skin. Her hair had been pulled away from her face, so he could see a heart shaped face with chocolate brown eyes that danced with amusement as she teased the two old men sitting at a table, wagging a finger warningly at them in mocking indignation as she moved away.

She walked behind the counter, still chuckling to herself, and made a comment to her colleague before disappearing out of sight.

Edward found that he wanted her to come back. He stood there for a moment, waiting.

"Can I help you?"

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Alice ran an appreciative gaze up his tall frame, watching him as he stood watching Bella.

He was gorgeous, and unlike a lot of striking men she knew, this one clearly had no idea of his appeal. As he had walked in and the two women sitting at the front table and exchanged quiet gasps and gone quiet, they eyes raking over him, and he paid them no attention at all.

He was scruffy and unkempt. His hair stuck up in spikes and whorls of bronze that clearly indicated he had rolled out of bed and into the day with barely a thought. The morning stubble merely served to accentuate a jaw line that begged to be kissed.

Not that she would be the one doing the kissing, Alice realised. As soon as Bella had laughed he only had eyes for her.

Naturally, Bella had no idea.

Whilst Alice more than held her own when it came to dating, she constantly despaired that Bella would remain single. Men seemed drawn to her, and she had no idea. Alice told her repeatedly when she was being checked out, pointed men out to her, passed on phone numbers, and still Bella seemed mystified as to why she attracted any interest at all.

Bella had finished her conversation and walk back around the counter, giggling at Alice as she walked past.

"Watch out for those two, Alice," Bella said in voice loud enough to carry to the two old men, "they're getting cheekier by the year," and then continued into the kitchen.

Alice gave the two men in question a wink, before turning to the man who stood silently watching.

"Can I help you?"

She watched him watch Bella, and knew what she was going to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward gazed at her for a moment, and then looked blankly at the counter.

"Uh, coffee?"

"Coming right up," she agreed promptly, "How do you have it?"

"Cream and sugar," he replied, and dug out his wallet.

"Sugar's on the table," she replied as she gave him his change, "go take a seat and your coffee will be right over."

"Thanks."



He paused and looked at the cupcakes on display. The most prominent ones had an orange coloured icing that seemed oddly familiar, with a red cherry on top. He leaned forward to peer at the handwritten sign - *You Can Do It Cupcake*.

He raised an eyebrow at the title.

"It's our affirmation for the day, and if you're quitting smoking you get a free nicotine patch."

"I see," he allowed, "where do you get them from?"

"Uh, I think Bella just went to the pharmacist and-"

"No," he shook his head, "the cupcakes."

"Oh! They're all made here on the premises by Bella, who you just saw head into the kitchen."

Edward looked up at that.

Now he knew her name.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey Boss, could you spot me for a minute? I've got to-," Alice jiggled on the spot by way of illustration.

"Sure, got any orders?"

"Just one, tall hunk wants a tall coffee. He's paid," Alice said, grabbing the key for the restroom and ducking out the back.

Bella went to the coffee machine and went to work. As she waited for the coffee to filter into the cup she looked for the customer Alice had mentioned. It wasn't hard to see him. He looked like a lion in a cattery, and he looked miserable. She kept watching him as he picked up a sachet of sugar and tapped it on the table, lost in thought. The coffee was poured, and she paused for a moment before getting out a plate.

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Edward mumbled his thanks as his coffee appeared on the table, then looked up in surprise as a cupcake on a small plate followed. It was the woman he had been watching earlier.

"You look like you needed it," she said, indicating the cupcake with a glance. A nicotine patch, individually wrapped, had been stuck in the icing on top of the cupcake.

"What gave it away?"

His voice felt rusty from lack of use.

"The way you've been playing with that sugar sachet was a pretty good clue," she replied, making him glance at the sachet he was holding in his fingers as he would a cigarette.

"Thanks," he said, feeling awkward and out of practice, "I didn't expect-"

She waved off his thanks.

"That's when random acts mean the most, when they're not looked for."

She smiled, and he found himself smiling back.

"I'm Bella," she said, holding out her hand.

"Edward," he replied as they shook.

"Well Edward, I've got to get back to work, but maybe we'll see you here again sometime."

"Maybe," he agreed.

She gave a quick smile then she went back to work, stopping at the stereo to turn up the music slightly.

Edward watched her leave, and sipped at his coffee listening to the words of the song.

'I am the milkman of human kindness, I will leave an extra pint'.

He swiped a finger through the cupcake frosting and tasted it. Delicious. Suddenly feeling hungry, he began to eat.

He still had no words, but for the first time in a long time, he felt less empty.

## **Chapter 2 – Sins and Salmon**

Edward switched off the alarm clock with a slap of his hand, and burrowed his head back into his pillow. If he could get back to sleep, he wouldn't have to think about what he wasn't able to do. The ambient noise of the city filtered into the apartment, and he heard a door bang in the apartment upstairs. He squeezed his eyes closed, trying to shut out the day.

Then the phone rang.

With a muffled oath he threw the pillow aside and sat up, half leaning, half crawling over to the bedside table where his cell phone was shrilling.

"What," he snapped.

"And good morning to you too, Asshole."

"Marcus, I see you've decided to give up on charm as a negotiating point."

He hadn't heard from his Editor for a few days, long enough for him to relax and hope that Marcus had found another project to occupy his time. Hearing his voice this morning however, made Edward realise with an inward sigh that the problem wasn't going to go away any time soon.

"Well it wasn't working so I figured it was time to move onto well-meaning abuse."

"Noted," Edward waited, but Marcus said nothing, "so was there a purpose to this call?"

"Just to say that it's looking like it's going to be a nice day for writing."

"Maybe, if there's something to write about."

"You'll think of something."

"No pressure or anything," Edward replied in a dry tone.

"Oh hell no, I'm not about to throw fuel on the fire by saying you're contractually obliged."

"Thanks," Edward said.

"Or that our suppliers are starting to put the heat on," the voice went on.

"Marcus," Edward said in a warning tone.

"And your legion of fans are emailing, wanting to know when the next book is due," Marcus continued, ignoring the interruption. "I mean, what sort of Editor would I be if I pulled that kind of shit with one of our most successful authors?"

Edward sighed.

"Just because everyone is up in arms because you won't do any interviews, you know how they all eat up that 'reclusive author' bullshit, it just makes them want to talk to you more."

"Thanks man, all this is really helping," Edward said at last.

"Am I annoying you yet?"

"What, you mean you could tell? And there I was trying to suppress the rage," Edward said in a dry tone.

"Hey how about we make a deal. Rather than you talking to me on the phone, you could maybe write it down?"

"You're a subtle man, Marcus."

"Wait, I can see something developing here," Marcus continued, warming to his theme, "you could write it down and fuck me, Cullen, you could probably get whole sentences out of this situation."

"Marcus, I'm warning you," Edward began.

"Or you'll what, do nothing? Right, like that isn't what you've been doing for the last few months," Marcus replied in a goading voice.

"Fuck you," Edward growled, and disconnected the call.

Marcus listened to the dial tone for a moment and then replaced the handset back in the receiver. He leaned forward with his elbows on the desk and rested his head in his hands, letting out a shaky breath. It had been a risky move, but something had to goad Edward into action. At this point anything had to be worth a try.

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Bella glanced at the clock, and returned to her book. It wasn't often that she woke up before her alarm, and rather than try to go back to sleep she had picked up the book she had been reading the night before. She propped herself up into a more comfortable position against her pillows and turned the page. She was feeling very self indulgent, and loving it.

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Edward flicked his cell phone back onto the bedside table, ignoring it when it slid off and fell onto the floor with a clatter. One of his pillows had fallen onto the floor and he couldn't be bothered getting it. He rolled onto his side and grabbed the other pillow, trying to get comfortable enough to go back to sleep. He sighed, a loud exhalation in the quiet bedroom, and tried to relax. He realised he was clenching his jaw and yawned, trying to stretch out the tension.

A car horn blared downstairs, followed by a shouted obscenity.

His eyes snapped open and he stared at the ceiling. Clearly it was not going to be his kind of day.

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Bella closed her book with considerable reluctance and got up. She didn't bother making the bed. Given it was a Friday, chances were more than good that she would end up having a few drinks after work and get home late. She showered and dressed.

Jeans and a shirt again, but she threw her favourite leather boots into a backpack, along with a bottle of scent and her lip gloss. She grabbed a bottle of water and left the apartment. She'd have something to eat when she

got to the shop. A look at her watch revealed that she was running ahead of schedule, so there might be time to sit down and think about the day ahead before the customers started to arrive.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice made her way towards Greenwich Village, her eyes raking over the passing closed faces of the other pedestrians, wondering where inspiration for her quote of the day was going to strike. Rounding a corner, she nearly tripped over a small dog hunched over doing its deed. Alice exchanged a sympathetic grimace with the dog walker, who was trying to fish out a plastic bag and control the other six dogs on leads at the same time.

"No good deed goes unpunished," the dog walker muttered in Alice's direction, bending down to clear away the dog's leavings.

Alice stepped aside and kept walking, her stride faltering for a moment as inspiration struck, then grinned and continued on her way.

\* \* \* \* \*

He didn't know where he was going, he just wanted to get out. Get away. He glanced around for his phone and saw it on the floor by the bed. He stooped to pick it up and then hesitated. Not many people called him these days. He'd been keeping to himself and had little to say, certainly less to write. He picked up the phone and then tossed it onto the bed and left it there.

He pulled on jeans and a t-shirt, thankful that he had clean clothes to choose from, and shuffled his feet into shoes and socks. Stopping in the kitchen, he swigged back a glass of juice and then made for the door. He'd get something to eat while he was out. He just had to get away from the damn computer for a while. He'd find a bookstore. Perhaps there was comfort to be found in someone else's words if he couldn't find any of his own.

He jogged down the staircase, then opened the front door and stepped outside, squinting against the daylight. Tugging his baseball cap out of his back jeans pocket, he flicked it out and tugged it into a comfortable position, and then slid his sunglasses on against the sun's glare.

It had been another late night, with nothing to show for it. He stared blindly at his laptop screen for what felt like hours, and then stared at the television, which had deadened his mind just as much. By the time he had killed a few more hours surfing the internet and decided to turn in it was already after midnight. He was going to have to get into a better routine. He thought back over the previous evening and snorted to himself. In terms of his social life, he had nowhere to go but up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella crossed the street, and looked up to see the familiar figure of Alice waiting for her under the red canopy.

"How do you do it?" Bella called out as she drew near, "I'm ahead of schedule and you *still* beat me."

Alice shrugged.

"Gotta keep you on your toes somehow Boss."

"Alice, don't call me Boss."

"Sorry Boss."

Bella unlocked the door and wedged the door open to let in the fresh air, flicking on lights and overhead circulating fans.

Alice walked past her, shrugging off her coat and putting her bag away in the lockable cupboard in the kitchen, then returned to pick up the chalkboard.

"Got your quote of the day?"

"Sure have, thought it up on the way to work this morning, how about you?"

"Yep. I saw the David Beckham billboard on the way in this morning, so it was a no-brainer. What was your inspiration?"

"Dog shit, believe it or not," Alice laughed, and picked up the chalk.

Bella shook her head and flicked on the coffee machine before going into the kitchen to turn on the oven.

Alice hung the chalkboard up outside, and then began to check the condiment supplies on each table.

Bella looked up from the coffee machine as Alice started to fill up the water jugs.

"Have you had breakfast?"

"Not yet," Alice replied.

"Neither have I. Grab some of the savoury muffins from yesterday and zap them in the microwave, they'll be nice with a bit of melted butter and a coffee."

"I'm on it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward stepped into the bookstore, and knew straight away that he had made a mistake. Books everywhere. Words everywhere. All written by people who probably had much better luck at stringing a sentence together these days than he did. He wandered up and down the aisles, picking up and replacing books at random, then scowled as he saw a display stand of his novels. There seemed to be no escape from the damn things.

He left the store and kept walking.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey Boss, are they nearly done?"

"Sure, get the board."

"What do you think this is?"

Bella looked up to see Alice was already holding it.

"Well done, okay-"

She dictated, and Alice laughingly wrote it down.

"Beckham's always good for inspiration," she commented.

"Like *that's* what Armani was aiming for," scoffed Bella as she picked up the tray and followed Alice out into the front of the store.

Today's offering was a lush selection of red velvet cupcakes, with white chocolate liqueur frosting, white chocolate curls and a ripe raspberry nestled into the moist folds of sugar. Alice waited as Bella arranged the cupcakes, and then propped the mini chalkboard on a small easel to stand beside them proclaiming *I feel a sin coming on*.

Alice looked at the cupcakes, then their name, and then back at Bella.

"Nice one," she said.

"I thought so," Bella agreed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward kept walking.

He paused at a travel agency, looking at the posters and prices, for a moment entertaining the thought of getting out, getting anywhere, getting all the way far, far away. Going some place where no-one knew what he did, what he used to do, what he was supposed to be doing.

He sighed and walked on.

It was early afternoon before he paused at the intersection, waiting for the lights to change, and actually took a good look around to get his bearings. He slid his sunglasses down his nose and squinted around at the buildings. Where the hell was he?

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't know where you went in your head this morning Boss, but what the hell did you put in those cupcakes?"

Bella was in the midst of decorating and looked up in concern.

"What, no good?"

Alice snorted.

"Yeah right, like that's gonna happen. They're practically walking out the store. Just tell me those ones there are going to be ready soon."

"Sure, give me about five minutes," Bella replied in an absent voice, popping a raspberry into her mouth. She went back to piping on the frosting on the last cupcake then put the icing bag down on the counter. Popping another raspberry into her mouth, she chewed as she sprinkled the white chocolate curls over the cupcakes, arranging them just so, humming to herself. She felt very content.

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Edward walked on, feeling annoyed. He knew he was in Greenwich Village again, but he must have gotten turned around somehow, his sense of direction felt skewed. He stopped at the next corner and looked down the cross street. That's when he recognised the red canopy flapping in the breeze halfway down the next block.

The bakery.

He knew where he was now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella was putting the last of the latest batch of cupcakes in the display cabinet when she heard Alice greet someone and walk out from behind to counter to hug the newcomer. She looked up to see a slim woman laugh and hug Alice, as the two of them began to chatter with an ease that spoke of a long friendship. Alice took the woman by the hand and hauled her over to the counter.

"Boss, this is Angela, my friend that I've been telling you about."

"Alice, don't call me Boss," Bella replied, and reached out with a laugh to shake Angela's hand, "Hi Angela, you'll have to excuse Alice and I. We go way back so we have a bit of a routine going."

"I know the feeling, and hi Bella, it's nice to meet you at last," Angela answered.

Bella assessed her in a glance, and liked what she saw: Angela had a quiet unassuming nature, her face was open and honest, her smile reached her eyes, and her mouth looked like it smiled often.

"Angela is looking for some part-time work at the moment, and I thought she'd be perfect," Alice supplied.



"Have you done retail or hospitality before, Angela?" asked Bella.

"Some, but not a lot," Angela replied, "I'm a quick study though and I've got a strong work ethic."

"She's kept up with me in the past," added Alice.

"And that's saying something," said Bella, "which is good enough for me. Welcome to the team, Angela, when can you start?"

"Uh," Angela looked taken aback, "Well I guess now is as good a time as any."

"Great," Bella praised, "Alice will show you the ropes, and I'll get some paperwork for you to fill in."

"Okay," Angela replied, and then gave a small laugh, "that was all really easy."

"Hey, it's just synchronicity," Bella shrugged, "I needed more help, Alice knew you, so it's all good. Besides," she added, "any friend of Alice's is a friend of mine, so I think we'll make a great team."

"Not that I want to shoot a job offer in the foot or anything, but are you sure?" Angela ventured, "I mean, I've never had a job interview quite like this before."

"I've never really hired anyone before," Bella shrugged, then turned to Alice who was about to protest, "you don't count, you told me you were going to work here and it would be fabulous, so I didn't have much say in it."

Alice opened and closed her mouth, then turned to Angela.

"It's true," she admitted. "I just showed up and convinced Bella that she needed me."

Bella gave Angela a wry smile, "She has an annoying way of being right too," she said.

"Tell me about it," agreed Angela.

"So Boss, while I show Angela around, what say you have some lunch?"

"You trying to get rid of me?" teased Bella.

"Hell no, you're too good a cook, but you ought to eat something besides frosting."

"Okay, I'll make something up."

"How about you eat the smoked salmon bagel I've got ready for you in the refrigerator, over at that table," Alice supplied, pointing at a table near the front door.

Bella stared at her.

"When the hell did we get married?"

Alice snorted.

"Please, like you could afford me."

"Alice, whoever gets you will be some lucky bastard, but I just hope he knows what he's taking on," retorted Bella over her shoulder as she went to get her lunch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward walked up the street, his pace slowing, until he stood on the other side of the street staring at the shopfront. He wasn't sure what he was doing. He shoved his hands in his pockets and glanced up the street.

It was just a bakery.

No big deal.

So why did he feel like it was?

He looked at the chalkboard hanging up out the front of the store. Another new quote of the day. At least someone was able to write.

He crossed the street for a better look.

*The road to hell is closed for repaving.*

He grinned, and his feet made the decision for him. He stepped inside.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella walked out of the kitchen with her bagel on a plate, protesting to Alice,

"Jesus, do you think you made this one big enough?"

"Relax Boss, I made them for us at home this morning."

"Maybe, but it's the size of a goddamn Volkswagon!"

"You work very hard, so you need a good lunch," said Alice with a placid smile, "now go sit, and I'll bring you a coffee."

Bella sat.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward stood in the doorway of the cafe getting his bearings, his eyes darting towards the counter. There were two women standing behind the coffee machine, one in the process of teaching the other how it all worked. They were deep in conversation but looked up with ready smiles at his approach.

He studied their features, but neither was the woman that he had spoken to a few days before. He was surprised to feel a stab of disappointment.

"Hi there, what can I get for you?"

The shorter of the two women had addressed him, and he requested a coffee in a quiet voice.

"No problem," she smiled, "you go take a seat and we'll be right with you."

He took his change, nodded his thanks and turned around to look for a table.

That's when he saw her.

She was sitting at a small bistro table by herself, with what appeared to be a late lunch on the table. She was leaning back in her chair slightly as she gave a cat-like stretch, her arms up over her head, quite unselfconscious. She relaxed with a sigh and rolled her head from side to side, before opening her eyes and picking up her bagel and taking a bite. She chewed with obvious enjoyment and gave a thumbs-up to the women behind the counter.

He hesitated, looking around the café as he tried to find a spare table.

"You can sit here if you like."

He turned to see the woman – Bella, he remembered her name – had pushed out a spare chair at her table with her foot. She had a hand raised to her face to cover her mouth as she finished chewing, and spoke again.

"I don't be here long, and then I'll be getting back to work," she explained, jerking her thumb towards the kitchen.

Edward stood hesitating, shifting his weight as he tried to decide what to do. She was looking at him, waiting for him to say something. He was going to have to find some words.

"I don't want to impose," he began, and she shook her head in denial.

"Sit," she invited again.

He sat down, licked his lips, and tried to think of something to say.

She regarded him over the top of her bagel as she took another bite.

He noticed that her eyes crinkled at the edges. She must be someone who smiled often, and with sincerity. She had brown eyes, fringed with thick lashes. Eyes that were framed with expressive eyebrows, one of which, he realised now, was beginning to arch in inquiry.

He was staring.

He cleared his throat, and gave a start of relief with one of the women silently appeared at his elbow to slide his coffee cup onto the table. He clutched at the saucer, relieved to have something to do with his hands. After keeping to himself for so long, he was feeling the heat of her regard to be somewhat disconcerting.

He wished he could think of something to say.

He wished he could find the words.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella had seen him, or rather heard his low voice when he had placed his order. She had been stretching out a kink in her back, and had looked up in curiosity when she heard a gravelly low timbre. She had always liked people watching, and she got special enjoyment out of seeing who was visiting her store, her pride and joy.

He was tall, but stood like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

A quick glance showed her that there were no available tables, but she could fix that.

"You can sit here if you like."

When he looked over, she hooked a chair with her heel and pushed it out in invitation.

"I don't want to impose," he said after a moment's pause.

"Sit," she invited again.

He sat fidgeting as he waited, giving a small start when Alice appeared by the table and set his coffee cup down beside his elbow.

Bella took another bite of her bagel, chewing slowly as she watched him.

There was something different about him.

His eyes were green, with a generous abundance of eyelashes that women paid a fortune for in mascara to achieve. Green eyes staring back at her brown ones.

She matched him stare for stare, her gaze steady.

She felt peaceful and relaxed. The bakery had been having a good day, the cupcakes had gone over well with customers, they had help, and she was feeling content.

Unlike the man sitting in front of her. He looked tired, worn out, and weighed down.

She glanced down at her plate, and made a decision. Alice had been making lunch for Bella for over two years now, she knew how much Bella could eat, and the bagel had been cut in two. She dabbed at her mouth with her napkin, and dusted off her hands. Then she stood up and slid the plate towards him.

He looked at the plate, and then up at her in surprise.

She smiled, and touched his shoulder in passing as she headed back towards the kitchen. She had a brief impression of hardness and warmth, and then she kept walking.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward stared at her in astonishment as she stood up and slid her plate across to him. She had shared her table with him, now she was sharing her lunch.

A moment later she reappeared and set down another plate, this one holding a cupcake.

This time when he looked up she winked, and went back to the kitchen.

He hadn't known where he was walking today, and yet here he was back in Greenwich Village. Words had hounded him out of his apartment, shooed him out of the bookstore, and herded him along the street until he had ended up here. He considered the bagel for a moment, and then began to eat, feeling nourished before he even began.

Edward paused to take a sip of his coffee, glancing around the store, marvelling at where he was. In a bakery with words outside that made him smile, and a woman inside with warm crinkly eyes and a quiet mouth. He'd found someone who didn't pester him for words.

Her laughter sounded from the kitchen in response to a comment from her colleague, and he felt his lips moving into a smile at the sound.

He liked it here. He'd have to come back.

With any luck he'd think of something to say.

Maybe he'd find some words for her.

### Chapter 3 – Kings and Queens

Bella peered at her alarm clock as she switched off the incessant buzzing, and then buried her face back into her pillow with a low groan. The noise woke up the man sleeping beside her, and he squinted at the back of her head for a moment before rolling onto his side and snuggling up beside her, hooking one of his tanned, muscled legs over her hips for good measure.

"Can't we must stay in bed?" he mumbled.

"Gotta work," Bella rasped back. She needed water.

"You're the boss, can't you call in sick?" came the reply, then he ran his hand suggestively over her rump, "I'll make pancakes ..."

Bella lay there for a moment, considering the suggestion, which certainly had merits. Then again, the bakery wasn't going to run itself. Alice was good at everything else she did, but she wasn't 'cupcake good', which was something even she was only too happy to admit.

"Sorry babe, no can do," Bella apologised.

She tried to sit up, and the man grabbed her and pulled her back against his chest, planning a sloppy kiss on the side of her neck and grabbing at her chest. Bella shrieked and slapped at his wandering hands. It was like being in bed with an octopus, his hands were everywhere.

"Jacob! Stop it! Jesus, what is it with gay men and tits?" Bella finally pushed him off and sat up in bed, her face flushed and hair messy. She looked down at her mussed up wife beater and groaned in mock despair. "Look what you've done!"

"What?" Jacob rolled back onto his side and lay with his head propped in his hand, giving her a sleepy eyed look that had no doubt worked on many conquests.

"You've knocked my tits all outta whack," Bella pushed at them for a moment, "oh no, wait ... these ones are real."

Jacob threw back his head and laughed.

Bella squinted at him and grinned with affection before crawling off the bed and staggering towards the bathroom. She stopped at the basin to chug back a large glass of water and then stripped off and stepped into the shower, all but groaning with relief as the water hit her skin. She leaned against the tiled wall trying to wake up, then yipped with surprise as Jacob yanked back the shower curtain and held out a glass of something fizzing towards her.

"Jacob!"

"What? It's not like I haven't seen it before. Drink this," he commanded.

Bella accepted the glass and sniffed at it, eyeing the effervescent contents with caution.

"Relax Bells, it's a vitamin B tablet, great hangover cure," Jacob said, "of course," he added as an afterthought, "they work better if you take them beforehand, but it'll help you feel human."

She paused, and then slugged the contents back.

"Good girl," Jacob was waiting to retrieve the glass. "Now you finish up in there and I'll get us something to eat."

"Thanks Mom," Bella said as she turned her back to him, and flinched as she received a stinging slap on her wet rump. "What was that for?"

"That was for being cheeky," Jacob retorted as he left the bathroom.

Bella shook her head and his bossiness and started to wash her hair. She nearly finished when she saw a shadow fall across the shower curtain.

"I see you, Jacob Black."

"I wasn't trying to hide," he replied, "are you nearly done?"

"Yep"

"Good. I'm coming in."

"Give me a sec," Bella answered, making sure her hair was completely rinsed.

"5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2," Jacob counted down, then yanked open the curtain.

Bella rolled her eyes and stepped past him, snatching the towel he was ostentatiously holding up to prevent him from seeing anything.

"Bit late to be playing coy now isn't it?" Bella asked as she wrapped the towel around herself and then grabbed a smaller one for her hair. She looked up and saw Jacob's muscular backside as he stepped into the shower.

"I suppose so, but a semblance of modesty is nice now and then."

"You, modest? Please."

"Who said I was talking about *me*?" Jacob said, "I was doing that to protect your sensibilities, although I daresay it's been a while since you've woken up with a man in your bed."

"True," Bella said as she towel dried her hair, "but it's not often I wake up with a screaming queen either."

"You'd better be careful I don't just pour you a saucer of milk for breakfast."

Bella stuck her tongue out at him, aware that she was being childish and enjoying herself anyway, then went into the bedroom to finish getting dry. By the time Jacob had finished his ablutions, Bella had dressed herself into her button down jeans, and her 'Average Joes' t-shirt. She was lacing up her red chucks when Jacob re-appeared, somehow managing to look immaculate despite the fact he was wearing his clothes from the night before: black jeans, and a tailored white button down shirt that accentuated his olive skin and flashing dark brown eyes. His short dark hair had been freshly washed and styled, and the hint of stubble only made him look all the more picture perfect. He looked her up and down and shook his head.

"Oh Bells," he sighed, "Chucks again?"

"What?" Bella looked down at them, "they're comfortable, they come in different colours, I love them."

"Yeah but c'mon, can't you wear something a bit more stylish?"

Bella gave him an exasperated look.

"Jake, I run a café, I bake all day, there's no way in hell you're going to get me wearing Jimmy Choo heels."

"I know, I just live in hope is all," Jacob replied.

"Dream on," Bella replied, "actually while you're at it, dream up a Prince Charming for me."

Jacob snorted.

"Oh please, like he'd go for you when I'm in the room."

"Modest much?"

"Not really," Jacob smirked back.

By the time Bella had brushed her teeth and added a quick layer of makeup in a bid to put a bit more colour in her face, Jacob had prepared scrambled eggs and was waiting for the toast to pop up.

"Now you look better," he praised as Bella appeared in the small living room.

"Thanks babe," Bella replied, accepting a plate and glass of juice and indicating the two seater couch with a jerk of her head.

They put their plates down on the coffee table, and began to eat. Bella checked her watch. She was still running on time. Jacob looked around his surroundings as he chewed, and sipped at his juice before speaking.

"You know Bells, this place is looking really homey"



"Coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment," Bella replied as she forked herself some more eggs.

"*Homey*, not homo," Jacob said, nudging her with his shoulder.

"I know," said Bella, nudging him back.

"No really, the place is looking good. You've got a nice vibe going on here, it's very ... eclectic."

Bella looked around the apartment, trying to see it through Jacob's eyes. The walls were covered with pictures that had either been painted by friends, or picked up at flea markets over the years, vying for wall space with framed postcards, and little items of interest that had attracted her attention and been tacked to the walls, including an antique Indian sari that floated on the wall next to the bathroom door.

The room also boasted a series of bookshelves in different heights and different colours, each one home to a diverse range of books, cds, glass vases filled with seashells, and more books. Only one shelf alcove was kept bare but for a graceful pair of Buddha hand figurines.

"Do you mean eclectic in a good way, or a bad way?"

"Oh definitely good," Jacob reassured her.

"It's not as stylish as your place," Bella admitted as she finished her eggs and reached for her juice.

"True, but you're not a gay man in New York," he replied.

"This is also true," Bella agreed.

"Still, this'd be a nice place to bring a date home," he gave her an arch look, "if you were to actually go on one."

"I'm a busy woman," Bella hedged, "I don't have time to date."

"Mm-hmm, but you made time to go to the wine bar with Alice last night."

"That's different, that was drinks after work," Bella protested. She hated it when Jacob started grilling her about her love life, or lack thereof.

"Right, and I saw a few guys checking you out, which you had no clue about because you weren't even trying to case the joint."

Bella sipped her juice.

"You know Bells, you're a fine lookin' woman, you need to put yourself out there more. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Thank you Exhibit A," Bella replied dryly, then she rushed on to continue as Jacob's face fell, "Oh sweetie no, that's not what I meant. Oh crap," she subsided back into her chair, her face a picture of misery.

"No, it's okay, I get where you're coming from," Jacob said quietly. "I was still working out what the hell I was, so how were you to know?"

"Well we know now," Bella sighed.

"Guess I made you gun shy for a while there, huh," Jacob said with a sad smile.

Bella reached over to take his hand, giving it a light squeeze for emphasis.

"Jacob, you can't take *all* the credit for my dating disasters. Besides," she continued, "no matter what your orientation, I think we were always destined to be better friends than lovers, and you know I'd much rather have you in my life than not. We're good."

"Good to know," Jacob replied, his expression lightening somewhat. "Still, we're going to have to find you a man."

"Okay," Bella threw her hands up, "whatever. Knock yourself out. Just do me a favour," she eyed him.

"Anything," he replied instantly.

"Make sure your gaydar is working, I think we both know mine's a little off."

Jacob laughed and Bella checked her watch.

"Okay Princess, let's hit the road, I've got to get to work."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms up over his head, groaning as he heard his stiff body stretch and pop. He subsided, looking at his laptop screen. The document still awaited him, but at least it wasn't blank. Today, for the first time he had typed something.

One word, 'Laughter'.

It wasn't much, but it was a start. Certainly more than he'd been able to come up with over the last couple of months.

He sat in his chair, staring at the single word, thinking of warm dancing eyes.

He looked at his watch. He'd woken up early this morning. Perhaps he'd sit and think a little more, and go for a walk later.

He looked back at the screen. It still taunted him, but somehow not as much as it usually did. He'd made a mark on the page now.

Something was starting, he just wish he knew what.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I know it's good for me, I just wish I knew why I'm going to drink it." Alice regarded the tumbler full of pink juice, and sniffed at it warily. Her conquest from the night before sighed and rested his hip against the counter.

"Because it's full of nutrients from celery, wheatgrass, carrot, ginger and lots of beet," he replied, counting off the ingredients on his fingers as he spoke. "Just drink it, it'll cure your hangover."

Alice drank it down, then gagged and rushed to fill the tumbler with water to follow.

"It tasted like *dirt*!" she accused over her shoulder.

"That's your imagination," he replied as Alice shook her head as if to get rid of the taste. "So," he continued, "what are you doing tonight?"

Alice looked at his kitchen bench, where he had bowls piled high with fresh produce. She was hung over, and longing to eat everything that she knew was bad for her. She also desperately wanted a coffee, but the best he had been able to offer was a cup of dandelion tea. She gazed at the man with regret. Such a shame, he'd been fantastic in the sack.

"I think," she ventured, "I'm going to eat everything deep fried that I can get my hands on."

He pulled a face. "You really ought to go vegan," he began in a preaching tone.

"No, I really ought to go to work," Alice interrupted, grabbing her bag and heading for the door.

He caught her just before she could leave and planted a long kiss on her. Alice sighed and leaned into him, then broke away and opened the door with a small smile.

"You'll call?" he asked.

"Mmmm," she replied, and made her escape while he tried to work out if that had meant yes or no.

*What a waste*, she thought to herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella yawned as she and Jacob came to a stop at the lights, and Jacob ran his hand briskly up and down her back.

"Wakey wakey," he said, grinning down at her.

"I'm getting there," she assured him, "once I get a coffee I'll be fine."

The lights changed and they walked across the street.

"So, what time did we get home last night?"

"All I know is that it was after midnight," Jacob said, draping his arm around her shoulders and hurrying her along.

"What, after midnight and you didn't turn into a pumpkin? What a shame you didn't find Prince Charming after all," Bella teased.

Jacob gave her a droll look.

"Honey, if we'd been in *that* fairy tale, I'd have happily changed as long as I could go home with Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater."

His brazen comment shocked a whoop of laughter out of Bella, and she stumbled on, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes as Jacob grinned and kept marching her towards work.

"C'mon you, let's get you to work, you know it'll do you good," Jacob urged.

They rounded the corner to see Alice standing under the canopy, waiting as always.

"Every single morning," Bella muttered to herself. Jacob looked at her with an inquiring gaze. "She beats me every morning," Bella explained.

Jacob shrugged, "It just means she's keen."

"Hey Boss," Alice greeted.

"Don't call me Boss," Bella replied, and unlocked the door, "you remember Jacob?"

"The man with almost as much style as me? Sure," Alice sassed as Jacob slapped her on the rump by way of greeting.

"Hey girl," Jacob said once they were inside, "so what's the verdict on last night's offering? Was he Mr Right, or Mr Right Now?"

Alice pulled a face. "Mr Right Now turned out to be a vegan," she replied, "which is why I've got this," she held up a partially eaten bacon sandwich, "for breakfast."

"A modern tragedy!" commiserated Jacob.

"Tell me about it," groused Alice, "I need a coffee," she said to Bella, "huge."

"Got it," Bella replied.

Alice jammed what was left of her sandwich into her mouth and lugged the chalkboard outside, chewing as she wrote. She stood back to regard her handiwork and nodded with satisfaction, and then went back inside.

Bella had just finished making the coffees for the three of them, and Alice accepted her grande coffee with all the reverence it deserved. She held it in both hands, for a moment just inhaling the freshly brewed aroma, and then took a sip, her eyes all but rolling back into her head with pleasure.

"Wow," Jacob said as he watched the spectacle, "she really takes her coffee seriously."

"When you're as tiny as she is, with a hangover that huge, you'd appreciate a coffee too," replied Bella as she cleaned down the machine, looking up with a grin as Angela arrived. "Hey girl," she greeted, "need a morning brew?"

"Love one," Angela said, "but shouldn't I be making it?" Angela stashed her bag in the kitchen and reappeared, wiping her hands on her jeans. "Hi," she greeted Jacob with a shy smile.

"Greetings," he replied as he sipped his coffee.

"Jacob and I go way back," Bella explained.

"Back to when she thought blue eye shadow and pink lipstick was a fabulous look," Jacob elaborated, making Angela laugh as Bella winced. "Oh Bells, don't be embarrassed, I was right there beside you in my stone wash jeans and matching jacket." Jacob shuddered.

"And on that note, I'm going to start baking," Bella said, sidling away.

"Okay Missy, I'll see you again sometime, thanks for the bed last night," Jacob said, draining his coffee and grabbing Bella for a cuddle, then headed off, slapping Alice on the rump again for good measure.

When Alice got back to the counter, Angela was pouring herself a coffee.

"So, uh, is Jacob Bella's ..." her voice trailed off uncertainly.

"Oh hell no, he plays for the other team," Alice laughed, "but the two of them have known each other since college. They even dated for a while."

"Really?" Angela was agog.

"Well Jacob hadn't come out at that stage, but when he did and Bella stayed good friends."

"Oh," Angela thought for a moment, "makes my life look like white bread by comparison."

"That's not always a bad thing, as long as you keep an open mind," Alice reasoned as Angela nodded in agreement. "Anyways, Bella and I went to a wine bar last night for Friday night drinks, and Jacob ended up meeting us there and we just kept on going," Alice explained, "which is why he ended up crashing at hers for the night."

"Must be nice to have friends like that," Angela commented and looked at Alice, "Bella's pretty cool, huh."

"Yep."

"So why's she single?"

"Beats me," Alice shrugged, "guess she just hasn't met the right guy yet."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward looked at his watch, it was nearly midday. He puffed out his breath and gazed around his apartment. After his early publishing success, his parents had encouraged him to invest in real estate. He had been somewhat surprised therefore, to find himself graduating from college and ending up in West Soho living in style. The apartment was quite large, with polished floorboards and large windows flanking the wall that looked down onto the street. High ceilings and tasteful light fittings added to the sense of airiness, but for all that his mother had helped to choose the furniture and rugs, the apartment often felt cold to him.

He usually chalked that up to the fact that he lived alone, and his work kept him to a relatively solitary existence. Nowadays, he felt that it was because the room took a lot of words to fill, and these days words seemed hard to come by.

Getting up from his desk he paced the length of the room, hands in pockets as he stared off into space. His gaze drifted towards the row of bookshelves. Hundreds of books, maybe his collection was over a thousand now, he'd never counted. So many words by so many other people. Of course, there was a shelf that held a collection of his, but they weren't helping him now. He needed to find some more words of his own, and sitting inside the apartment didn't seem to be helping.

Edward checked the time again. He should eat. His gaze flickered towards the kitchen, where he knew there was a fully stocked refrigerator. For a moment he wavered, rubbing his hands over his stubble as he thought.

Setting his jaw, he grabbed his keys and sunglasses and stalked towards the door. He'd got for a walk, do some research, see if he could find any inspiration. Maybe he'd get something to eat while he was out, he knew just the place after all. But he'd go for a walk first. Maybe if he told himself that enough times, he'd believe it, instead of knowing that going to the bakery had been the first thing on his mind this morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Daydreaming, or are you still trying to wake up?"

Bella glanced up to see Alice watching her from the doorway.

"A little of both," she admitted, as she glanced down at the cupcakes and put a cherry on the last one.

"God they look good," Alice sighed.

"I made them with you in mind," Bella admitted. Alice's tired look brightened.

"Really?"

"Yep, in honour of Mr Vegan, I've made you an antidote."

"What is it?" Alice took a step into the kitchen, gazing at the rack of cakes.

"Peanut butter cupcakes, with chocolate and peanut butter cream cheese frosting," Bella supplied, "and a cherry on top."

"Elvis would be proud," Alice commented. What are you going to call them?

Bella told her, Alice jotted it down.

Another day at the bakery had begun.

\* \* \* \* \*

He'd browsed at some music, scowled his way through a bookstore, and kept walking. Any stops he'd made in various stores just seemed to prolong the inevitable, so after an hour he'd sighed and turned the corner, picking up the pace somewhat. The closer he got to the bakery, the more he walked with a sense of purpose, only he didn't notice that.

He paused across the street to take a good look at the bakery that seemed to have some sort of hold over him. The red canopy bore the bakery's name, and he was surprised to realise that he hadn't even noticed it before.

*Take the Cake.*

He crossed the street and stopped at the window display. A different collection of cupcakes in the bell jars today, surrounded by apples and vitamin tablets. He puzzled over this, trying to work out the connection then remembered the chalkboard at the entrance. He glanced over at it and felt his mouth curve into a smile.

*Buy organic for health, but eat cupcakes for taste.*

He stepped inside, eager to discover more.

The floor was tiled, and the walls were covered in old wooden panels to match the long antique counter. Brass magazine racks contained a variety of magazines and newspapers, and a small bookshelf housed a collection of children's books and board games, some new, some old. The tables and chairs were an eclectic mixture of French bistro style and farmhouse, some of which had been hand painted with vines, flowers and dragonflies,

all of which were reflected in the collection of framed mirrors vying for wall space. It was a riot of colour and warmth.

He walked towards the counter.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wow, God must really love her work sometimes," Angela breathed.

"Her work?" Alice asked.

"Only a woman would work to making something *that* fine," Angela replied. Alice looked up to see what had caught her attention.

He was back. This was the third time in as many weeks now. Coincidence? Alice watched as his eyes raked the room, skimming over the two women behind the counter. Alice frowned a little, watching his expression. Was that disappointment? She thought quickly.

"Angela, could you spot me here for a sec?"

"Sure, but I'm not sure I'm up to speed on the coffee machine," Angela said easily.

"Not a problem, if you get an order Bella can take care of it," Alice said. She stepped away from the counter, "I just have to make a phone call."

He was walking towards the counter now, so Alice turned and walked with what she hoped was a casual stride towards the back of the store. Bella looked up when she entered the kitchen.

"Everything okay?"

"Sure, just got to get some air. Angela might need a hand with a coffee though," Alice replied, not breaking stride.

Bella watched her go then popped her head out of the kitchen in time to see Angela write down an order. She wiped her hands on her apron and stepped out into the store.

"Need a hand?" she asked Angela in a quiet voice. Angela nodded gratefully.

"Could you?" she proffered the order slip, "My milk froth is getting better, but I'm not confident enough to inflict it on the public yet."

"No problem," Bella grinned, grabbing a cup and setting the espresso, then jiggling the milk jug under the steam spigot with practised ease, "you'll pick it up soon enough. Where's this one going?"

"The Lion King on table 4," Angela said, and then blushed at Bella's raised eyebrow.



Bella gazed over at the table where Edward sat waiting, frowning over a copy of the New York Times. She had to admit that Angela had a point. He sat with a careless grace that hinted at strength.

"I think he's been in here before," Bella commented.

"He was here on my first day," Angela replied promptly, then, "What? I wouldn't forget a guy like *that*."

"I would've thought Alice would have enjoyed looking after him after her vegan experience," Bella said, scanning the order and selecting one of their fresh turkey and salad bagels and sliding it onto a plate.

"She saw him then said she had to make a phone call. I guess that's why she went out back?"

Bella thought for a moment, she was sure she hadn't seen Alice holding her phone. Just then, Alice appeared in the doorway.

"Hey Angela, could you give me a hand carrying the next batch of cupcakes out?"

Angela shot Bella an inquiring look.

"Go ahead, I'll take these out," Bella said. She picked up the cup and plate, and walked over to the table. "Hiya," she greeted as she drew near. He looked up, and offered a small nod as he shifted his newspaper aside to put down the plates.

"Thank you," he said in a quiet voice.

"You're very welcome," she replied, and then gestured towards the newspaper, "anything good in it today?"

He glanced at it then back up at her with a wry grimace, "Not much."

"Well you can't read doom and gloom while you eat, mind if I suggest something else?"

He looked puzzled, "Sure," he replied.

Bella stepped over to the bookcase, and after a quick scan pulled out a book and placed it in front of him. He picked it up and looked at the title.

"The Berenstain Bears?"

"Granted, it's not classic literature to some, but I think you'll find it's a perfect lunch accompaniment, enjoy!" she winked and returned to the counter, ostensibly wiping down the surface, but keeping a surreptitious eye on him.

"Hey Boss," Alice greeted in a bright voice. Bella turned to see Alice and Angela carrying two plates of the daily cupcake out to be displayed, "you look like you need a break."

"Do I?" Bella replied, unconsciously reaching a hand up to her hair, "do I look that bad?"

"Nah you look good, but why don't you take a load off and I'll bring you a coffee?"

"Alright," Bella said slowly. She went into the kitchen to get a couple of items out of her bag, and by the time she reappeared, Alice was already placing a fresh coffee on a table out the front next to Bella's customer.

Bella shot Alice a suspicious glance, but Alice was radiating innocence. Naturally that meant she was up to something. With an inward sigh, Bella sat down and arranged her things. She sipped her coffee, then selected a fresh piece of paper, picked up her pen and began to write, watching from the corner of her eye as he picked up the book and began idly flicking through the pages, then flipped back to the start and began to read. After the first page, he picked up his bagel and began to eat, still reading. Bella watched him, smiling to herself as she caught the occasional 'huh' of amusement

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Edward finished the book and his lunch, his eyes were peaceful.

"So how was it?" a voice ventured.

He looked up to see *she* was sitting at the table beside him, an empty coffee cup and some sheets of notepaper in front of her.

"I haven't even thought about that book for years," he commented, "but it's still a great read."

"That's why I keep it in the store, I get such a kick out of watching people of all ages and cultures pick it up. I'd love to be able to write something like that," she continued, "something that makes people smile."

"What about your chalkboard out the front? And your cupcake names seem to give people a laugh," Edward pointed out.

"Guess I hadn't thought of it like that," she replied with a slow smile.

He'd heard her laugh, and now he'd made her smile. He watched her mouth curl up, trying to remember every detail.

"And what's that you're working on?" Edward pointed a finger towards the coloured notepaper Bella had been working on moments before.

"This? Oh it's a letter to one of my friends."

"You don't email?" Edward was surprised.

"Sure, but sometimes I like to give people the pleasure of finding something nice in their mail instead of statements and bills."

"Huh," Edward said, leaning forward in his chair, intrigued.

"I like to think that there's a certain romance in writing a letter to someone," she continued, a faint pink tinging her cheeks now, "because it sends the message that you've set aside time to put pen to paper to someone. You're not forwarding a joke or dashing out an email. You're actually sitting down and devoting some time to that person, and it's something tangible."

She picked up the small sheet of paper and flapped it to illustrate her point, and then put it down with a slight laugh. "Mind you, this isn't exactly War and Peace, it's just a note to say I was thinking of them, and a really bad joke that's going to make them groan, but it's still something."

"I admire you for that," Edward said in a quiet voice. She looked at him in surprise.

"What on earth for?"

Edward shrugged.

"I don't have much luck writing anything lately. I don't think I could manage something complicated like a letter."

She leaned forward, looking conspiratorial, and Edward instinctively leaned towards her.

"Want a tip about that?" she whispered.

"Sure," he whispered back.

"Say what you have to say and then stop. Don't labour at it so much."

Edward stared at her for a moment and then began to laugh. If only she knew. He was still chuckling when she looked up to a summons from the counter.

"Gotta go, sounds like the Pocket Rocket needs me," she smiled, and then looked a little embarrassed. "Sorry, I know you've been in here before, but I can't remember your name," she explained.

"Edward," he replied.

"Bella," she answered.

He smiled. He knew her name. He knew the bakery name. She'd given him more words today.

He watched as she gathered up her paper then left the table, running a hand over his shoulder in passing. Edward lifted his hand to grasp her fingers, but she was gone.

He watched as she disappeared into the kitchen, and looked up a few minutes later as she re-emerged. She was stuffing the notepaper into a stamped envelope, and she left the store. Edward sat watching her as she walked

over to a letterbox on the other side of the street. She stood gazing at the envelope for a moment then she kissed it and popped it into the mail slot. She patted the mailbox for good measure, and returned to the store, grinning at Edward in passing as she walked through the store and back into the kitchen.

"Is there anything else you'd like?" a voice said beside him.

"Yes," he replied in an absent tone, and then jerked back to awareness as someone giggled, "Sorry, what?"

He looked up to see a small woman with dark spiked hair and a knowing grin regarding him as she picked up his empty coffee cup from the table.

"I said is there anything else you'd like?"

"Uh," out of reflex he looked at his watch, "Not just now, I should probably be going."

"Bella had to take a phone call, but she wanted me to give you this with our compliments," the woman explained, extending a cupcake on a plate towards him. "It's our daily special."

Edward glanced at it then back at her. "What's this one called?"

"Vegan rehab," she grinned, then added, "private joke."

"Right," he said, accepting the cake and standing up, "Please tell Bella," he felt a stab of pleasure at being able to use her name, "that I said thanks."

"Will do," she replied, stepping away and eyeing him appreciatively, "and I'm sure we'll see you here again some time," the woman replied in an assured tone, "and just so you know, she's single."

Edward's forehead wrinkled as he tried to work out if he'd heard her right. The woman leaned forward.

"She's single, you know, available," she repeated, "Just thought you'd like to know is all," she winked.

Edward sat in quiet amazement as he watched her collect some cups off nearby tables and take them out the back, humming to herself as she worked. He waited for a moment longer, but Bella didn't reappear, so he quietly left the store. Half a block later, he began to eat the cupcake. It was good.

As he walked, his thoughts wandered back over his afternoon, and he shook his head. He had established a comfortable routine for himself, but that routine had faltered when his inspiration had seemingly run dry. Now by some chance he had found his way into the bakery. Not once, but three times now. Today he had spent the afternoon reading a children's book, and talking to a woman that made him feel rested and exhilarated all at once. It was a curious sensation.

He liked it.

## Chapter 4 – Cake and Sunshine

Bella opened her eyes seconds before the alarm began to sound. She paused, and then reached out to switch it off, sighing in the sudden silence. She lay there for a moment, staring sightlessly at the digital display then her gaze shifted to the framed photograph. She reached out again and gently traced the image's face with a forefinger.

It was a special day.

She grasped the picture frame and got out of bed, taking it out into the kitchen and stuffing it into her bag to take with her to work, then headed towards the bathroom. No dawdling this morning, ablutions were performed quickly and in silence. The only noises in the apartment were the ambient sounds drifting in from the street, and the occasional sounds of water running, the blast of the hairdryer, the clatter of jewellery being selected and discarded, and then the jangle of keys and hurried footsteps. The slam of the door resonated in the silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mouthing the lyrics to the song blaring through her ipod headphones, Alice glanced at her watch and picked up the pace. She had skipped breakfast, but would be able to fix something to eat once she got to work. Dodging her way through traffic she crossed the street and broke into a light jog.

She rounded the corner and breathed a sigh of relief; she was still running ahead of Bella, the unspoken tradition remained unbroken. She'd made a note of the date yesterday and knew that today was going to be set apart from the norm.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward shambled towards the television, yawning and stretching, pausing to grab the waistband of his pyjama bottoms that slipped perilously low on his hips as he picked up the remote. He turned towards the sofa, aiming the remote over his shoulder and thumbing a button at random. The flat screen tv came to life as he threw himself onto the sofa with a muffled thump, and he turned a basilisk gaze towards the screen.

Just another day.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Morning, Boss,"

"Alice, don't call me Boss," Bella replied with a smile that tried but didn't quite meet her eyes.

"Sorry, Boss," Alice waited for Bella to unlock the door, then walked inside and dumped her bag on the counter, first things first. She grabbed a piece of chalk and got the chalkboard ready for the day.

By the time she'd hung the chalkboard outside, Bella had two coffees ready, and was getting out the supplies for the first batch. Conversation was at a minimum, but Alice had known to expect it. She switched on the stereo, selected a disk and before long Groove Armada's soothing beats permeated the store.

A quick peek around the corner revealed Bella concentrating on the industrial sized cake mixer, breaking eggs with total focus on the task at hand. Alice stood there for a moment, then turned and went back to filling up the stainless steel jugs with filtered water. She added slices of lemon and fresh mint and set the jugs out on the small self-service table near the end of the counter.

She looked up as Angela arrived, and greeted her with a smile.

"Hey Babe," she said as Angela drew near, "coffee?"

"Please," Angela said gratefully, "I overslept so had to high-tail it over here."

"That reminds me," Alice snapped her fingers, "I didn't get to have breakfast so I'll see if there's any-" she broke off as Bella appeared with a small plate.

"Warm savoury cheese and herb scones, with plenty of butter," Bella said with a small smile, "that should keep you guys going for a while," she added before disappearing back into the kitchen.

Angela dimpled her thanks, and watched Bella disappear before turning to Alice with an inquiring look.

"Is she okay?" she whispered.

"She'll be fine," Alice said in a confident tone, "today is just going to be a bit hard on our girl, so we'll have to be gentle."

"Oh?"

Alice could tell that Angela wanted to ask more, but wasn't going to impose. She felt a rush of appreciation for the Angela's quiet nature and goodwill. She had done the right thing bringing her on board, especially on a day like today.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward powered up his laptop, glancing at the calendar widget that appeared on the screen. Another week had gone by, they were starting to blur into one another, and he still had very little to show for it. Marcus hadn't called for a week and for that he was grateful, but now he found he felt like seeing someone. Perhaps someone with dancing brown eyes. For the moment though, he scrolled through his contact list, eyes narrowed as he looked at the list of names, then gave a quiet grunt of satisfaction. He dialled the number, and grinned when the familiar voice answered.

"Whitlock," he began, and laughed at the war whoop of recognition.

Plans were made, and a few minutes later he hung up feeling satisfied. Other than the bakery, he hadn't had contact with many people at all over the last few weeks. Getting out and seeing an old friend would be good for him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice appeared in the kitchen doorway and stopped short.

"Whoa, you got busy."

Bella had delivered the first batch of cupcakes to Alice, and had personally taken care of the window display, before retreating to the kitchen again. She had worked methodically all morning, and now there were over ten dozen cupcakes iced and decorated.

"I know," Bella straightened and turned to Alice. "I've hit my quota, so I think I might get some fresh air."

Alice regarded her for a long moment. Bella couldn't return her gaze.

"You gotta bail for a while?" she asked. Bella nodded and bit her lip. Alice stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her. "Alright then, take care of you," Alice said in a soft voice, then released her and stepped back out into the shop area. Bella stood still, blinking quickly, then gathered up her bag.

She left the store without a word, leaving Alice and Angela standing behind the counter in silence, watching her go.

Bella stood outside and looked at the chalkboard then back in Alice, offering a small but genuine smile, and then began to walk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward was near Washington Square Park, standing at the lights waiting to cross, when some movement on the other side of the street caught his eye. It was her. Bella. She stood amongst the crowd, her gaze turned inward, but that wasn't what held his attention. She wasn't smiling. Edward didn't think he had ever seen her look so lost. Her gaze drifted and for a moment she seemed to look at him. They stared at each other across the traffic for a moment and then Edward lifted his hand and gave her a tentative wave. She gave no sign of recognition, as her gaze moved on. Edward paused then lowered his hand. Something was wrong.

The lights changed and people surged forward. Edward stuffed his hands in his pockets and crossed the street, keeping a watchful gaze on Bella. She walked straight past him, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. She passed him close enough for him to catch a waft of her scent, warm with a hint of vanilla musk, like cake and sunshine.

He reached the curb and then turned around, his shoulder colliding with another pedestrian. He apologised and then turned again to see where Bella was headed. He caught a glimpse of her hair and then a bus turned the corner, obscuring his vision. By the time the traffic had cleared, she was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella entered Washington Square Park, and followed the path towards the dog run. Once there, she leaned against the fence, her face propped in her hands and watched dogs of all shapes and sizes gambolling and playing with each other. From time to time dogs would wander over to where she stood at the fence for an inquiring sniff, and she would extend her hand, fingers curled into her palm, for their inspection then she would rub them behind their ears.

Eventually she followed the fence line down towards the gate and let herself in, exchanging smiles with some of the dog owners exercising their pets. Bella wandered around, squatting as some of the smaller dogs wandered over for a hello rub, which she happily obliged.

Bella was laughing as a golden retriever snuffled at her ear then swiped his long wet tongue from her hair to her jawline, when a shadow fell across her. She looked up to see an older woman regarding her with interest.

"You have a dog here?"

Bella looked up, squinting against the sunlight and trying to fend off the enthusiastic affections of the retriever. "What? No, I don't. I just come here when I'm having an off kind of day," she explained.

"Ah," comprehension dawned on the woman's face, "and there's no better cure than some unconditional canine love."

"You said it," Bella smiled back, then grabbed the retriever affectionately and gave it a hug. The dog grinned. He got a lot of hugs, and this human smelled good. He slurped his tongue on her face again in thanks, grinning as she yelped and recoiled. They always did that.

Bella left the park half an hour later, her expression considerably lighter. The retriever watched her go with some regret then pricked up his ears as he spotted an attractive poodle. Easy come, easy go.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward had stopped at a newsagent for a quick purchase and then he continued on his way to the bakery. He arrived in good time, and stopped to check out the chalkboard swinging from its brass hooks.

*Live life one cupcake at a time.*

He smiled and moved over to look at the window display. The bell jars held cupcakes that were sweet in their simplicity: vanilla frosting with rainbow sprinkles. One of the bell jars held a small frame that featured an old photo. Edward leaned forward for a closer look. It was a younger looking Bella, and a man that was obviously her father. They were leaning against a police car, the man's arm hugging Bella to his chest as they both grinned at the camera. Beside the frame was a solitary cupcake, and a small hand-written sign. *Charlie's Favourite.*

Now he knew why she had looked so sad.

He went inside and sat at a table to wait.

\* \* \* \* \*



"Pssst, Alice!" Angela hissed.

Alice bobbed up from the display cabinet that she had been restocking, "What?"

Angela jerked her head towards the front of the store, "the Lion King's back."

Alice followed Angela's gaze and saw him sitting at a table near the front door. The morning sun shone through the front windows, highlighting the auburn in his hair. He half sat, half sprawled in his chair, flicking through a copy of the New York Times with careless grace. He was, Alice had to admit, glorious.

"Let's hope Bella gets back soon," Alice whispered to Angela, as the two women regarded him with that they hoped were covert glances, along with every other woman in the store.

Alice gazed at him, and then shook her head in admiration. He truly had no inkling that he was the centre of attention. She found that very attractive, as her extensive dating history had revealed that attractive men often tended to rely on their looks and fall quite short in ... other departments.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Edward Cullen, you reclusive son of a bitch," a voice drawled from the doorway.

Edward looked up, pushing his newspaper aside as he stood up with a broad smile to greet his friend.

"Jasper Whitlock, c'mere you bastard," he replied as the two men enfolded each other in an enthusiastic back thumping embrace.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh no," Angela pulled a disappointed face, "the good ones are always gay."

"Uh-uh," Alice replied, shaking her head, "he's straight."

"Are you sure?" Angela was sceptical.

Alice smirked at her, "sure I'm sure, he watches Bella like a fat man watches fried food."

\* \* \* \* \*

The two men sat down, grinning at each other.

"Shit, I can't believe you called," Jasper said, shaking his head, "how long as it been?"

"Too long if you're asking Mom," Edward replied.

"Tell me about it, my folks keep asking after you as well," Jasper grunted. He cocked his head towards the counter. "I'm on the clock today man, so how about we order something?"

"Sounds like a plan," Edward agreed.

Jasper sat up straighter in his chair and looked around the store, then regarded Edward with a quizzical expression. "So where the hell are we? This isn't your usual hangout from what I recall."

"Whit, I haven't had a regular hangout for a while," he grimaced, "unless you count my desk chair."

Jasper looked sympathetic, "Yeah, I heard about that but wasn't going to say anything."

Edward raised an eyebrow at that. "Mom?" he asked. Jasper nodded and Edward sighed, "Figures."

"Well they're worried too," Jasper said in a mild tone.

"Yeah I know," Edward ran his hand through his hair, frustrated, "it's just ... well you know how it is with deadlines."

"Tell me about it," Jasper deadpanned, "I love that whooshing noise they make as they go by."

"Right," Edward scoffed, "like you can miss deadlines working on a paper."

"True," Jasper inclined his head in acknowledgement, "but the pressure is still the same, except I get it *every day*."

"This is also true," agreed Edward.

"And," Jasper continued, "I think it's safe to say that you reap better dividends."

Edward shrugged but didn't reply.

"But enough of that, I need *food*," Jasper said, "I got to work early without breakfast this morning, so I could eat the crotch out of the low-flying duck right about now."

Edward laughed as they walked towards the counter, "Whit, with a mouth like that it's a wonder you're able to charm the ladies."

"Oh I don't know," replied the small woman behind the counter as she gave Jasper an assessing glance, "he's doing okay so far."

Jasper gave the woman a quick grin, then turned his attention to the display cabinet, apparently dismissing her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice was stunned: the guy was cute, she knew she was packing heat, and when it came to the opposite sex she had an exceptional batting average, and yet he had apparently dismissed her with a glance. She took his order and he accepted his change with an absent-minded 'thanks', then walked back to his table. She was still watching his retreating back when she realised that the other man – the Lion – had been speaking to her.

"Sorry, what was that?" she blinked then took his order, shaking her head as if to clear it.

She passed the order slips to Angela and stood there for a moment, watching the two men resume their seats and start chatting.

He'd ignored her, and she didn't like that.

She didn't like that one bit.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So," Jasper was saying, "what's the draw with this place? I wouldn't have thought it was your usual thing."

"I dunno," Edward shrugged, "it has a kind of appeal."

And then Bella appeared in the doorway.

Jasper looked at Edward, waiting for him to continue. When the other man said nothing, Jasper twisted slightly in his chair to follow his gaze, and grinned in understanding.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella felt better. The walk, fresh air and canine company had been refreshing. She might not be able to find love of the two-legged variety, but it was good to know that she could access unconditional adoration at short notice.

She stopped at the window to smile at Charlie's photo, and then continued inside, giving Edward a smile – a genuine one this time – and made her way towards the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice watched as Bella entered and smiled at the Lion, and the way his gaze followed her as if hypnotised as she made her way out the back. She sighed and shook her head. It was obvious that Bella had absolutely no idea of his interest, and he was being equally reticent.

This was going to take a while.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, have you been coming here for long?" Jasper asked, watching Edward with quiet amusement.

"Oh, a while," Edward replied in a faraway voice.

"So I see," Jasper commented.

Alice appeared with their orders, artfully brushing her breast against Jasper's shoulder as she leaned forward with their plates. Jasper nodded his thanks, and paid her little attention after that.

"Mmmph," Edward replied as he bit into his bagel, then chewed and swallowed. "it was a surprise discovery, but it has its appeal."

Jasper turned his head to watch the retreating back of the waitress.

"That it does," he said.

Edward followed his gaze. "You're shitting me. You've barely been here five minutes and you've already zeroed in on a target?"

Jasper gave him an innocent glance, "What? Is there something wrong with that?"

Edward glanced back at Alice who was wiping down the counter with short, angry strokes.

"Nothing at all, but I don't think you've caught her attention."

Jasper gave him a slow smile, "Oh I think I can handle that," he drawled, and gave him a slow wink.

Edward grinned. No work was going get done today, but for the first time, he felt much better about it. He'd had enough self-flagellation, it was time to live a little. One day at a time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella reappeared from the kitchen, and draped an arm around Alice's shoulders to give her a loose hug.

"How you feeling, Boss?" Alice inquired.

"Better," Bella relied, giving her a quick squeeze, then nodded towards the cabinet where Angela was cleaning, "how we doing today Angela?"

Angela straightened and gave Bella a smile.

"They're selling like hotcakes, well ... " she gave a small laugh, "you know what I mean."

"I do," Bella agreed, and smiled again, "Do you think we need more?"

Angela gave the cupcake display an assessing gaze, "No, at the rate we've been going I think we'll be okay for a while now."

"Good," Bella replied, "I wasn't ready to shackle myself to the oven again just yet."

"How about I make you some lunch soon?" Alice asked.

Bella looked at Alice affectionately, "What would I do without you?"

"Curl up in a foetal position and sob quietly because you couldn't imagine ever finding someone as fabulous to work with as me?" Alice bantered.

"Probably, I know I'd never find anyone as modest as you," Bella replied.

"Well there's always Jacob," Alice sassed back.

"Oh please, that man could make a sequin look shy."

Alice blinked at her, "Are you saying that I can't?"

Bella looked at Angela, "Help," she peeped.

Angela snuffled with laughter, "Uh-uh, you're on your own."

The three women began to laugh.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward glanced up to see the source of the laughter and smiled. She was looking better now, and he was glad for it.

The men bantered their way through lunch, and then Jasper checked his watch and began to excuse himself.

"I've gotta get back Edward, but listen, how about we do this again – don't be such a stranger next time."

"You've got yourself a deal," Edward replied, pleased that he had been able to rekindle a friendship that he had let cool to embers. "How's next week for you?"

"I'll check but off the top of my head it sounds good," Jasper said, swigging back his coffee.

The two men stood up and shook hands, and another hug for good measure, and Jasper turned to leave, and then turned back as if on an afterthought, "and listen, if you want to come back here, that's fine with me."

"I thought it might be," Edward grinned.

Jasper winked again, and left. Edward watched him go and settled back into his seat with a sigh. He didn't want to go just yet. If he was going to be honest with himself, he wanted to see her. He wanted to see Bella.

One of the other women appeared with a bagel on a plate, and set it down on the table beside him, giving him a shy smile and disappearing behind the counter again.

He looked at the plate in puzzlement.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Bella, why am I looking at you right now?" Alice said in an arch tone.

"Because I'm the best boss you've ever had and you can't help but gaze at me with adoration from time to time?"

"Well there is that," Alice conceded, "but I'm wondering why you're still here behind the counter, when there's a perfectly good bagel on a plate for you, sitting on a table over *there*," she pointed it out for emphasis.

"Right," said Bella, "Okay, I'm going."

"And you're going to eat that and relax, and I don't want to see you back here until you've had a coffee as well."

"Yes'm," Bella replied, snapping off a mock salute and walking towards the table.

Alice and Angela watched her go.

"That's not very subtle," offered Angela after a moment's pause.

"Subtlety wastes time," Alice replied, "plus it'd be lost on those two anyway."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella sank into her chair and looked at the bagel: smoked salmon again, her favourite. It never failed to amaze her how well Alice seemed to anticipate her needs. She bit into it and chewed slowly, enjoying the flavours of the salmon, cream cheese and capers. She was on her second mouthful when she glanced to her right and saw a familiar pair of green eyes. She chewed and swallowed before she spoke.

"Hello again," she offered.

"Hello," he gave her a gentle smile, making her blink. He seemed restrained for some reason, watching her, as if trying to gauge her reaction.

"How's your day going?" she asked, taking another bite.

A shrug.

"It's not bad. I just caught up with a friend I haven't seen for a long time," he considered it for a moment, "it was good."

"Then I'm happy for you."

His eyebrows went up.

"Just like that? You're happy for me?"

"Why not?"

"I-" he began, then stopped, "thank you."

"You're very welcome."

He watched her in silence, wishing he could think of something to say. He'd had words for Jasper, but Jasper he had known for a long time that extended into his childhood. This woman was different, and he didn't know what to say that would please her. And he found suddenly that he wanted to please her very much.

She worked her way through her lunch, exchanging greetings with other customers as they entered, enjoying brief conversations here and there. He admired the easy way she seemed to relate to everyone.

After a while, she glanced at him again and he shifted in his seat, leaning forward a little.

"So, uh ... I don't want to pry," he began awkwardly, cursing his clumsy words. It was a miracle he'd managed to get published. She nodded for him to continue, and he felt a rush of relief, "the cupcake in the window," he gestured towards the display, then watched as her open expression became one of polite reserve for a moment.

"It's for my father," she said in a soft voice, looking down into her cup.

"Listen, just tell me to shut up if I'm-" he babbled. He never babbled. What was it with this woman?

"No, it's okay," she reached out a hand to lay it over his own that rested on the table. Her hand felt warm and dry. And, he realised, entirely comfortable. "It's a vanilla butter cupcake, Charlie – my dad," she nodded towards the photo, "used to love them, he always used to tease me about opening a cupcake shop one day, because I used to make so many of them."

This time it was Edward who nodded for her to continue.

"I lost him when I was 19," she said quietly.

"I'm sorry-" Edward began automatically, Bella waved him off.

"It's not your fault," she smiled.

"So," he paused, "what happened?"

"Car accident," she said. "I was driving, and we got blindsided by a van. My head got hit pretty hard, and I can't remember a thing from that day."

Edward gazed at her, then without thinking placed his hand over hers, cupping her hand between his, rubbing his thumb in reassuring circles in an unconscious pattern.

She bit her lip, "So the next thing I know is that I'm waking up in hospital, and my big brother is telling me that Dad is gone, and I don't know a thing about it. All I've got to remember him by these days is that photo, a couple of birthday cards, and this," she lifted her free hand to sweep her hair away from her forehead, revealing a long white scar that ran along her hairline down to her left temple.

Edward winced. The two of them sat in a companionable silence for a moment, before Bella seemed to recollect herself with a small start.

"I'm sorry," she apologised in a rush, "I didn't mean to bring you down with my own little tale of woe-"

"Don't be sorry, I appreciate you telling me," Edward replied. "It's okay, really."

Bella looked flustered, "I really am sorry you know, I don't usually go around telling people stuff like that."

"Then I'm flattered that you did," Edward admitted, realising that it was the truth. The words were coming to him more easily now. "I don't often get to see you for a chat, you seem pretty busy."

Bella laughed at that, "I know, which is why Alice has suddenly started a campaign for me to start taking a lunch break now and then."

"I'll have to time my visits more carefully then," Edward replied, feeling emboldened by the feel of her hand that she seemed content to leave resting between his.

"Well, I'll try to make time to talk to you more in future then too," she teased, "then the girls will think that you're a special customer."

"So are you," Edward replied, the words suddenly appearing on his tongue unbidden.

"I'm what?"

"Special," he said, then, greatly daring, reached out to gently tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice watched them from her spot behind the coffee machine, holding her breath as the Lion reached out to touch Bella's hair.

Bella hadn't withdrawn, and he was still holding her hand.



It wasn't much, but it was a start.

Then there was the matter of Angela.

And there was the matter of the Lion's friend. *He* was going to be another challenge entirely, but that was okay. In fact, it was better than okay, she liked a challenge.

Alice's small smile widened into a satisfied grin.

Oh this was going to be fun.

## **Ch5 – Second Mouse Satisfaction**

Edward and Bella were still talking quietly at the table when a shadow fell across the doorway to the shop. Bella looked up and did a double take, slipping away from the table – and Edward's hands – with a cry of delight.

"Brother Bear!"

Edward sat watching as Bella launched herself at a man who took two laughing strides towards her before gathering her up into a hug that swept her feet off the floor. Bella cupped his face in her small hands, covering his cheeks with kisses as he loudly protested, still walking the two of them inside, Bella's small frame apparently no effort.

Edward had seen enough. He gathered his papers and waited for them to pass before he made his way out of the store.

Alice watched him go, shaking her head, "Silly man," she said to herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward walked, devouring the pavement with long strides, his hands jammed in his jeans pockets, his chin all but tucked into his chest, deep in thought. What had seemed a perfect moment and been broken by the stranger's loud arrival. More important, Edward's cautious happiness had evaporated as Bella had torn herself away from his gentle grasp.

The way she had thrown herself at the stranger spoke of a long and easy intimacy. Of course she was taken. No-one that attractive in New York could be single.

And yet ...

Edward stopped short, making the person walking behind him almost trip over themselves as they stepped around him, shooting him a filthy look.

She'd called him *Brother Bear*. And she'd mentioned having an older brother when she had told him about the accident.

His writer's memory clicked into gear, and the clues began to fall into place: the framed picture in the store window, Bella's melancholy state, their quiet conversation, and then the arrival of the person she'd called Brother Bear. A man who had brown eyes just like Bella's. Just like hers because they were *related*.

Edward clenched his hands into fists and sighed.

He'd been a fool.

He could have said something. Asked her something. Anything. If only he could think of something to say. It was too late to go back now. He walked on, thinking about the touch of her hair, and the warmth of her skin. Thinking about the feel of her hand in his.

He'd visit the bakery again soon, set things to rights.

He knew he had to see Bella again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It's so good to see you!"

Bella had stopped kissing and had instead wrapped her arms around the man's neck, hugging him and wiggling to be set down.

"Easy there Cupcake," he said in a laughing voice as he let Bella down, then looked across to the counter to see Alice grinning at him, and his face lit up with glee, "Pocket Rocket!"

"Oh no," Alice muttered, her grin faltering as she began backing away from the counter. Emmett rounded it, moving with surprising grace despite his immense size as she looked around for a convenient means of escape. She feinted to her left, but he stepped to the right, neatly blocking her access to the kitchen, shaking his head as he began to laugh in anticipation. Alice sighed and straightened up from her crouching stance. "Oh go on then, you big lug," and opened her arms in surrender.

He whooped and picked her up, giving her a hug that sent the breath out of her in a whoosh, then dipped her back onto her feet. Alice staggered back a pace then laughed, pushing at his chest to get him to move. "Jesus Em, and I thought you were the side of a house the last time you were in."

Angela, who had appeared in the kitchen doorway to investigate the ruckus, shrank back when Emmett rounded on her.

"And who do we have here?"

"Easy Bear, play gentle," warned Alice, "this is Angela."

Emmett grinned at Angela, who offered him a shy smile in return as he reached out and shook her hand.

"Great to meet you Angela, I'm Emmett, Bella's brother."

"You're related?" Angela's confusion was plain to see as she looked from Bella to Emmett and then back again. Emmett towered over Bella, his scruffy jeans and tight-fitting t-shirt only served to emphasise his tanned and very muscular arms. His hair was closely cropped,

"Tell me about it," Bella smirked, "Mom used to say that after birthing *him*," she jerked a thumb towards Emmett, "she was pretty gun shy for a while so I'm lucky to be standing here."

"Yeah right," scoffed Emmett, "as if Mom and Dad could keep their hands off each other."

"Eww, parental sex lives, too much information," Alice winced, making Bella laugh.

"Well they're not here to deny it," Emmett said, "speaking of which," he moved towards Bella again and draped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her in to kiss her temple, "I saw the window display, Charlie would've loved it."

Angela, who had been filled in on the significance of the day by Alice gave a nod of understanding. "How come you guys refer to your Dad by his first name?"

Bella nodded at Emmett, who began to explain. "After Mom died, Dad wanted to take us on a holiday to get right away from things, so we came to New York. One day we were in the Museum and lost sight of Charlie, so the two of us were walking along, hand in hand calling out 'Dad ... *Dad* ...' and we could see him in the distance but he wasn't responding, then-"

Bella cut in, "then Bear here called out *Charlie*, and Charlie's head snapped around and he came straight back to where we were."

Alice smiled, she'd heard this story before, but she loved the way Bella and Emmett's faces glowed whenever they recounted it.

Emmett continued, "and when he caught up to us, we said '*didn't you hear us calling?*' and he said '*Sure, but there are heaps of Dads here, you could have been calling to any one of them*', so from then on he was Charlie."

Angela laughed, "That's so cute!"

Bella smiled, "That's so Charlie."

"And you've honoured him well, Sis." Emmett said with a grin.

"But how come you're not in the photo?" Angela asked.

Emmett smiled, "Who do you think was holding the camera? I'm still there."

"You're always there," Bella replied with a gentle smile.

"Yep, you might not see me, but I'll always be with you, Bells."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward peered around in the gloom until he saw Jasper reach up and give a languid wave. He worked his way through the Friday afternoon crowd and saw that Jasper had somehow managed to get a bar table, and already had a beer and a shot waiting.

"Cullen," Jasper greeted him with a lazy nod.

"Whitlock," Edward replied, picking up the shot and raising an eyebrow at Jasper.

"Down the hatch," Jasper said.

Edward threw the shot back, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and quickly took a sip of beer. "I'm glad you called, how's your day been?" he asked as he set his glass down.

Edward watched his friend cast a happy gaze around the patrons of the bar, a good proportion of which were women, then thought about his own productivity for the day. He'd gone home from the bakery and after much thought over a few hours, had written a sentence. Not much to show for the day. Certainly nothing to a journalist with deadlines like Jasper, but given Edward's productivity of late, it was on par with *War and Peace*. Jasper had called him early evening and invited him out for a drink, and Edward had accepted, it seemed a better option than staring at his computer all evening.

Jasper gave a happy shrug, "deadlines are met so my weekend has started. Cullen, let's play."

"You're on," Edward muttered, picking up his beer again. He was taking another sip when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He fumbled for it and answered, one hand pressed over his other ear so that he could hear better. "Hello?"

"Hey son, sounds like you're having fun somewhere."

"Dad," Edward couldn't stop the happy grin on his face, "how are you?"

"Doing good at this end, but we miss you. Your mother wanted me to call. What are you up to this weekend?"

That was, Edward knew, code for '*we both miss you, come home*'.

"I'm having a drink with Jasper tonight," he replied, "yeah the Whitlock kid," he agreed, grinning as Jasper raised his glass in acknowledgement, "so maybe Sunday?"

"That sounds great. Listen I won't keep you on the phone then, but please come over on Sunday. I know your mother will jump at the chance to feed you."

"You won't hear me arguing," Edward replied, "see you on Sunday, Dad, love you."

"Will do, love you too, Son. I think your mother's cooking already."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You mean I don't get a home cooked meal?" Emmett said, his eyes pleading, "c'mon Bella, it's been ages."

Emmett had spent the afternoon hanging out at the bakery, making the girls laugh and performing some quality control checks on the cupcake supply. As it turned out, his visit had been well timed in more ways than one. Bella had signed for a delivery of ingredients, and had immediately pressed Emmett into service with the heavy lifting. He had helped Bella clean up the store after closing, and wanted to do something for dinner. Bella's first instinct had been to suggest take-out.

"Oh come on then," she sighed, picking up her satchel, "but I've got to pick up a few things on the way home."

"No problem," Emmett replied with a grin.

"And you're paying."

"Fair call," he agreed.

They had called in at a grocery store on the way home, and Bella picked up a few things after sending Emmett to a liquor store further down the block to get a bottle of wine to enjoy with their meal.

Once home, Bella had kicked off her shoes and changed shirts, then had busied herself making dinner while Emmett uncorked some white and kept up a steady stream of conversation. She directed Emmett to 'make the table look pretty', and after some searching he had produced a tablecloth and some candles. Soon they were sitting down to a meal of creamy smoked salmon pasta, and some crusty garlic bread.

Emmett raised his wine glass, "To Charlie and Renee," he said.

Bella chinked her glass against his, "Happy Charlie Day, Em."

"Amen," he replied, and then got down to the business of the meal.

A while later, Emmett used last of the garlic bread to clean up the sauce in his bowl, having already gone back for seconds. He leaned back in his chair and gave a sigh that was replete with satisfaction.

"God, that was good."

Bella watched him with quiet amusement, tucking a foot up on her chair and twirling a strand of hair around one finger, her elbow resting on her knee.

"Don't you cook much at home?"

"Standard bachelor fare," he replied, finishing his mouthful and stacking the plates.

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"Meaning they know me by name at Subway, but yeah, I cook sometimes, it just doesn't taste as good as this-," he waved his wine glass at the table. He patted his still-flat belly and gave her a hopeful look. "I don't suppose-," he raised an eyebrow.

Bella laughed "they're in a box near the sink." She smiled as Emmett picked up their dinner plates went to investigate, enjoying their sibling shorthand. He returned with the box, took out a cupcake and bit into it, making a happy humming noise to himself as he ate.

"So," Emmett said finally, licking some frosting off his fingers, "it's time for the annual question, you ready?"

"As I'll ever be," she said in a resigned tone, "bring it on."

Emmett folded his arms on the table and leaned forward, "How's the love life?"

"How can I put this," Bella pretended to think for a moment, "let's just say that if my love life was a person, it'd be lying in a hospital bed somewhere, in a vegetative state, with a nurse saying 'switch it off'."

Emmett laughed and shook his head.

"And now it's my turn," Bella went on, "how about you?"

"Well let's just say I don't lack of companionship," he waggled his eyebrows suggestively, making her groan, "but," his expression sobered, and for a moment he looked vulnerable, "it'd be nice to having something more permanent."

The two of them sat in a contemplative silence for a while.

"You know," Emmett ventured, "if Mom was still alive she'd be match-making up a storm for the two of us."

"No doubt about it," Bella agreed, "and Dad would be polishing his shotgun, wanting to know the intentions of any guy that turned up on the doorstep."

Emmett grinned.

"So is there anyone on the horizon for you?" Emmett asked out of curiosity.

"Not that I'm aware of, but Jake and Alice are usually better at spotting that kind of thing, how about you?"

"Well I'm looking, so I guess it'll happen when it's meant to," Emmett stared into his wine glass and then took another sip. "We'll get there, Bells."

"Yeah, but it'd be nice to know where *there* is. I mean, I've got friends, I've got a great little business that's starting to turn a profit, I mean," she sipped her wine and shrugged, "maybe there are some of us that just aren't destined to have it all."

"Maybe not," Emmett replied, "but that doesn't mean you just have to roll over and accept it. Mr Right isn't just going to knock on your door, Bells, you've got to get out there."

"I know," Bella replied with a sad little smile, "just do me a favour."

"Anything," Emmett agreed instantly.

"If I don't end up married and chasing the happily ever after, just promise me you won't let me turn into the crazy old cat lady."

"Done, as long as you make sure I don't end up the sad old bachelor drunk at the bar."

"Brother Bear," Bella said, "you've got yourself a deal."

Emmett pushed his chair back from the table and opened his arms. Bella got up and walked around to curl up on his lap, tucking her head under his chin.

"I've missed you," she mumbled into his shirtfront.

"I've missed you too, Sis," Emmett replied in a quiet voice. "Let's do this more often, okay?"

"You're just saying that to get more cake," Bella retorted, swallowing the sudden lump in her throat.

"Saw right through me that time didn't you," Emmett chuckled.

Bella closed her eyes, listening to the rumble of his laughter in his chest. "Do you miss them?" Bella ventured in a quiet voice.

"Every day," Emmett's voice was just as soft.

They sat together, Emmett rocking his little sister gently in his arms, closing his eyes and resting his cheek on her head.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jasper slung an arm around Edward's shoulders and leaned over to shout in his ear.

"Another round?"

"Yeah," Edward flicked some money in Jasper's direction who managed to swipe the notes on his second attempt before ambling off to the bar. Edward watched his progress and grinned, then his gaze drifted, stopping when he realised someone was staring at him. She shook her dark hair off her shoulders and nibbled at the straw in her drink. The suggestion in her eyes was unmistakeable. Edward stared back as he finished his drink.

Jasper returned from the bar with their drinks, and setting them down on the table followed Edward's gaze. "Nice," he commented. "Listen man, if you wanna go play I can find my way home."

"Nah, I'm good," Edward replied, accepting the next drink. "She's not my type."

Jasper glanced across at the woman and then gave Edward an incredulous look. "Are you shitting me? She's been watching you like she's already on her back, that's a serious case of 'come fuck me' eyes you're getting there."

"I know," Edward muttered, "but she's not-" he stopped with a shrug.

Jasper watched him, his eyes growing wide. "Oh-ho, so you've got someone else in your sights," he guessed, grinning when he saw the look on Edward's face, "I'll take that as a yes, who is she?"

"No-one you know," Edward replied, chugging back his beer in a bid to avoid the conversation.

"Because you haven't made a move yet?" Jasper asked. Edward shot him a quick look, "I'm right again aren't I? Damn I'm good."

"Yeah, you're something," Edward gave him a wry grin.

"So what's she like?" Jasper's eyes were alive with curiosity.

"Smart, funny, great laugh, beautiful-" Edward began, pausing as Jasper waved him off.

"Okay, I get the idea. And she's single?"

"That's what I've been told," Edward replied, thinking of Alice.

"Well if she's that good, you're going to have to move fast. But you know, but before you think about Miss Right that you clearly have up on a pedestal, there's always Miss Right Now."

"What?" Edward's gaze swung from the brunette back to Jasper's.

"You heard me," Jasper shrugged, "why deny yourself a *right now* because you've got a *what if*? Carpe diem and all that shit."

"I don't know," Edward said, doubtful.



"When in doubt my friend," Jasper said, "have another drink. I'll get us another round."

Jasper went back to the bar, and Edward looked at the brunette again. Maybe Jasper had a point. He'd locked himself away for so long. Maybe it was time to live a little.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella woke up, and reached for the glass of water beside her bed as she slapped off the alarm. It had been a late night with Emmett, and she had consumed far more wine than usual. She finished her water and got up, making the bed before heading towards the bathroom.

Another day had begun.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward surfaced into awareness slowly. Very slowly. It took him a while to realise that the bed smelled difference. That'd been some dream. Even the sheets *felt* different. And his mouth felt like someone had poured the Sahara Desert into it.

Then he felt the warmth of another body beside him. His eyes flew open, and the first thing he saw was a mass of brunette hair on the pillow beside him.

Where the hell was he?

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice made her way to work, stopping in at a newsagent to buy a copy of her weekly indulgence, *Us Weekly*. She leafed through the pages as she walked, dividing her attention between the oncoming pedestrians and the printed page before her. She stopped at a set of lights, snorting with derision as she read about yet *another* sex-tape scandal.

\* \* \* \* \*

The man stopped outside and laughed as he read the quote.

*The purpose of life is love, and the purpose of videotape is to make hot movies of that love.*

He went inside and strolled up to the counter. "Nice quote out the front, who came up with that?"

Bella looked up with a ready smile at the customer. He was tall and blonde, with wide blue friendly eyes.

"That'd be the work of our resident genius, Alice," she replied, inclining her head towards Alice who was working at the coffee machine, who took a moment to bob a quick curtsy before resume her task.

"Nice," he grinned, although his gaze hadn't moved from Bella. Alice bit her lip to hold back a grin, "And you are-," his voice tailed off and he grinned at Bella hopefully.

Bella managed not to yelp as Alice gave her a swift kick in the shins. "I'm Bella, I own the store," she said with a nod.

"And she's the resident cupcake genius," Alice added.

"Really?" his eyebrows went up as he nodded in appreciation, "Well Bella, it's nice to meet you, I'm Mike."

"Hi," Bella smiled. "So what can we get you?"

"Hmm," he made a show of inspecting the case, "well I guess that all depends," he said, looking up at her again.

"Depends on what?"

"On you telling me which cupcake comes with your number," he flashed her a winning smile.

Bella opened her mouth, but Alice beat her to the punch. "They all do," she chimed.

"Great!" Mike rubbed his hands together, "Well I'll leave the choice up to you, Bella."

"Take a seat, Mike," Bella managed, and Alice will be out with the coffee.

"Thanks," another grin, and he moved off towards a table.

"What the hell are you doing?" Bella hissed at Alice.

"Trying to help you out," Alice replied in an undertone, scooping out a cupcake and putting it on a plate, before picking it up and grabbing the coffee, "because sometimes life's just too short to dawdle over shit like this," and with that, she sailed out into the store.

By the time Alice returned to the counter, Bella was serving someone else. Angela returned with some more cups, and paused to exchange a glance with Alice.

"Wow," Angela whispered, "she's looking pissed, what did you do?"

Alice gave Angela a sly grin. "Relax Toots, the love doctor is in town."

Angela looked out to where Mike was enjoying his snack, all the while keeping a very appreciative gaze on Bella.

"Him?" she said in a voice that radiated disbelief.

"Yup, but only for now."

Angela looked at Alice in askance. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. Trust me."

Mike left an hour later, and Bella glared at Alice who cleaned up his table. As Alice got back to the coffee machine, Bella sauntered over. "Nice try, Alice, but he didn't get my number," she taunted.

"That's okay, I traded numbers with him on your behalf," Alice said in a flippant tone, walking into the kitchen and leaving Bella blinking in surprise in her wake.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey Boss, I couldn't help but notice that you were having a very cosy little chat with the Lion yesterday, before Emmett came in last week," Alice said in an arch tone, "it looked like the two of you were getting along."

"Who?" Bella looked puzzled.

Alice rolled her eyes, snapping the braces she was wearing over her polka dot t-shirt in irritation, "will you just *try* to work with me for maybe a minute?"

"Well give me a clue," Bella replied.

"Auburn hair, tall, jaw line that just begs to be kissed, green eyes, kinda shy, the two of you were holding hands," Alice recited, ticking the items off on her fingers.

Bella stared at her for a moment before comprehension dawned, "Shy, you mean Edward?"

"Yes," Alice said with relief. "Thank god we've got a name, Ange and I have been calling him the Lion King for a few weeks now, but you're the only one he really wants to talk to."

"Really?" Bella looked surprised and flattered as she kept cleaning the bench.

"Uh-huh," Alice replied, watching the slight flush creeping up Bella's neck. *Come on little fishy*, "the two of you seem to have struck up a nice little friendship."

"Mmmph," Bella grunted and kept working.

"And then there was Mike today, what did you think of him?"

"Well he seems like a nice guy," Bella allowed.

Alice stared. "Nice? Is that all you've got to say?"

"Yup," Bella kept cleaning. Her back was to Alice, so the other woman didn't see her lips tightening.

"Well I would have thought you could say something better than just *nice*."

Bella turned around, resting one hand on her hip and brushing her hair off her face with the other. "Well shit, Alice, what else do you want me to say?" Bella was getting angry now, and this was a rare thing.

"I-," Alice was shocked into silence, also a rare thing.

Bella sighed, and leaned against the counter looking weary. "Alice, you know today has been really hard for me, the shop has been busy, and if you don't mind I'd rather not end it with a lecture about my love life or-," she held up a warning finger as Alice made as if to speak, "the lack thereof. Get it?"

Alice closed her mouth with a snap. "Got it," she managed.

"Good."

Bella regarded her for a moment, then turned and slung the dishcloth over one shoulder as she started to unload the dishwasher. "Do me a favour," she said over her shoulder, "go out, have a few drinks, have a great time, and get laid."

"That's an official directive? Get laid?" Alice said.

"Someone around here has to," Bella shrugged, stacking her stainless steel mixing bowls with muted clangs.

The kitchen was quiet for a moment, save for the sounds of dishes and cutlery as Bella unloaded and stacked things away.

"Boss," Alice ventured after a pause, "You know I only nag you like because-,"

"You care," Bella interrupted and gave her a tired smile, "I know."

"So, we're cool?" Alice said this in a timid voice, and Bella looked at her in surprise.

"Oh honey," she crossed to her and gave her a hug, "you know we are. I'm just a bit fragile today is all."

"I know, and I shouldn't have pushed," Alice admitted in a small voice.

Bella gave her another squeeze and then stepped back, her hands on Alice's shoulders.

"Look, I'll make a deal with you," Bella said in a careful tone, "if I go out on a date with someone, will it get you off my back?"

"Sure," Alice said.

"Really?" Bella raised an eyebrow.

"Well," Alice hedged, "maybe for a while."

"That's good enough for me," Bella agreed, "now get outta here."

After another hug, Alice left a few minutes later. Bella kept working, trying to ignore the scrap of paper that Alice had stuck to the refrigerator door. A number with the name 'Mike' scrawled above it in big letters.

She finished cleaning, and slowly walked towards the refrigerator and removed the scrap of paper. Maybe Emmett had a point. They both ought to do something with their lives. She sighed, and after a long moment reached for the phone. She closed her eyes, deep in thought, then in a decisive movement punched in the numbers and waited for the call to go through.

It answered.

"Hi, is that Mike?" She listened to the happy affirmative, "Um, it's Bella, from the bakery – I got your number this afternoon ..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward sat looking at his computer screen and then stared out of the window at the city. The hour was late, but he would still hear plenty of activity outside. People were enjoying evening strolls, traffic was still moving.

Everyone seemed to be having a good time.

So why wasn't he?

He thought back to his very sober awakening in a strange bed and grimaced. It had been a long time since he'd started the day with a hangover and a stammered apology. Looking at her in the light of day, he saw that she was nothing like Bella.

Nothing like her at all.

Dark hair, and blue eyes that flashed with a cold brilliance that didn't match her smile. She'd brushed aside his apologies with a careless gesture, and while her lips trembled slightly, her smile hadn't faltered.

"Honey, you were my rebound for the evening, so as far as I'm concerned you can leave, and don't come back."

"I'm sorry," he had offered again.

She had seemed to soften a little at that. "You know," she said slowly, "either I'm still drunk, or inclined to think you might actually mean that."

Edward had said nothing more.

"Either way," she had continued, "you're not obliged to stay, so why don't you do us both a favour and leave now so that I can go back to sleep."

"Whatever he did, I hope you feel better soon," he had said, pulling on his jeans.

"Last night was a good start," she had said, regarding him through slitted eyes. Hangover notwithstanding, she could still appreciate a nice body when she saw it. "And just so you know, I wasn't her."

"What?" he looked at her in confusion.

"I know when I'm having sex with a man who's thinking about someone else," she said in a bitter tone, "so thanks for a great fuck, thanks for being nice about it this morning, and let's both hope we get what we want."

He had paused, but she said nothing more, so he left, closing the door quietly behind him.

Edward sighed and looked at the screen again.

Still the same sentence as before.

*A laugh that lights up the room, and a smile that can't help but create another.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella laughed at Mike's joke, even though it wasn't that funny. She hated herself, feeling like she was trying to be someone else.

She had called Mike who had happily agreed to meet her out for dinner. They had enjoyed a meal and a glass of wine, then had strolled to a wine bar to continue the evening. A glass of wine had become another, and then another. Then Bella had thrown caution to the wind and enjoyed a cosmopolitan.

"Looks like you enjoy a Cosmo," Mike had commented as she had downed two in quick succession.

Bella nodded. It wasn't often she drank, but when she did, she generally made a night of it. "If I could get these things in a sippy cup, I'd be a happy girl," she said carelessly, reaching for the glass as Mike laughed.

Somehow, they had made their way home to Bella's apartment. It had been closer, and Bella had giggled and leaned against Mike all the way up the stairs. Once inside, she had closed the door and turned to see Mike reaching for her.

Bella leaned into his embrace, trying not to mind when he swirled his tongue into her ear and sucked on her earlobe. Perhaps it was something that had worked for him in the past, but not this time. She stared into the darkness of the bedroom then closed her eyes tightly as his lips claimed hers.

Damn it. She'd been lonely for too long. She needed this. She really did. She kept reciting that in her head as she closed her eyes and gave herself up to him, knowing that she was cheating them both.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward stood under the shower for a long time, then pulled on some clean sleepwear and padded towards the bed. His empty, king size bed. He crawled under the sheets, and punched his pillow into a pleasing shape. He tried to relax, and inhaled, breathing in the scent of his own bed.

His last thought as he drifted off to sleep was of Bella's smile, and the touch of her hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella rolled towards the alarm clock as it sounded, and encountered a warm body instead of her spare pillow. She opened her eyes to see Mike sound asleep for all that the alarm clock was shrilling beside his head. Clutching the sheet to her chest, she leaned across him and slapped at the alarm until it stopped, subsiding back onto the bed and regarding Mike with weariness.

There was nothing for it. She had to get ready, and he had to go.

"Hey," she nudged his shoulder once, and then again. He grunted and tried to roll over, but she pulled at his shoulder, "Hey Mike, we've got to get going."

"In a minute," he mumbled, attempting to burrow back into the pillow.

"No, *now*," she repeated, "c'mon."

He showed no sign of movement. Bella regarded him for a moment and then came to a decision. She had a routine, and he was going to have to like it or lump it, preferably the latter. She grabbed at the sheet and quilt and yanked it off the bed.

*That* woke him up.

"What the fu-," he began, then he saw Bella, who was shimmying into a t-shirt that she had dropped on the floor last night, "What are you doing? C'mere," he patted the mattress in an inviting manner.

Bella looked at him over her shoulder and stood up.

"Sorry Mike, no time, I've got to get to work."

"So call in sick," he put his hands behind his head and rolled over onto his back, quite unabashed at his nudity. Bella regarded him with, she realised, only mild regret, then shook her head.

"It's my business, I've got to be there," she said in what she hoped was a patient tone.

A small 'I want' line appeared between Mike's eyebrows. "But I thought-," he began.

"What you want and what I need are two different things," Bella said in what she hoped was a gentle tone, "and I've got a business to run so I'm going to get ready, okay?" She patted his foot and then got up and rounded the bed as she headed towards the bathroom. "There's plenty of food in the kitchen," she called over her shoulder, "so help yourself to some breakfast and then we need to move."

She quickly stripped off the t-shirt and got into the shower, praying he wouldn't try to join her. She showered quickly, shivering under the hot spray. The sex last night had been good, like scratching a persistent itch, but waking up with the reality felt very different. She wanted him out of her sanctuary, and soon.

Hearing movement, she froze and cocked her head. She heard the refrigerator door open, and Mike foraging. She relaxed a fraction and began to wash her hair. Good. He was going to eat, and then the sooner she was ready they were going to go.

She reappeared a short while later in jeans and one of Emmett's shirts. It was enormous on her, but she had knotted it at the waist to try and cinch it in somewhat. She had teamed with a pair of her oldest jeans – and given her extensive collection that was saying a lot – and her faithful red chucks. Her hair was still wet, and her face was devoid of makeup when she entered the kitchen carrying her satchel.

Mike saw her and smiled, although she could see that his heart wasn't quite in it. Getting rebuffed the morning after the night before had put him on the back foot.

"Wow, you get ready quick," he commented.

Bella shrugged, "I've got a full on day baking," she replied.

Mike waved a half eaten apple towards the door. "So, time to hit the road?"

Bella nodded, hoping her relief didn't show on her face. "Yup, sorry."

They left the apartment and made their way down the stairs side by side.

"So," Mike ventured after a brief pause, "how about we catch up for lunch?"

"I can't," Bella replied with a regretful smile, "business owner, remember?"

"Oh yeah," he looked disappointed, "that's right." He thought for a moment, "Well, how about breakfast on Saturday?"

"Working again, it's a 6-day a week operation, so I don't have much of a life," she replied, shrugging her satchel strap into a more comfortable position on her shoulder.

"Right," Mike looked at his feet and then back at her. Bella felt guilty. Was she being too harsh? Mike was a nice-looking guy, classic All-American good looks, and they'd had a fun evening together. Lots of women would go for a guy like him, so why wasn't she? "So," Mike said again, "Maybe I'll call you sometime-," his voice trailed off and they both looked at each other, feeling uncomfortable.



"Mike," Bella sighed, looking down at her feet for a moment, trying to find the words. "I just don't know if this is a good time for me. Running my own business takes a lot of-"

"Time," Mike interrupted with a sigh, "I know." He gave her a half-smile. "Still, if you want to catch up again sometime, you've got my number."

On impulse, Bella stood on tip-toe and gave him a gentle kiss. "I'm really sorry, Mike," she said, and this time she meant it. They both knew she wouldn't call.

They said their goodbyes and went their separate ways. Bella watched Mike head off in the opposite direction, and then went on her way, wondering why she felt so relieved and lonely all at once.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice walked to work, her eyes darting back and forth over the faces in the crowd as she sought her daily inspiration. She had three more blocks to think of something, and so far, the Chalkboard Gods hadn't given her a damn thing. She arrived at the corner of Broadway and Houston, and unhooked her ipod ear buds. Her playlist wasn't inspiring her this morning either, so maybe she'd eavesdrop for a change. Moments later, she heard two women talking behind her.

"You still on for lunch on Saturday?"

"Not sure, Tony said he's gotta be in at the office, so unless I can get a sitter ..." the voice trailed off in a mixture of disappointment and disgust.

"Just bring them along," the other woman suggested.

"Are you crazy? The kids'll get bored."

"So?" Alice could hear the shrug in the other's voice, "they'll play in the café and we can have a drink, they'll be fine."

Alice clenched her jaw. The bakery was fortunate enough not to have become an unofficial crèche. All the same, the attitude of some women when it came to letting their children run riot and have someone else pick up after them without a word of thanks made her blood boil. If anyone tried that with her in the bakery she'd ....

She paused.

She smiled.

The Chalkboard Gods had provided. She was still sending up silent thanks and eternal gratitude as she crossed the street moments later.

By the time Bella arrived, Alice had thought up the perfect revenge, and offered Bella a serene smile as she unlocked the door.

"Morning, Boss."

"Alice, don't call me Boss," Bella replied with a smile.

Alice relaxed. All was forgiven. "Sorry, Boss."

As soon as Bella had let herself in, Alice darted inside to collect the chalkboard. She wrote quickly and then hung up the board with a 'that's that' nod of satisfaction. She'd even used red chalk, just to make her point.

*We love family time, but please note that unattended children will be given an espresso and a free puppy!*

Alice got back inside and did a double-take as she took a good look at Bella.

"What the hell happened? Did you oversleep or-," she broke off, her eyes widening, "or *didn't you get much sleep at all?*"

Bella opened the door and ushered Alice inside, giving her a wry smile. "I woke up on time, but no, I didn't get much sleep, thanks so much for asking."

Alice was agog. "What did you do?" *She looks like she ...*

"I took my own advice from yesterday, and called that guy."

"I knew it!" Alice gave a little skip, "so how was it?"

"It was," Bella paused, "okay." She pulled a face, "pretty lame description, huh?"

Alice turned to face her, "Really? He looked like a nice guy."

"Oh and he is, nothing wrong with him at all," Bella dropped her satchel and flicked on the coffee machine, pulling out a couple of cups. "Before you can ask, yes we had sex, and it was good sex, but it just felt like we were ... like I was ... I don't know, going through the motions or something."

While the machine was warming up, the two women put their bags away and kept chattering as they went about their morning routine.

"Tell Dr Alice everything," Alice said, getting the milk out of the fridge and handing it to Bella, who took it with a nod of thanks.

"Well you know, I just would've liked a deeper connection."

Alice gave Bella a significant look, "surely the only way he could get deeper would be with surgery."

Bella coughed to hide her laugh. "Well yes, there was that. All I'm saying is that if it's just going to be sex for the sake of it, then I can take care of things for myself in that department."

"True," Alice suggested, "but you have to admit that having someone else there with you makes for a great way to pass the time."

"There is that," Bella agreed.

"Did he spend the night?" Alice went on.

"Yeah," Bella sighed, and poured the frothy milk into the cups, "which is why I look like *this*," she gestured to her – or rather Emmett's – shirt and wet hair.

"Ah," Alice's face brightened in understanding, "you grunged yourself up so that he wouldn't get any saucy ideas about seeing you again."

"Yup, think it's too obvious?"

Alice gave her a pitying look. "Honey, he's a *guy*, there's no such thing as too obvious. He'll be fine."

They sipped their coffee in silence for a moment, giving the freshly ground brew all the loving attention it deserved.

"Tell you what," Alice continued, "why don't you go fix yourself up and I'll get things started."

"You're a champ," Bella said gratefully.

"Don't applaud, throw money," Alice teased, and slapped Bella's rump to shoo her away. "Now you go get yourself looking nice, I've got a bakery to open, and Angela will be here soon."

"Yes'm."

Bella went out into the kitchen and hung up her satchel, then opened one of the cupboards and pulled out one of the spare t-shirts she kept in there for emergencies. She looked at the front and grinned, it seemed appropriate. She wriggled into it, and then looked her satchel and cursed when she realised she didn't have her brush.

"Alice!"

"Wassup?" Alice popped her head into the kitchen, "hey nice shirt."

"Thanks, you got a brush?"

Alice pointed at her scruffy styled short hair, "do I look like I have a brush?"

"What am I going to do? I can't get around with hair like this."

"Gimme a sec, Angela's just got here so she might be able to help."

Bella heard the women exchange greetings, and then Angela came into kitchen with a smile, already digging in her bag. "Oh I see what she means, don't worry Bella, we'll get you sorted."

"Thanks," Bella smiled with gratitude.

Alice cocked her head and considered Bella for a moment. "You know, with a hot little shirt like that, can I have a play?"

"Knock yourself out," Bella shrugged, and Alice set to work.

A few minutes later, Bella was surveying her reflection in a mirror, "Braids? You've put me in braids?"

"You don't like?" Alice looked worried.

Bella laughed, "No, they're cute. I just haven't had braids since grade school, and even then it was only when Renee could hold me down long enough." She gave Alice a quick hug, "thanks for getting me presentable, Babe."

"Anytime," Alice smiled, and went back out the front.

Reaching for her compact, Bella gave herself a quick dusting of makeup, some mascara and lip gloss. Closing the small mirror with a snap, she dropped it back into her bag, and then turned towards the kitchen counter. It was time to start the day.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward woke up with a hoarse gasp, his arm still reaching for the space beside him before he realised the bed was empty. He stared at the empty expanse before dropping his head back onto his pillow with a sigh. The dream had been so real. He squeezed his eyes closed, trying to remember, but already the vision was slipping away. All he could remember was an impression of soft, sweet skin, and brown eyes that crinkled at him before fluttering closed with pleasure. He rolled onto his side, hugging the spare pillow to his chest, trying to ignore the tightness in his groin, wishing he wasn't alone.

He was going to have to do something about that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice was enjoying her morning coffee when Angela arrived, looking a bit flushed and pleased with herself.

"Hey Ange," said Alice, "you need a coffee?"

"Oh please," Angela smiled as she passed Alice to leave her bag in the kitchen. She returned and accepted a cup from Alice with thanks, looking her up and down as she did so. "God, I wish I could look like you," she sighed.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"You know," Angela waved a hand at her, "stunning, instead of stunned."

Alice looked down at her outfit. Her favourite black jeans, a blue Paul Frank t-shirt, and tiger print ballet flats. It was simple and funky, and entirely Alice.

"Well," Alice grinned, "it helps when you're short enough to shop in the kid's section, keeps the costs down a bit," she cocked her head and regarded Angela thoughtfully, "but I think we can have a play with your wardrobe."

Angela went pink with pleasure, "really?"

"Yup, particularly if – and I'm only guessing here – it's going to help you snare someone's interest."

Angela's pink cheeks flushed crimson.

"Thought so," Alice added with satisfaction.

"So," Angela said in a bid to change the focus of the conversation, "if that's me sorted, what about Bella?"

"What about her?"

"You know," Angela peeked into the kitchen to make sure Bella was busy, "The Lion King hasn't been in for a while."

"I know," Alice frowned for a moment, "but I think he'll be in soon. There's a pattern of sorts, and my gut tells me that he'll be back."

"I hope you're right," Angela said, sipping her coffee.

"I'm always right, and if I'm not, well, I'll just have to make the time to fix things until they are."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella waved off some customers and then looked up at the oversized clock hanging over the kitchen door. It was yet another flea market find, with an enormous face that reminded Bella of the ones she saw at Central Station. She enjoyed her weekend customers as everyone seemed to be in a more relaxed state of mind. She checked her Saturday diary sheet and looked up to see Alice heading inside with some empty cups.

"Alice, it's nearly 11 o'clock, time to get ready," she called before heading into the kitchen.

"I'm on it," Alice replied, heading out into the café front with some fabric folded over one arm, then saw Edward standing outside. She put the fabric down, and returned to the counter, biding her time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward had walked through the village, making his way towards the bakery. He had no idea what he was going to say. He hadn't visited the bakery for a few days. Since his night of drunken debauchery he'd steered clear, trying to get his thoughts in order.

However circular his thoughts had been, they always returned to one thing.

Bella.

Edward looked down the street, seeing the red canopy of *Take The Cake*, not realising that he was already smiling. The store seemed to be a bit busier than usual today, he could see people coming and going as he made his way towards the store. He hoped he'd be able to find a table.

As was his tradition, he stopped at checked out the chalkboard before entering.

*The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.*

As soon as he entered, his gaze automatically went to the counter, looking to see Bella. He wasn't disappointed. She was serving some customers, exchanging a few words and a laugh with each of them. She was wearing a black tight-fitting tee, with the unmistakable Rolling Stones logo: red pouting lips with a tongue hanging out, moving suggestively as Bella twisted and turned.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angela saw Edward pause in the doorway and nudged Alice, who looked up from her coffee making.

"It's him," Angela said with quiet excitement.

"Excellent, second cast has left the stage, and now it's time for the main attraction," Alice replied.

"Huh?"

"Don't worry," Alice said, looking serene.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward dropped his newspaper and keys onto a spare table, and made his way to the counter to order. Bella was with other customers, so he turned to the small woman near the coffee machine, who grinned at him.

"Your usual?" Alice asked as she got a cup out.

"You know it?" Edward was surprised.

"I remember our 'Specials', as we like to call them," Alice replied blithely, "anything for lunch as well?"

Edward laughed despite himself. "How about I leave it up to you?" he replied, getting out his wallet.

"Oh good," Alice gave him a happy smile, "I do so like it when people come to their senses."

"Is that what they do around you?"

"Generally," Alice replied, flicking a glance towards the kitchen, "some faster than others."

Edward had no idea what she was talking about, but handed over some notes and accepted his change as Alice shooed him towards a table.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward looked up from his coffee at the sounds of furniture being moved, and found himself watching a very business-like Alice set to work. Bella had come to his table to collect his plate, and Edward made the most of the opportunity.

"Hi, Bella," he smiled, marvelling that conversation with her was becoming easier with each visit.

"Hey, Edward," Bella gave him a warm smile, "It's nice to see you again."

"Likewise," he ventured, "so what's going on over there?" he asked, pointing towards Alice's endeavours.

"We're hosting a little girl's birthday party, they're having a High Tea," she explained. At Edward's look of inquiry she went on, "We don't normally take bookings, but we thought we'd give it a shot and see how things go." She looked over at the activity around the tables, and then grinned back at Edward. "If you think you can handle the oestrogen levels, stick around and see for yourself."

Meanwhile, Alice had moved two tables together and produced a vintage white tablecloth. She draped it over the top and then arranged the chairs to fit. Angela appeared with a laden tray, from which they decanted a series of mismatched floral teacups and saucers, sugar bowls and milk jugs. A vase of flowers was added, and Alice scattered rose petals across the table. As a final touch, Angela tied some pastel helium-filled balloons to the back of each chair, with a lavish amount of ribbon.

Half an hour later, the birthday girl arrived, accompanied by four of her friends, and her mother. The girls were all carefully dressed in 'going out' clothes, and they oohed and ahed over the pretty display before carefully taking their seats around the table. The balloons formed a cordon around the table that bobbed gently as the girls chattered and giggled.

Edward watched, charmed as Bella greeted the mother and birthday girl with a broad smile, before signalling Alice and Angela to deliver the main event. The girls broke into squeals of delight as their High Tea was delivered, and Bella settled them down before describing the fare that was being set out before them. It had all been artfully arranged on three-tier china plate stands, and was a selection of cucumber sandwiches (crusts removed), quiches, and smoked salmon bites. The next tier held a selection of cupcakes, each delicately frosted in colours to match the flowers and balloons, and the final tier held little paper cups of Turkish delight and fresh strawberries.

His lunch forgotten, Edward leaned forward, chin in hand as he watched the tea party unfold.

The girls were quite taken with the fine display, and under the watchful eye of the attending mother began to eat. Bella reappeared and carefully poured each girl cup of milky chai tea. Edward was surprised to see that the noise was kept to a minimum, as the girls carefully passed plates, toasted each other with their teacups, and seemed to delight in what appeared to be a fine dining experience for the junior set. The birthday girl opened her presents, and soon Bella reappeared with individually boxed cupcakes for each of the young guests to take home with them. The bill was discretely presented and settled, and each girl left with her chair balloon carefully tied to her wrist, calling out thanks and goodbyes. Bella stood in the doorway of the shop waving them off, and then turned to walk back into the store, a pleased smile on her face.

She stopped at the table to assist Angela who had appeared and was gathering up plates, and the two of them shared a quiet conversation about the afternoon as they cleared away the leavings of the party. Alice finished serving a customer, and then appeared to gather up the tablecloth, being careful to collect the loose rose petals along the way.

By this stage, Edward had returned to his lunch and newspaper, and looked up in surprise as a cupcake appeared beside his coffee. He glanced up to see Bella sliding the plate onto the table, a pleased smile on her face.

"This is becoming a habit," she smiled, "but we had some spares from the birthday party and I thought you'd like one."

"Thanks," Edward couldn't help but smile back, Bella's smile was infectious as she turned and returned to the counter. He watched as she dispensed some extra cupcakes to customers free of charge, noticing how everyone was smiling after Bella had spoken with them. He wished he had her easy way with people.

She looked busy, which was a pity. He'd hoped they'd be able to talk a bit more.

He decided that he wanted to stay awhile longer, and went up to the counter again, where Alice looked up with a bright smile.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Please," he replied as he turned his head to see what the cupcake of the day was, grinning as he saw the name, and automatically looked at Bella's t-shirt before reading the sign again.

*I can't get no satisfaction, Bitter dark chocolate and cherry, with creamy frosting.*

He looked back at Alice, who winked.

"Private joke," was all she offered. "Want one?"

"Sure, why not, I haven't been getting much lately either."

"What, cupcakes?" Alice deliberately misunderstood.

"No," Edward raised an eyebrow at the sign, "the satisfaction."



"Ohhh," Alice replied. Her mind was working furiously. *He's got to be single.* "And what do you do when you're satisfied?"

Edward shrugged, "I write."

"Really? Been writing much lately?"

He gave a short laugh, "Hell no, can't get no satisfaction, remember?"

"Ahh," Alice nodded, "and is your-" she gave a delicate pause as she poured some milk into his coffee, "*girlfriend* able to help at all?"

"Uh, no," Edward replied, "I'm single." His gaze flickered to Bella again, and looked back to see Alice watching him with a small smile.

"Single," Alice repeated, "right."

"For now, anyway," Edward replied.

Their eyes met in perfect understanding.

"Well I hope you get what you want soon then," Alice replied, handing him his cup with a grin, "if there's anything we here at *Take The Cake* can do to help, let us know."

"I'll bear that in mind," Edward replied gravely, his eye flickering in a subtle wink to Alice before he turned and made his way back to his table.

Alice watched him go then regarded Bella. She wouldn't give her a push today, she decided, it would be interesting to see what happened of its own accord, but she'd step in if she had to.

## **Ch 6 – The Fox and the Key**

Bella dunked her chocolate croissant into her café au lait before shoving the sopping chunk of pastry into her mouth with a hum of pleasure. Jacob watched her over his magazine, then silently passed over a napkin for her to dab her chin.

"Thanks," she mumbled as she dabbed at her chin, then leaned forward slightly for inspect, "better?"

Jacob eyed her briefly and then nodded, leaning over to dust some croissant crumbs off the top of Bella's t-shirt.

"You know, you really are a tit man at heart for all that you're gay," she commented as he fussed over her shirt.

"Hey," he objected, "I just like checking up on the girls and making sure they're okay."

"And how are they?" Bella peered down at her chest, which was now crumb and wrinkle free.

"Oh they're just lovely," he heaved a reminiscent sigh, "it's just too bad they're not a set of Pecs."

"Can't have it all," Bella replied, then finished her croissant, and then licked her fingers clean, before chugging the rest of her coffee. "That was fantastic, I'm going to get another one," she announced, grabbing her bag and standing up from the small table, "you want?"

"Just a coffee for me, Babe," Jacob replied with a smile, his attention momentarily diverted by a handsome man strolling past. Bella smiled at Jacob's blatant stare, and went into the café to order.

It was Sunday morning, and Bella was revelling in the thought of the lazy day stretching out ahead of her. She allowed herself one Sunday each month off work, and she planned to make the most of it. She had phoned Jacob to meet him for brunch, before heading off to the Hell's Kitchen Flea Market. Jacob wasn't keen on the markets, but joined Bella on occasion to 'see what else was on offer', as he liked to put it.

They weren't the only ones with that idea. The local cafes all seemed to be doing a brisk trade, with people sitting at the tables and chairs set up outside, soaking up the sunshine in various states of repair.

"I don't know how you can manage to eat so much," Jacob commented as Bella sat back down.

"Guess I must just burn it off at work," Bella replied as she stuffed her wallet back into her bag, "which is probably a good thing. Anything good to report?"

"Well," Jacob watched another passerby, "there's a few showing promise."

"I meant in the paper," Bella deadpanned.

"In that case, no, unless you want to pick up a little holiday property at Martha's Vineyard," Jacob flicked the lifestyle section back onto the table, "the rest of it I'm afraid, is deathly dull."

"Sounds about standard," Bella commented, reaching for the paper. Jacob produced a glossy magazine and he had stashed in Bella's bag and began to flick through it, eyeing off the advertisements for high end merchandise.

"Got it," he sighed and turned the page, "got it, had it, had him," he smiled and turned the page.

"Hang on, go back, which one?" Bella leaned over. Jacob held up the magazine to show a picture of a bronzed male model, "Oh yeah, I remember him. Weren't you quite keen on him for a while?"

"I was until he opened his mouth," Jacob said in an absent-minded voice as he kept flicking through the magazine. "Lovely to look at," he continued, "but whenever he spoke all I could hear was the ocean."

Bella snorted, "I suppose at the start you weren't really after him for his conversation."

"Absolutely," Jacob agreed on a sigh.

"So who have you been seeing lately?" Bella ventured after a pause.

"Well, I've got one that's showing some promise," Jacob allowed, "but the others have just been for a bit of fun."

Bella smiled to herself as she took another bite.

"And what was *that* little smile for?" Jacob asked.

"Well, I had one of those last week," Bella replied, trying not to blush.

"What? No, you don't mean," Jacob leaned forward, his face showing delighted shock, "Miss Swan, are you telling me you got *laid*?"

"You want to repeat that? I'm not sure they heard you in Florida!" Bella hissed, her cheeks flaming now as people on nearby tables shot her amused glances.

"Sorry," Jacob subsided, but his eyes were alight with curiosity. "Tell me everything."

"His name was Mike, Alice got his number for me when he came into the story," Bella began, stopping when Jacob flapped his hands impatiently.

"No, no, no. I want to know the good bits," Jacob replied, "How was the sex?"

"Such a pity," Bella said, shaking her head at Jacob in wonder, "you would've made a lovely girl."

"Spill," Jacob demanded, "did he stay the night?"

"He did," Bella replied, "but," she said holding up a hand to forestall more excited questions, "that was it. We won't be seeing each other again."

"What, no good?" Jacob's face fell.

"He was good, it was great, actually," Bella said, "but there was no connection."

"Honey, then he wasn't doing it *right*," Jacob said, slapping the table for emphasis.

"Oh god," Bella dissolved into giggles, "not like *that*," she said at last, "I meant there was no ... emotional connection."

"Ah," Jacob nodded in understanding. "So you want the loveage."

"What?"

"I read it in an article somewhere," Jacob explained, "women have sex with the men they've fallen in love with, and men fall in love with the women they have sex with." He leaned back in his chair, "So men and women approach the same situation from completely different viewpoints."

"Uh," Bella said, still confused.

Jacob sighed and went on.

"Your *Mr Right Now* last week was probably out for some great sex, and although that satisfied a part of you," he leered at this point, making Bella laugh again, "you want the loveage as well."

"And that's ... what did you call it, loveage?" now Bella was looking even more mystified.

"Yup. You want the whole kit. The hot sex, companionship, love, respect ... all the relationship goodness. For what it's worth, you're not the Lone Ranger. We all want it. Even me."

"Huh," Bella said after a long moment. "Well I guess you're right."

"And so is Alice," Jacob went on, "for all that she's a little energiser bunny root-rat, she's after someone that will see her for what she is."

"And what's that, exactly?" Bella said, intrigued now.

"She's a genuinely warm little person, who is just gagging for someone to look after." Jacob said, "Why else do you think she clucks around you so much?"

Bella looked confused.

"Are you saying that she's ..."

"Oh hell no, she's a meat and potatoes girl, just like you. But she still wants someone to look after her, so she can look after them. Deep at heart, she's a nester."

"Right," Bella considered this and then looked at Jacob, "So what does that make you?"

"Fabulous," Jacob drawled, making Bella laugh again.

\* \* \* \* \*

*You were great. Call me.*

Alice looked at the note and phone number that had been left on the pillow beside her, and then picked it up to crumple it into a ball and lob it at the bin. She had feigned sleep until the man had left, trying to keep her breathing deep, slow and even, relaxing only when she heard the apartment door click shut.

She rolled over and stretched, feeling her muscles pop as she groaned with satisfaction. She felt pleasantly sore from the activities of the night before. She sat up and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, then got out of bed and stripped off the sheets, rolling them up and stuffing them into a laundry bag. She worked in silence, putting clean sheets on the bed and tucking at the corners and tucking them in with vigour, until the bed looked pristine.

She padded towards the bathroom and stopped into the shower, turning on the water taps and flinching away from the hot water. Once the temperature had adjusted, she stood under the spray for a long time, her tears washing down the drain. She often felt lonely in the mornings.

By the time she had finished her shower, she had made her peace with the previous evening, and was ready to start the day. She stood in her apartment for a moment, debating over what to do with the day. Her home was cosy and stylish, coordinating art prints hung on the walls, stacks of her favourite fashion magazines sat on the coffee tables, and everything was in its place.

Everything was as it should be.

Alice stood in the centre of the living room, hands on hips, admiring her surroundings. It was the kind of place where she knew she could – and often had – spend an entire day, content in her own company.

Fuck it, she was going out for pancakes. She grabbed her bag and marched out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward finished his breakfast and pushed his plate away from him as he finished his coffee, sighing as he put down his cup, feeling replete with satisfaction.

He had been woken up by a call from his parents, which had been a mild surprise given he'd had dinner with them both only days before. They'd invited him to join them downtown for brunch, which he had agreed to. It wasn't as if he had an exacting schedule to keep after all.

He'd arrived at the café to see his parents – Carlisle and Esme – already sitting at an outside table. Hugs and kisses all round had been exchanged, before they had all settled down at the table and ordered. The conversation had flowed easily. Edward had a close and easy relationship with his parents, who were both academics. As he ate, Edward noticed how, even after years of marriage, his parents found all manner of excuses to touch each other. Carlisle finished eating first, and relaxed with an arm around the back of Esme's chair, his hand rubbing her upper arm in lazy circles.

"Good?" his father asked with a smile.

"Yup," Edward sighed, "thanks for calling, this was a good idea."

"Oh honey, you know we love seeing you," his mother said, reaching over to rub his wrist, "it seems like we haven't seen enough of you."

Edward felt a pang of guilt. She was right of course. The more difficult work had become for him, the more he had shut everyone out. His editor Marcus had giving him a week's breathing space, but had started to call him for some carefully worded conversations.

"So, Edward," his father began. Edward braced himself because he knew what was coming. "How's it all going? With work, I mean."

"Well," Edward scratched his stubble, "it has its moments." He thought about the last few weeks, about Bella, and smiled.

"Looks like it," his mother observed, "what's her name?"

"What?" Edward was started out of his thoughts by his mother's amused question. "What makes you think it's anyone?"

She shook her head. "Edward, I've been married to your father for 35 years, I've watched you in and out of relationships, I know a goofy grin when I see it."

Edward shifted on his seat, all too aware that his father was watching him with a considerable amount of amusement.

"Uh," he temporised.

"Might as well give it up son, you know she'll get it out of you anyway," his father advised.

Edward shot him an affectionate glare, "Thanks for your support, Dad," he muttered.

"Just calling it how I see it," his father shrugged, "plus of course, while she's grilling you it means I get off the hook for a while."

"Well," he began, "work has been," he paused again, "work hasn't been happening much at all lately, but I'm sure you knew that was still the case."

Esme's face creased with concern, "oh Edward, writer's block?"

Edward gave a mirthless grin, "It's beyond a block now Mom, it feels like the Great Wall of China."

"Anything we can do to help?" Esme leaned forward to put her hand on Edward's.

He smiled. No matter how old he got, he'd always be their boy.

"No, it's okay," he said, even though it wasn't.

"Well you know we're here for you, Son," Carlisle chimed in, "at least let your mother feed you once in a while."

Carlisle's eyes crinkled, and for the first time Edward noticed that his father's naturally blonde hair was slowly shifting towards a paler shade, white and gray hairs interspersed with the gold. His mother's auburn hair still fell in thick waves around her shoulders, but it too was beginning to pale at her temples. He thought of Bella again, and her conversation about losing her parents, and looked at Carlisle and Esme through new eyes.

"Thanks, it'd be nice to see more of you," Edward replied, and meant it.

"So," Esme said in a more business-like tone, "what's going on with your work, how are you dealing with it?" she gave Edward a shrewd gaze, "I seem to recall your way of coping with stress was to hide away from the world, would I be on the right track?"

"Yes," Edward admitted with a groan. His parents knew him all too well.

"And has it worked?" she continued.

"No," Edward admitted again, shifting in his seat as his father grinned.

"And what have we learned from this?"

"Oh god, are you going all teacher on me?" Edward replied, trying to divert the conversation. Esme pursed her lips but her eyes were twinkling at him, so Edward sighed and began to talk. "All right, so it hasn't been working. I've started going out for walks, just taking things in and-," his voice trailed off.

"And what?" Esme asked in a gentle voice.

"And I don't know," Edward shrugged, "I think I've found something-," his words trailed off again.

"Or someone?" guessed Carlisle.

"Maybe," Edward considered the situation, "or maybe not. I don't know."

"Well I guess there's only one way to find out," Esme prompted, "and is she nice?"

Edward grinned as he thought of Bella's laughter, and her easy way with people, "Yeah, she's one of a kind."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Another one? What do you want to look at more of those for?" Jacob asked as Bella tugged him across to another stall offering original artworks and prints.

"I just like them," Bella replied, "so I'm going to have a look. You don't have to come."

"Well," Jacob stopped and dithered, Bella turned to look at him.

"What?"

Jacob rubbed the back of his neck, a sign that he was getting uncomfortable.

"See here's the thing, Bells," he began, "I've got a date this afternoon."

"You have?" Bella's eyes widened, "and you're wasting time at a flea market with me when you should be getting ready?"

"Something like that," Jacob agreed, then went on in a hasty tone, "not that time with you is wasted."

"Oh I got what you meant," Bella waved away his concern, "you go get ready. You know I can spend a whole day here, and you've got a much better offer."

"Thanks, Bells," Jacob said, wrapping his arms around her for a quick hug. Bella closed her eyes and felt the warmth emanating from his body to hers. Jacob stepped back, but kept his hands on her shoulders, looking into her eyes. "You sure you're okay?"

"Of course," Bella scrunched her nose at him, "and make sure you tell me all about it later, I want to hear who the lucky guy is."

"I will," Jacob gave her a quick, soft kiss, "later, Bells."

"Seeya, Jake," she replied, swatting his rump as he turned to stroll off.

"Don't touch what you can't afford," Jacob sassed.

"I don't have that much small change on me anyway," Bella teased back, pleased that their old camaraderie was intact. She watched him walk away, and didn't fail to notice the admiring glances that followed his passage. He looked like a Calvin Klein model in his scruffy jeans and fashionably tattered t-shirt. She turned away with a smile, and walked over to the art stall that had caught her attention.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice stopped and looked in the shop window. The outfit was certainly striking, exquisitely tailored, and the fabrics were beautiful. She cocked her head to one side to try to read the price on the swing tag, pouting a little when she realised she couldn't make out the details. She squinted and peered at the outfit, memorising the details. *I can make that.* She told herself. Maybe she would. She pulled out her notebook and made some preliminary sketches, jotting down notes to herself as her gaze flickered between the window and her book. Snapping it shut, she stuffed it back into her bag and kept walking.

Now she had a project to work on. She always felt better when she had a project.

She walked past another window display, this one full of toys. A stuff lion caught her eye and she smiled, thinking about Bella, wondering what she was going to do about the Lion King.



\* \* \* \* \*

After a relaxing couple of hours, Edward had bid his parents a fond farewell and set off across the city towards home. He walked at a relaxed pace, hands in pockets as he watched the Sunday crowds. He wondered what Bella was doing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella watched Jacob weave his way through the crowd, and then turned back to the stall she had been making a beeline for. The sun was shining, and she had a whole day ahead of her to spend on whatever she wished. She felt blessed. She gave the artist operating the stall a quick smile, and then began to flick through some of the prints, stopping and admiring from time to time, but not tempted to buy.

She checked her watch and kept strolling, stopping at another artist stall. She realised she was thoroughly enjoying herself, and decided to reward herself with a present. She began to look at the limited edition prints, realising that the pictures were good. Bella flicked through a few more. They were *very* good.

Bella felt very pleased. She'd made a great find.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward realised that he was walking with no particular destination in mind. He glanced around him, looking at all the shops and traffic, and decided to go somewhere different for a change. He'd heard his mother talking about the Hell's Kitchen flea markets. It wasn't his usual thing, but of course the longer he stayed out, the longer he'd be away from the computer. And it *was* a nice day after all. He hesitated a moment longer, and then crossed the street.

Perhaps he'd find some inspiration.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ideas began to flow into Bella's mind as she held up the print and regarded it at arm's length. She loved it. It was a small print, a stylised fox sitting amongst some flowers. The fox's red coat over, was made up of small symbols that reminded her of Louis Vuitton. Very stylish, and very different. Her mind was made up; she could already picture it hanging in the store. She looked across to see a blonde woman regarding her with a smile.

"I love it," Bella smiled, "how much?"

The woman came over and looked at the print, checking the small sticker on the back and named a price. It was surprisingly reasonable, so Bella fished out her wallet and counted out some notes.

"You might like some of the other pictures I've got down this end of the stall as well," the woman said invitingly.

After only a brief hesitation Bella followed. "I have the feeling you're not going to do my budget any favours," she admonished with a grin, "but they *are* lovely. Are you the artist?"

"I am," the woman said, "I'm Rosalie," she put out her hand.

"Bella," they shook.

"So Rosalie, have you been doing these for very long? They look really professional," Bella said, flicking through the offerings. Her eyes gleamed. She had already seen at least four that she'd like to get.

"More years than I care to admit," Rosalie laughed, pushing her long blonde hair away from her face. She was dressed in soft linen pants and a matching grey t-shirt, and somehow managed to look cool, calm and collected despite the crowds of people milling around.

"Well it shows," Bella said in admiring tones, "these are just gorgeous."

"Thanks," Rosalie said with surprised pleasure.

Bella looked up at her, "What, you don't get compliments that often?"

"You'd be surprised," Rosalie shrugged, "people usually buy and move on, it's not often I come across someone that's happy to chat."

"Oh I'm in business for myself as well, probably where the chatty bug kicks in," Bella answered.

Rosalie laughed, "That's an excellent way of putting it. What do you do?"

"All sorts of things," Bella said, and opened her wallet again to retrieve a business card, "I've got a little bakery café in the Village, cupcakes are our specialty. Drop in and say hi sometime."

Rosalie took the card and smiled at the bakery name. "You know," she said as she slipped the card into her pocket, "I think I will."

"It'd be great to see you, but in the meantime," Bella held up another two pictures, "how much for these?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward made his way through the markets, feeling out of place as he walked past an array of stalls offering vintage and contemporary women's fashion. He was feeling out of his depth as he wove his way through the crowd, occasionally stopping to look at various handicrafts.

He paused to admire some hand bound leather journals, and then realised they currently pointless. Perhaps that would change in time, but he wasn't about to tempt fate by purchasing some more blank pages that would no doubt come back to haunt him.

Edward sighed as he paused and looked at the crowds of people. Getting off the beaten track was one way of making new discoveries, but it might help if he knew what he was looking for in the first place.

That's when he saw her.

He moved towards her through the crowd, watching as she laughed and joked with a woman at a stall. They exchanged notes, and Bella took careful possession of some flat packages. She'd just bought something. Edward stopped and gazed at her for a moment. He was used to seeing her with her hair up and off her face when she was working. It was a curious sensation, seeing her outside of her usual environment. She was wearing her hair down, and he admired the way it fell over her bare shoulders. She laughed and joked with her usual ease, and she turned away with a smile and a wave, strolled through the crowd with a careless grace. Her good mood was evident by the half-smile that played on her lips.

Edward half stood, half leaned against a market umbrella as he watched her navigate the crowds, stopping with a laugh as a toddler clutching a stuffed toy wandered out into her path. She half tripped and caught the child by his shoulders, and he clutched at her legs for balance as they staggered around in a laughing waltz before Bella got her balance again. She grinned and exchanged a couple of words with the child's parents before continuing on her way.

Edward began to follow her progress, trying to think of something to say. He wanted something witty, something that would warm her eyes. He liked her smile, and he wanted to see it again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice was humming with excitement as she let herself back into her apartment. She could still see it so clearly. She stuffed the last of her warm pretzel into her mouth and chewed as she snatched up a piece of blank paper and made some quick sketches. Finally she held the page away from her and gave a nod of satisfaction. She'd got it. It was time to get to work.

She dumped her bags of shopping and groceries on the kitchen counter, and put the cold items away, then headed for a corner of the living room. She had five vintage suitcases of varying sizes staked on top of each other to form a small leather pyramid, and now she began to unstack and ransack the contents, sorting and discarding as she went. The cases were her treasure trove of colour and texture, and she smiled as she held up a strand of sequins. Perfect.

Uncoiling herself from her position on the floor, she got up and went to her ipod dock, programming some upbeat music for the afternoon. She was going to be busy, so she was going to need something to keep her energy level up. The beats of Lady Gaga began to fill the room, and Alice opened a small cupboard and hauled out her sewing machine and set it up on the small two-seater table in the living room. She spread out some fabric and began to cut, smiling as she worked. Spreading out a couple of fabric off-cuts, Alice flicked out a stream of silver sequins, her gaze speculative as she compared and contrasted the colours, then pinned and began to sew.

This was going to be good. It'd be another piece she could sell sometime, which would all go into her emergency fund, or what her Mama had always called her 'running away money'. Alice never ran, but it was nice to know she had the option. She had plans for her future anyway. And there would be no running.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella strolled through the markets, feeling pleased with herself. All she had to do was find some picture frames and her new purchases would be displayed in the shop. She stopped to buy a warm pretzel, and was chewing with great enjoyment when she turned and bumped straight into someone's chest.

"Mmph!" she half choked and swallowed, "I'm sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going."

She felt warm hands clasp her upper arms as she stumbled a half pace backwards, and looked up to see a man looking just as startled as she was. She began to laugh.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward had followed at a hesitant pace, longing to be able to say something to her, clenching his hands in frustration. Why was this so hard? He stopped to consider the situation. He didn't feel intimidated by her, quite the contrary. He felt more comfortable with her than he had with anyone else for years. He drew closer. He could reach out and touch her, and still the words stuck in his throat.

Then the situation resolved itself before he could realise what was happening. He took a step closer just as she abruptly wheeled about and collided with him. He automatically reached out to balance her as their impetus knocked her back a step. Her wide brown eyes looked up at him he steadied her.

He could feel her hair brushing against his hands where he held her upper arms, and her skin felt warm from the sun. He smiled at her, realising that he hadn't heard a word she'd said.

"Are you okay, Bella?" he asked, the words bubbling up and out.

"I'm fine," her forehead creased in puzzlement, "have we met?"

He dropped his hands from her arms as if scalded. She had no idea who he was. He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, feeling awkward.

"Uh, yeah. I'm Edward," he replied.

She gave him a polite but blank stare.

"We've talked at your store a few times, you shared your lunch with me," he clarified, trying to fill in the blanks. *Please, please remember me.*

To his vast relief, her expression cleared as her mouth formed an 'O' of recognition.

"Edward, right. Please forgive me. I meet so many people during the week, of course I remember you now," she apologised, her cheeks turning pink. "It's hard sometimes, when I see people out of context I have a hard time placing them."

"It must be nice to know that many people," Edward observed, feeling his momentary tension begin to ease.

"I didn't mean to make you feel awkward," she said, reaching out to grasp his forearm, and he looked at her in surprise. "Charlie, my Dad, used to rub his neck like that when he was a bit uncomfortable too."

"I was actually coming over to say hello," Edward explained, "in a city this big it's not often that I bump into someone I know, I just didn't realise you liked to do it literally."

"Well you know, I like to be thorough," Bella grinned. "You out shopping today?"

"Not really, I just had brunch with my folks and thought I'd go exploring today."

"It's a lovely day for it," Bella offered, "have you found anything interesting?"

"You know," Edward said, "I think I have."

They fell in step with each other and began to stroll through the markets. Occasionally a gust of wind would blow Bella's hair onto Edward's shoulder, carrying a cloud of her scent. He couldn't quite place what it reminded him of. Cupcakes and sunshine, or vanilla and musk. It was a smell he would forever associate with her.

They kept talking, and Edward found that she managed to surprise a few laughs out of him along the way. He was even more delighted when he made her laugh in return. It was as if she had tapped into a hidden well of conversation and he didn't know he had, and the words kept flowing.

They reached the edge of the markets, and stopped looking back at where they'd been.

"So," Bella said, looking up at him, "I guess we've seen everything here today."

She may have, but Edward had found himself watching her reaction to everything instead.

"You want to get a coffee or something?" he paused for her reaction, then decided to tease her, "I know this great place if cupcakes are your thing."

"I don't think I could eat anything else, I seem to have been grazing all morning," she said, rubbing an apparently flat tummy.

He tried to hide his disappointment.

"Still," she went on, "coffee never goes astray, do you know of any good cafes around here?"

"I'm sure we can find something," Edward replied, "shall we do some more exploring?"

"Oh lets," she smiled, and to his surprise slipped her arm through his in a show of familiarity, and they began to follow the path out of the park.

He'd found words for her. Somehow he always found words for her, and they were going to spend a little more time together.

Edward looked at the blue sky, and then glanced at Bella's hair as she chattered away at his side. The sun was revealing auburn tints to her hair that he hadn't noticed before, and her yellow and white sundress flowed around her as they walked. Everything about Bella seemed warm: her hair, her eyes, her smile, even her smell.

He smiled. He felt content. He didn't care how long she stayed, only that she stayed awhile longer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella opened the door to her apartment and walked in, hanging up her keys on the hook beside the door, and putting her sunglasses on the deep wooden mirror frame, adding her earrings to the modest collection in the Chinese teacup.

She walked with a lazy pace into the living room, tossing her bag onto the couch but holding onto the prints she'd purchased from Rosalie. She stood and unwrapped them carefully, letting the paper fall to the floor as she held them out, one at a time. They were small, no bigger than a sheet of copy paper, but there was a whimsical charm about them. She propped two of them up on her bookshelves, and put one beside her bag to take to work in the morning.

It had been a delightful day, and a very unexpected one.

After bumping into Edward, they had ended up spending much of the afternoon together. They had started with a coffee, and then it had seemed only natural to browse through some of the nearby shops. A bookstore had been open, and she hadn't been able to stop herself from going inside, apologising to Edward in advance.

"Books are my addiction," she had warned him, "it could get messy."

He had laughed at that.

"No, really. I get this blank stare while I'm in the zone, Alice swears that one day I'll start drooling."

"Which one's Alice?"

"The little one, the Pocket Rocket," Bella had clarified.

He had snapped his fingers, "Now I know exactly who you're talking about."

As soon as they had stepped into the store she had lost track of time. They had meandered around the store for a while, acquainting themselves with the layout, and then Bella had started browsing in earnest. She had started to drift towards a display stand at one point, and only barely registered that Edward had stiffened slightly before pulling her attention elsewhere.

They had been in the store for over an hour before making their way back outside, squinting in the daylight. Bella had looked at her watch and realised the day was getting away from her, and realising that she felt more relaxed and satisfied than she had in a long time.

They had both made their goodbyes with considerable reluctance.

"Maybe I'll see you at the shop again sometime?"

"You can count on it," he had replied with a grave smile.

"And as a special treat, I promise to recognise you," she had teased.

She smiled to herself, remembering his warmth, thinking about his smile. His eyes were always so serious, like he was trying to absorb everything around him all at once.

There was still more that she had to do today, and she went into the bedroom to change into her yoga gear, and then flicked out her yoga matt onto the living room floor. She lit her aromatherapy oil burner, and switched on some relaxing music.

A while later, she was breathing deep and even, holding the warrior pose, feeling centred and strong. Feeling as centred, a quiet corner of her awareness registered, as she had been when she had heard Edward laugh.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward was still thinking about Bella's smile when he arrived home. He'd taken a risk going into the bookstore with Bella, but it had all gone well. He'd managed to keep a lower profile than he'd thought, a fact which he made a mental note *notto* mention to Marcus. Editors didn't like it when their favourite authors started to drop off the radar.

They'd had a coffee together, and somehow he had kept talking. Bella had entertained him with anecdotes from the store, and he told her about his parents. The words had been so easy, had felt so right.

He felt relaxed and at ease with the day. He walked into the expansive living room, but only switched on a few lamps, wanting to keep the lighting low and warm. He paused in the kitchen and poured himself a glass of wine, kicked off his shoes and sprawled on the couch. Picking up the remote, he switched on the tv, gazing it for a while before switching it off and opting for some music instead.

Edward sipped at his wine, then got up and wandered around the room. He felt a little restless now that he was alone. The music wasn't quite satisfying him either. He gazed at his surroundings, and then saw his laptop. He stood staring at it for a while, sipping his wine, deep in thought.

Finally he walked towards it and switched it on, taking a seat as he waited for it to power up. His last document appeared on the screen.

He stared at the words for a long moment, thinking of Bella.

For the first time in a long time, he felt energised.

He set his glass down, and began to type.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice held up the finished product, her eyes stinging a little from tiredness. Her neck ached and her shoulders felt stiff from hunching over the sewing machine, but it had definitely been worth it. She smiled.

"Pretty baby," she cooed, "Momma's proud of you," then she laughed at her own foolishness. She stood up and stretched, then bent forward and stepped back into a downward dog yoga pose. She held the position for a few minutes, feeling her muscles stretch. She completed the Vinyasana, flowing through the movements before ending up in a standing position, closing her eyes and taking a few deep breaths. Opening her eyes again, she felt a little more refreshed as she walked towards her wardrobe to get a padded hanger for her newest creation.

Once her new 'baby' was safely stowed, she packed everything away as methodically as she had removed it. The suitcases were restored to order, a quick supper was made and consumed, and then she began to shut the apartment down for the evening.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella switched off the small lamp by the couch and set her book aside with a small yawn. After her yoga, she had hunted through her things, finally uncovering a small frame that was just right for the fox print. She combined the two, and nodded at the happy result. She had fixed herself a small meal that she had enjoyed with a glass of wine, and then had settled down on the couch to immerse herself in a book.

As always, the printed words had carried her away for the evening, and she had been a little surprised at the hour when she finally emerged from the pages.

She felt pleasantly warm from the wine, and almost boneless from relaxation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice showered, scrubbing herself down with some lavender soap and followed it with scented body oil. After spending a few hours sewing, she needed to relax her mind as much as possible. The soothing aromatherapy oils would do their work soon enough. Drying off, she shimmied into clean pyjamas and slipped into bed, glorying in the feel of the fresh sheets.

Alice took a few slow, deep breaths, and asked for a dream.

She was sound sleep within minutes.

\* \* \* \* \*



Bella wandered out of the bathroom wearing clean underwear and an old t-shirt of Emmett's that she had begged him to leave. She didn't have many of Charlie's shirts left, and was trying to make them last as long as she could by interspersing them with items flinched from her big brother.

Crawling into the bed, she checked her alarm and snuggled into her pillow.

It had been a very good day.

She was thinking of Edward as she drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't until he yawned that Edward thought to check the time, and was shocked to see that it was after midnight.

He looked at the screen. He'd written a few thousand words. He'd done it. Somehow he'd broken through. Tired as he was, there was no clear way of knowing if what he'd written was useable, but for the time being he was surprised and pleased.

He looked at the time again. He needed to get some sleep if he wanted to stop in and see Bella tomorrow. Or maybe that was too soon? He'd see how he felt about it in the morning.

Edward switched off the lamps and went into the bedroom, shucking off his jeans and throwing them over the back of a chair. He began to tug his shirt off over his head, pausing and sniffing at the shoulder. It was still there, incredibly faint but he could detect it. Bella's scent.

He smiled, and gently draped the shirt over his jeans. He wouldn't wash it just yet.

He crawled into bed, tugging the sheets over his body as he settled down for the evening.

He'd found words for her, and she had unlocked words for him.

No-one else had been able to do that. Not his editor, not his friends, and not his parents. Only she had been able to draw them out.

Somehow she had found the key to him, that he hadn't realised he had lost.

Bella.

Edward's eyes fluttered closed and his breathing evened out. After a long time, his eyelashes flickered. For the first time in months, Edward dreamed.

## Chapter 7 Late Night Surprise

"Morning, Boss."

"Alice, don't call me Boss."

"Sorry, Boss."

Bella unlocked the door and stood aside, whistling under her breath to the music on her ipod as she let Alice in ahead of her. Alice slung her bag in the kitchen closet, and reappeared, flicking on the barista machine and getting the chalkboard. Bella followed her, shucking off her satchel and hanging it on the hook beside Alice's.

Alice propped the chalkboard up against the counter and stood watching Bella, tossing a piece of chalk from one hand to the other.

"So," Alice ventured, "how was your day off?"

"Splendiferous," Bella replied, smiling to herself and tapping her fingers on the counter as she waited for the coffee machine to start up.

"Oh really?" Alice wandered closer, folding her arms and leaning over the counter towards Bella, "and what did you do?"

For a split second, Bella considered telling Alice about her encounter with Edward and their subsequent afternoon. She had gone to bed thinking about him, and had woken up feeling ... unsatisfied. Those kinds of dreams hadn't happened to her for a long time. For the time being, she decided to keep the day to herself. Telling Alice would mean the inevitable dissection, and then Alice would very lovingly try to manipulate the situation to what she considered was everyone's best advantage.

No, she wouldn't tell her just yet. She liked having something – even if it was just a random afternoon – entirely to herself, something that she could, and would, review at leisure. She had found herself daydreaming on the way to work, thinking about the colour of Edward's eyes, and his impressive height compared to her small frame. She remembered the sensation of colliding with his chest, and the feeling of warmth that had rushed into her as he all but loomed over her, making sure she was all right.

Bella was later mortified that she hadn't been able to recognise Edward at first glance. Given her usual work hours though, it wasn't often that she had the opportunity to see people out of context. She had apologised as fast as she could, but not before she had seen a flash of disappointment on his face. To her relief, the conversation after that had flowed easily. At first, she had kept up the usual jovial patter that she used in the store, but after a while, Edward's quiet company had somehow managed to soothe and relax her even more. Gradually, her conversation had slowed, become a little less witty, a little more genuine. She had liked him from the start, but she felt her usual social façade slipping a little. He made her feel ... warmer.

She had always been a tactile, but she had even surprised herself when she had slipped her arm through his as they had meandered through the city in search of coffee. Even now, she smiled at the sensory memory of the way the muscles in his arms had flexed and relaxed at her contact, and then the warmth of his arm seeping into hers.

He had even smelled good. She was used to men's aftershave, plenty of products certainly wafted in and out of the store all day, but she hadn't been able to place which brand Edward used. He had smelled warm and musky, with an undertone that she still wasn't able to place. She liked it.

And to think that earlier in the day she had been enjoying the sensation of time to herself. Edward had somehow managed to change that.

She liked him.

"I went to the flea markets and found a couple of great art pieces," Bella replied, "they're in my bag so I'll get them out once we've had our heart-starters."

Alice watched Bella closely. Bella was looking very happy, but seemed to be trying to hide it. Given Bella was generally an open book, this was enough to give Alice pause. "Mm-hmm, and what else did you get up to?"

"Well, I wore a *dress*," Bella went on, widening her eyes in mock surprise as Alice feigned a shocked response of her own.

"Oh you *never*," Alice replied, clapping her hands to her cheeks, "which one?"

"Remember the yellow and white halter neck one you made for me?"

"Rowr," Alice nodded with approval, "and I bet you looked great. Did you pick up?"

"Uh-," Bella stalled for a moment, "nope, but I had a great day out. It was just gorgeous yesterday don't you think? The sun was shining, I saw some great things, bought myself some presents," she picked up two cups, "mocha for you?"

"Yeah," Alice replied, "Grande, thanks." Sometimes she forgot that Bella only gave herself one day off a month, and she obviously cherished her free time. Alice gave a mental shrug, perhaps her radar had been off after all.

"How about you," Bella said as she wiped down the spigot and passed Alice her mocha, "what did you get up to, or should I say, who?"

"You know me too well," Alice replied, toasting Bella with her cup before taking a sip. She gave it some thought and then wrinkled her nose at Bella. "He was cute enough, but nothing serious."

"Right, but did you have a good time?" Bella called as she ducked into the kitchen to turn on the industrial oven for pre-warming.

"Yeah we did," Alice conceded, "he was nice but young and forgettable." Alice sipped her mocha again, turning the piece of chalk over and over in her fingers, then gave Bella a smug smile, "but I'm pretty sure he'll remember *me* for a while."

"That good?"

"Oh I was *very* good, I think the next woman he's with will offer some thanks up to my tutoring skills."

With that, Alice put down her cup and wrote on the chalkboard, showing Bella who laughed and gave her a thumbs-up. Alice carried the chalkboard outside and hung it carefully on the hooks, grinning to herself as she went back inside.

Angela arrived a few minutes later, and stopped to read the chalkboard before entering the store, laughing and shaking her head. "Good weekend?" she asked as she put her things away.

"Very satisfying," Alice replied with a smile. Sewing and creating always made her feel good, sometimes she had to admit – albeit very quietly - it was even better than sex.

"Where's Bella?" Angela asked, then paused as she heard the mixer start up, "never mind," she glanced at Alice, "has she told you what today's cake is?"

Alice shrugged. "Nope, but when she saw the quote for the day she said she had an idea, then just got straight to work. We'll find out soon enough."

"Guess that's why she's the boss," Angela agreed.

"So how was your weekend?" Alice asked as she began to fill the water jugs.

Angela paused as she picked up a pallet of bagels that she would be turning into the daily lunch specials, "it was good," she considered, then looked at Alice and blushed.

"Look at you! What's his name?" Alice dropped a slice of lemon into one of the jugs with a plop, and turned to give Angela her full attention.

Angela heaved the pallet onto the island bench behind the main counter, and opened the refrigerator built in underneath, so her reply was muffled as she took out some ingredients.

"Sorry?" Alice called, "I didn't quite catch that."

"I don't know what his name is, I just think he's cute."

"He works at a bookstore," Angela confessed, "and he seems really nice." She gave a small shrug, "I bought something and we just got to talking."

"Nice, I like it," mused Alice, "it's a good start. Do you know if he's seeing anyone?"

"I don't think so, he asked if I had a boyfriend," Angela replied, "so maybe he's available too," she said in tones of quiet hope.

"Well then, what are we going to do about that?" Alice paused and pointed her paring knife at Angela for emphasis as she spoke, "I'll tell you, we're going to find out who he is, and then make sure he falls madly in love with you."

Checking the oven, Bella smiled to herself as she listened in on the girl's conversation. Thank God for Angela. The heat would be off her for a while, and she was all the more thankful that she hadn't told Alice about Edward. The Pocket Rocket would have gone into paroxysms of joy at the prospect of having not one, but *two* friend's love lives to oversee.

"Wow," Angela commented, "you make it sound so easy."

"What can I say? I've got plenty of experience. Mind you," she looked up and Angela and gave her an urchin grin, "it's generally of the short term variety."

Both the women laughed, and then got back to work.

In the kitchen, Bella paused and considered Alice's glib comeback. She didn't judge Alice for her 'love 'em and leave 'em' approach, but she hadn't failed to see the flash of vulnerability on Alice's face when she had dismissed her Saturday evening encounter. Alice needed more, and yet it seemed she wasn't ready to admit it yet.

A while later, Bella delivered the daily cupcake special, along with an array of the usual butter cake and vanilla frosting ones that had always been Charlie's favourite. They were all frosted in different colours with different sprinkles, making the display cabinet look lush and inviting.

"Ohhh, I'd better have one of *those* with lunch today," Angela sighed, "what are they?"

Bella set the tray down, and adjusted a few cupcakes so they could be displayed to their best advantage.

I've made these in honour of our 'Pocket Rocket', Bella replied, speaking in a voice loud enough to carry to Alice who had been collected cups from a table at the front of the store.

"Wait! Wait! I'll get the chalk!" Alice hurried forward, setting down her cups with a clatter and picking up the little chalkboard that sat on an easel on top of the counter, "okay ready, fire away."

"That's what she said," Bella replied, laughing as Alice gave her a look of amused exasperation, "In honour of our dear Alice," she inclined her head towards Alice, who gave a gracious nod of acknowledgement in return, "I give you ... *Sugar Mama Cupcakes*, a caramel cupcake topped up with white creamy frosting and sprinkled with shattered caramel toffee."

"I think I just gained two pounds," replied Angela in a mournful tone, although her expression was still covetous.

Alice finished writing and propped up the chalkboard, then nodded approval to Bella.

"Nice one," she said.

"Cheers," answered Bella, "I was pretty pleased with them myself."

"Not at pleased as I was on Saturday night when he-," Alice began, whooping with laughter as Bella and Angela both gave an affected squeal of dismay and clapped their hands over their ears.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward woke up feeling more refreshed than he had in a long time. His dream still clung to him, following him into the bathroom, back into the kitchen, whispering to him as he plugged in his espresso machine and gave a massive yawn.

He headed towards the bathroom, stripping off and standing under the hot shower spray for a long time, gazing sightlessly at the tiles as his dream played in his mind's eye once more.

*He had been in a maze of white walls, stumbling along and feeling his way by touch, squinting against the bright light. He hadn't known where he was, but he knew there was something or someone waiting for him at the centre. He ran his hands over the seemingly endless white walls, losing his way and coming up against dead ends countless times. Finally he saw a speck of colour on one of the walls and had run towards it. A word: Laughter. He knew what he was looking for now.*

*Edward had kept searching, darting forward whenever he saw a word scribbled against the white. First there had only been the one word, then two, then five. Then he saw a steady stream, unravelling and coiling around the walls of the maze, guiding him on.*

*He ran on, trailing his hand along the wall's surface, his fingers brushing over the words that dipped and swirled, guiding him ever onwards. After what had felt like an eternity of searching, he rounded a corner and stopped short. The corridor of the maze had opened into a small room, three white walls, and the fourth ... the fourth was the shopfront of Bella's store.*

*He stood gaping at it, looking down to see the words had slithered off the walls and were pooling around his feet, swirling with an invisible current, eddying towards the store. He took an uncertain step forward.*

*The door opened, and Bella stepped out. She was wearing the sundress she had worn at the markets. Her hair was still down, and her smile was a beacon of warmth against the white surroundings. The words surged and crested against Bella's feet, making her look down and laugh as they swirled into the store.*

*Bella held the door open, and extended a hand towards him in invitation.*

It didn't take a genius to interpret that dream. It seemed even his subconscious realised that Bella restored his words. He wrapped a towel around his waist, and stood brushing his teeth, deep in thought at the bathroom basin. His head jerked when he heard the phone ring, and he spat and rinsed before padding into the room to snatch up the handset.

"Hello," he offered in a soft growl.

"Edward," said a voice in a very careful tone.

"Marcus," he acknowledged, "how are you?"

"I'm," Marcus hesitated, "I'm well, did you have a good weekend?"

"Thank you, I did," Edward replied, and then paused. He wasn't a talkative man by nature at the best of times, but for some reason of late Marcus brought out the worst in him.

"Dare I ask?"

"Yes, Marcus," Edward said in a quiet voice, "I've been working."

There was a slight pause, and Edward pictured Marcus leaning forward in his chair, eyes bright with curiosity.

"And?"

Edward shrugged even know he knew Marcus couldn't see the gesture. "It might be something," he allowed, "but then again it might be nothing at all."

"It doesn't matter," Marcus rushed in, "the fact that you're writing again is all that's important."

"I'm not going to meet deadline," Edward cautioned. His contract was for a number of publications within a certain timeframe, and this time he was falling well past the mark.

"That's not for you to worry about," Marcus said in a reassuring tone, "leave that to me. I won't let anyone bother you."

"Thanks," Edward replied, surprised to discover that he appreciated this source of unexpected support.

"Anytime, Edward. Look, I know that I'm a pain in the ass, but that's what they pay me for," Marcus went on, "I'm here to help, just try to remember that next time you want to kill me."

"I'll try," Edward replied in a dry tone, "but I'm not promising anything."

Marcus laughed, "I'll take what I can get." He paused. "So," he began delicately, "are you able to tell me anything about it?"

"Uh," Edward stalled. To be honest, he wasn't entirely sure what he'd written. It had been a stream of consciousness ramble that had run on for a few thousand words, and he hadn't had the opportunity to re-read it yet. "You know, I'm not entirely sure what it's going to be at this stage, I'm still getting a sense of it myself."

"Okay," replied Marcus, the disappointment showing in his voice, "we can talk about it later."

"Thanks, Marcus, I appreciate it."

"Anytime. I'll give you a call in a week or so, how does that sound?"

"Fine," Edward grunted.

"Try to control your enthusiasm, I'm doing my job, remember?"

"Yes, dear," Edward sighed, startling a laugh out of Marcus, "can I go now?"

"I think I'll let you. Talk to you later."

"Okay."

Edward hung up, staring at the handset for a moment before tossing it onto the bed. He turned to leave the room, and then glanced back. Hitching his towel into a firmer position around his waist, he tugged at the quilt and sheets, making the bed and rearranging the pillows for the first time in longer than he cared to admit. He picked up the phone again and paused before dialling.

"Hey, Whitlock," he began, "you up for a run sometime?"

Plans were made, and he snapped the phone shut, this time with a distinct sense of satisfaction.

Yesterday at the markets with Bella had been fun. More than that if he was honest. It had been wonderful. He wanted to get out into the world again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Bella," a voice said.

Bella looked up with a start, and beamed at the visitor.

"Hey it's the artist! You timed that well," Bella held up the framed fox print by way of illustration, "I was just about to find a home for this."

"Oh how lovely, I didn't realise you were going to hang it up in your store."

"Neither did I, but it seemed like a good place for it," Bella replied, "Alice, Angela, this is Rosalie. We met yesterday at the flea market."

The women exchanged greetings and smiles. Rosalie looked around her with interest as she stepped closer to the counter. "I've got to say, this is not what I was expecting when you said you ran a bakery, it's like another little world in here," she paused and laughed, "and I just *loved* the chalkboard out the front."

Bella grinned as she remembered what Alice had written. *Every life you touch is another chance to cop a feel.*

"It's been a long process to get the place to this stage," Bella replied, "but the girls and I are having fun with it. You'd be amazed at some of things we haul in here for a bit of fun."

"It's like a little treasure trove," marvelled Rosalie, "do you mind if I take a look around?"



"Sure, go ahead. Can we get you a coffee in the meantime?"

"That'd be great, I'll be back in a minute."

Rosalie wandered around the small café area, smiling at some of the whimsical touches in the store. Logically, the café was visual chaos, but somehow it all pulled together to create a charm and warmth entirely of its own. She smiled when she saw some shelves sporting an array of books, magazines and board games.

Bella appeared at her side with Rosalie's coffee in one hand, and a small hammer in the other. Rosalie took the cup with a smile of thanks, and stood back and watched as Bella carefully hammered a small tack into the wall, before returning to the counter to collect the fox print, which was hung with all due ceremony.

The two women stood and regarded it for a moment.

"I'm so glad you liked that one," commented Rosalie, "it's one of my favourites."

"It makes me smile just looking at it," answered Bella, then turned to regard her with a grin, "you know, that coffee looks awful lonely, come on," she touched Rosalie gently on the elbow and guided her to the display cabinet, "pick something out for afternoon tea."

"I really shouldn't-," Rosalie began, giving the cupcakes a heartfelt look.

"Alice, hand me a clean fork will you?" said Bella.

Mystified, Alice handed one over. Bella reached into the cabinet and picked up a cupcake, stabbing it several times with the fork before placing it on a small plate.

"This one will be okay, it has calorie leakage," she explained, handing the plate over to Rosalie, "I can justify anything."

Rosalie accepted the plate with a broad smile. "You know," she said, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward had made his way over to Washington Square Park and was doing some warm-up stretches when he looked up at the sound of his name being called. He waved, and Jasper waved back, jogging towards him.

"Hey, thanks for the call, the way things are going at work it's good to be out of the office."

"No problem, you sure you've got time?"

"Yeah, I'm just waiting for a few people to call back with some quotes, and the deadline for those isn't until tomorrow. All good," Jasper replied, "you ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Edward straightened up, "but it's been a while for me, so be gentle."

The two of them set off at a steady pace, talking as they jogged.

"You been up to much?" asked Jasper.

"Well," Edward paused to think of what to say, "I guess you could say I've gotten some work done."

"Cool," Jasper replied.

They kept jogging, and when Jasper remained silent, Edward shot him a quizzical glance.

"That's all you've got to say?"

Jasper shrugged, "I figure you'll tell me more when you're ready. I question people for a living, I know when people are ready to talk and when they're not."

Edward thought about this for a few more paces.

"Thanks. Wish there were more people like you out there."

"Have you told your folks you're writing again?"

"I haven't had a chance to, it only started last night."

They rounded a curve on the path and veered to the side as some cyclists wound their way past. They were nearing the dog park and Edward grinned as he saw the dogs and owners playing. Maybe he'd get a dog one day.

"Right, well you'll tell them when you're ready," Jasper suggested.

"Again with the thanks."

They jogged on, through dappled shade and open sunny stretches of pathways. Edward's lungs were starting to burn, and he felt sweat pooling on his back and chest. It had been a long time since he'd done this. A sideways glance showed that Jasper barely looked winded. He was going to have to jog more often, how had he managed to lose his fitness so fast?

"So," he gasped after a while, "how's your work?"

"Aw hell," Jasper grimaced, "I guess it is what it is. All the papers in this town are having a hard time, so I'm thinking about making a move."

Edward shot him a surprised look. He hadn't realised Jasper was so unhappy at work. "What's going on?"

Jasper shrugged. "It all seems to be going to shit. The paper's in trouble, they've started making a few lay-offs here and there. It's not looking good."

"Is your job in trouble?" Edward asked.

"Nah, I'll be fine, but it's not as much fun as it used to be. I've got a few options though."

"Such as?" Edward asked.

"All in good time," Jasper shot him an amused glance, "I'll tell you when I'm ready."

"Point taken," Edward conceded with a grin, and they jogged on.

"Hey," Jasper ventured after a while, "do you ever think it's funny how we both ended up making a living in publishing?"

"Yeah," Edward smiled, "sometimes."

"Me as the History major, you studying Commerce, what the hell happened?"

"We discovered booze and rock 'n' roll, my friend."

"True," conceded Jasper, "and damned if we didn't have a good time."

"Amen to that, Brother."

They looked at each other and laughed.

Jogging in silence for a while gave Edward the time to mull over Jasper's comments. It was true, for all that their lives had started out on different career paths, they had ended up in a kind of parallel. Having known each other from an early age thanks to their parents, everyone had been delighted when the two boys had been accepted at the same college.

What the parents had been a little *less* enchanted by, was Jasper's decision to start playing guitar in a local pub band, whilst Edward had starting writing review articles for local music magazines. Their parents had – after a few 'summit meetings', as Carlisle had called them - naturally been concerned that the boys find a life path that would ensure a steady income, although they had been careful to encourage and support them all the way through college, lest they rebel and drop out.

In the meantime, Edward and Jasper had somehow stumbled across their futures by accident. Jasper had a natural way with people that encouraged conversation, usually much to their surprise, as they found themselves revealing far more than they wanted to. Edward on the other hand, was a natural observer. He was quieter by nature, and tended to stand back and take everything in, chiming in on later conversations with a depth of knowledge and complexity of understanding that left people wondering uneasily if he had somehow managed to read their minds.

For all that Edward was the natural writer of the two, Jasper was the one that had delved into the media world first. He had completed his degree, but had been offered a job with a small newspaper. He had become well connected through the pub-band circuit, and his network of contacts had become legion. Jasper's people skills seemed a perfect compliment to journalism, and so his career began.

It had been Edward's mother, Esme, who had inadvertently changed Edward's direction. One that they had all agreed – including Edward up until a few months ago – that had been a change for the better. She had been helping him unpack his books from college, and had found some files that he had filled with random pieces of writing. After asking what it was, Edward had suggested in an off-hand manner that if she needed the files for work she could ditch the contents.

Esme hadn't done that, a fact she was thankful for even now. She had taken the files into her study and later that night, begun to read. Carlisle had sleepily come in to see if she was coming to bed at a very late hour, and she had wordlessly handed him one of the files she had finished, and kept reading the next.

The two of them had barely slept that night – an occurrence that they delighted in on a regular basis – although this time their wakefulness had been a result of Edward's writing. A few days later, Esme casually asked Edward if he had any more writing. Edward had nodded and mumbled through a mouthful of cereal that he had an extensive collection on his Macbook. He'd referred to the files as 'just some assorted ramblings, nothing much'.

Esme and Carlisle had, with Edward's amused permission, shown some people in the publishing industry.

Edward's life had never been the same after that.

By the time Edward and Jasper had completed the park circuit, Edward thought he was going to die, much to Jasper's amusement.

"Just go on," he wheezed, "leave me, save yourself."

"Aw c'mon, it's not that bad," Jasper laughed.

"Just promise me you'll put up a plaque where I fall, saying something touching about my courage and dauntlessness." Edward bent over double, bracing his hands on his knees, trying not to throw up. He hadn't had enough water to drink.

"I dunno, you're the better writer out of the two of us. I think I'll leave it up to you."

"Damn," Edward straightened up with a groan and squinted at Jasper, "and I'm in no shape to dictate. Guess I'll have to pull through."

The two men walked towards the edge of the park and back out into the streets.

"That's my boy," Jasper clapped him on the back, "I'm proud of you."

"Bite me," Edward replied.

"Speaking of which," Jasper said, a distinct gleam in his eye, "what was the name of that place we met at for lunch a while back?"

"*Take the Cake*, it's in the Village, why?"

"It was good. I might go there again sometime," Jasper replied.

"Really," Edward replied, watching Jasper's expression.

"Yeah, really." Jasper said, "but for now, I need lunch, how do you feel about a Tube Steak?"

Edward grimaced, "you want street meat after a jog like that?"

"Hey," Jasper cuffed him on the shoulder, "it might have been a workout for you, but I'm well ahead of you. I need mustard and onion too, and I can smell a vendor here somewhere. C'mon."

\* \* \* \* \*

"A hot dog," Bella stared at Alice, who had given a guilty start from her corner in the kitchen. "I slave over a hot oven to create culinary delights, Angela wears her fingers to the *bone* creating gourmet bagels, and you come in here with a *hot dog*?"

"Don't be mad," Alice pleaded, "I just felt like one!"

"Oh Alice," Bella shook her head, "I just don't know what I'm going to do with you," she gave the hot dog an arch look, "you know that's not even real meat, right?"

"Don't spoil the illusion!" Alice yelped, taking another bite and trying to talk with her mouth full, "I know it's plastic, I know it could withstand a nuclear war, but I *wanted* one."

"Fine," Bella sighed, "I'll make sure we've got tampons in the ladies' next week."

"Huh?" Alice looked mystified, and Bella smiled at her.

"You always crave stuff like that when you're due, same as I usually want sweet or savoury."

"It's cheese for me," commented Angela as she carried a tray of cups inside and stacked them into the dishwasher, "and you know it's only a matter of time before we're in sync."

"Men have it so easy," Alice contemplated her hot dog for a moment and then resolutely bit into it again, "they never have to put up with this shit."

Bella was still laughing when she walked back out into the front area, and looked over to see Rosalie reading an old comic book. She made herself a coffee and sauntered over. "You mind?" she said, indicating the vacant chair at Rosalie's table.

"Oh please, sit," said Rosalie with a smile.

Bella sat down with a small sigh.

"Busy day?"

"Not too bad," Bella answered, "plus I just teased Alice out back because I caught her with a hot dog, she only eats that shit when, uh-," she raised an eyebrow at Rosalie, who smiled.

"What, when she's about the surf the crimson tide?"

"I *knew* you'd get it!" Bella slapped the table and laughed.

"It's a chick thing," Rosalie shrugged, then leaned forward slightly, "it's champagne and early Meg Ryan movies for me, or deep fried food."

The two women exchanged a smile. "No wonder we freak men out," Bella observed, "they just don't get it at all do they?"

"No, the poor dears," Rosalie answered with an amused smile, "they just don't stand a chance."

"Amen, Sister," Bella replied, toasting her with her coffee cup.

"This is a great place, Bella, how long have you been here?"

"Five and a half very hard, very long years," Bella replied, "I had a shaky start, but it's going okay now."

"Glad to hear it, the place really does have a lot of character, and it's great to see the fox settling in well."

Bella twisted in her chair to look at the picture, and turned back to Rosalie. "Doesn't he look great? I'm going to have to get some more."

"Anytime," Rosalie replied, "it looks like this place is constantly changing, have you got any other plans?"

"Oh for sure. I've been wanting to get some magazine racks up on the wall and didn't know what to do about it, but Bear came to the rescue," Bella commented.

"Bear?"

"Sorry, my brother Emmett. You'll understand the name if you ever meet him."

"Right," laughed Rosalie, "so what's he going to do?"

"He knows a retired plumber, so he's found me some thin copper pipes for a song. He's promised to polish them up, and then he's going to get in here with a drill and get creative."

"Sounds great, I'll be looking forward to seeing the finished result," said, gathering her bag and showing signs that she was getting ready to leave.

"You'll be coming back then?" Bella asked, pleased.

Rosalie gave her a look. "Bella, if you can create cupcakes like these and promise calorie leakage into the bargain, how could I not?"

"Glad to hear it. Listen anytime you're in the area on a Friday afternoon, stop on in. The girls and I usually have a bottle of wine when we close, or head to a wine bar up the street. You're always welcome to come along."

"Really? Thanks, I'd love to," Rosalie smiled, "Oh, and before I forget," she took out her wallet and handed over a business card.

Bella accepted it with a smile of thanks, and tucked it into her apron pocket.

"See you again soon then," she said.

"And I'll see you at the markets sometime," Rosalie replied.

"Sounds like a deal to me."

Alice and Angela called out a farewell as Rosalie made her way towards the door.

"Babycake!"

Bella looked up with a delighted smile of recognition. Emmett was coming into the store, although he stopped short and stood aside to let Rosalie leave. Rosalie brushed against him, offering a smile of thanks for his chivalry as she passed.

Emmett stood stock still and watched her leave, his eyes following her progress. When he turned back to Bella, he looked pole-axed. He wandered towards the counter, and stopped in front of it, looking at Bella.

"Wow," he said. "That's all I've got to say, wow."

"I take it you saw something you like?"

"Something like that," Emmett replied, then turned and jogged back to the entrance and stuck his head out the door, looking to see if he could still see Rosalie's blonde hair in the crowd.

He walked back inside, slower this time. By the time he reached the counter, Bella had a cupcake on a plate and was making some more coffee.

Alice appeared, wiping crumbs off her hands with a dishcloth, and beamed at Emmett.

"Hey, Em," she called.

"Hey," he said in a distracted tone, then looked at Bella. "Tell me you know her."

"I do," Bella felt smug. She hadn't seen Emmett looking like this for a long time.

"Number?"

Bella produced the business card, "got it," she replied.

Emmett eyed the business card and then looked back at Bella. "I love you, Bells."

"Almost as much as I love you, Em." She slid his coffee across him towards the counter.

"You gonna take another break?" Alice asked as she served another customer.

"You know, I think I will."

"Ah the privilege of power," Alice replied with a wink. She loved working with Bella, and was delighted to see just how relaxed Bella was today. Maybe she had needed the Sunday off even more than she thought. Alice made a mental note to have a talk to Angela, to see if they could somehow reduce Bella's workload a little.

Bella selected a 'Charlie' cupcake and followed Emmett to a table, where he was already opening the file he'd been carrying and making some room for their cups and plates.

"So, what's the verdict?" Bella asked as she sat down.

Emmett licked some frosting from the corner of his mouth and then glanced at Bella.

"Bells, do you have an idea as to how the business is going?"

"A little," she shrugged, "seems to be going okay, why?" she looked worried, "what's wrong? Am I wrong? Am I struggling more than I thought?"

Emmett gave her a look that was rich with affection. "Bells, calm down. You're doing better than okay. Seems you've found yourself a good little niche here in the Village after all. How was your weekend?"

"Uh," Bella was flummoxed at the change in topic, "it was good. Great, even. I didn't realise how tired I was until I had the chance for a bit of a lie-in."

Emmett regarded his sister. He loved her with all his heart, which was considerable, and always would. After Charlie and Renee's passing, the two of them had grown even closer. Partners had come and gone, and had always been welcomed into the fold, but their bond had grown stronger over the years. Bella was, he had to admit – even if she was his sister – a striking woman. She had a quiet kind of beauty that drew people to her.



He took enormous pride in her success, but had watched with concern as faint purple smudges of fatigue had appeared beneath her eyes, and had remained as the years went by. He had cautioned and advised, and now he was in a position to remedy the situation.

"Would you like to have more?"

"Oh god," Bella half laughed, half moaned, "and now you're just talking dirty."

"I'm serious, Bells. You can all give yourselves a two-day weekend, just like the rest of us. How 'bout it?"

Bella gaped at him. "Are you sure?"

"Definitely. Your turnover has been steadily increasing, and you're sitting in a good place. You've got some good cash reserves now, good staff. I think you need to start to pace things before you burn yourself out and it all ends in a screaming heap."

Bella sipped her coffee, her mind racing. She set her cup down and looked at Emmett. "You're serious."

"Yup."

"How long have you been thinking about this?"

"About twelve months," he admitted, then held up a hand as she opened her mouth to protest, "I wanted to make sure it was a long term trend, not just a spike in your sales."

Bella shook her head. "How is it, that you ended up with a degree in Commerce, and yet you work as an Urban Ranger at Central Park?"

Emmett shrugged, "guess I found something to do that I enjoy more. And anyway, how did that Literature degree of yours work out?"

"Point taken," she replied.

"That's what she said," Emmett shot back, making her laugh. "I guess we found our passions led us elsewhere, but look at it this way, I'm in a position to help my favourite sister, my youngest sister, my oldest sister,-" he paused and raised an eyebrow.

"Your only sister," Bella completed the old joke, and waved for Emmett to continue.

He nodded and went on, "with her business decisions, and make sure that she's okay, *and* I get to stop in and see the hotties that her business attracts."

"I've invited her to stop in for a drink here sometime."

"God, I love my sister so hard."

"No charge."

Emmett continued, "and, although you've got a Literature degree you don't think you use, I've got an extensive collection of notes and letters from you at home, and I know your friends often keep them too, so I think we're going okay." He toasted her with his cup and took a swig.

"You've kept all my notes?"

"Yep."

"Even the one that I wrote on the back of a dry cleaning docket?"

"Especially that one. It's one of my favourites."

"Why?"

"Because it tells me that you were having a busy day, but you still had a moment to think about your brother, grab any piece of paper that came to hand, and write something to him."

Bella swallowed hard against a lump in her throat and sipped at her coffee again. She thought about Emmett's business suggestion, and her forehead wrinkled with concern. "You're really sure about this?"

"Totally."

Without breaking her gaze, Bella lifted her chin slightly, "Hey, Alice, you got a sec?"

"Hang on," came the reply. Alice finished serving, Angela took over and Alice appeared at the table.

"Sit down," Bella invited.

"What's all this about?"

"Well, Em here has just made a suggestion and I thought I'd see what you think."

"Oh?"

"How would you feel if I were to close the store Sundays and Mondays, and we all have a two day weekend?"

Alice stared at her. "I think I could tongue kiss you right now."

"I think that means she thinks it's good," observed Emmett, "although if you girls want to go the practical demonstration I've got no objections, Alice, so long as your intentions towards my sister are honourable."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward had walked home slowly, already feeling the muscles twinging in protest after the jog. Jasper had returned to work, somehow still managing to look fresh, which firmed Edward's resolve to go jogging more often.

He walked home deep in thought, completely missing the admiring glances from women in the street – and a few men – as he strode through the crowds. He moved with an unconscious grace and assurance that centuries before could have commanded armies, but all he knew was that he felt rank and desperately wanted another shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella let herself into the apartment, and slipped into her routine. Jewellery was dispensed into teacups, keys were hung up and her bag was slung over a chair. She wandered about the apartment, her face blank with thought.

Dinner was cooked and eaten, followed by a glass of red wine.

The television was switched on and stared at for a long time.

After a few hours, Bella sat up with a huff of exasperation. It was no use trying to relax because her head wouldn't stop buzzing with activity. Emmett's revelation this afternoon had floored her, although she had to admit that she was thrilled.

Maybe she'd go see a movie. It was better than lying on the sofa like a corpse.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward woke with a start, cursing when he saw the time. After getting home, he'd had a long, hot shower, and re-read his writing effort from the night before and made some notes. He'd prepared a quick lunch, and then found himself sprawled on the sofa starting drowsily at the television. He hadn't even realised he was falling asleep.

Now it was late at night. He'd been sleeping better than ever lately, although now he'd taken such an unexpectedly long nap, no doubt his burgeoning sleep pattern would be thrown out.

He sat up with a sigh and scrubbed at his hair with his hands. He was feeling wide awake now.

Maybe he'd go see a movie. It'd have to be a late session, but he knew The Quad always had something worth seeing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella skipped down the steps, and walked a couple of blocks before finding a cab. She had no idea what was showing, but she knew the Quad Cinema at the corner Fifth and Sixth Avenue had late sessions. It'd probably be an independent or foreign film, but that suited her just fine.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward looked up as he saw movement in the aisle, his eyes widening as he saw whom it was. She hadn't seen him yet, so he waited until she got a bit closer.

"Bella?" he whispered.

Her head snapped up in surprise, "Edward?" she whispered back, "what are you doing here?"

"Same as you I'd imagine," he replied, inclining his head towards the still darkened screen.

"Oh, right," she gave a sheepish laugh, "sorry. I wasn't expecting to see anyone I knew here at this hour." She paused and looked at him, "so are you stalking me or something?"

"Well, given I got here first, I'd have to say it's a case of you stalking me for a change."

"It's a fair cop," she conceded, then bit her bottom lip and looked around at the array of empty seats. "Uh, so it seems a bit silly to know you're here and sit somewhere else, do you mind if I-", she indicated the seat beside him.

"I'd be delighted," he replied with a smile.

Bella had barely sat down when the lights began to dim.

"So," murmured Edward after a pause, "what's your stash?"

She looked at him, her eyes luminous in the dark, "Huh?"

He held up his bucket of popcorn by way of explanation.

"Oh, right. Let's see, I've got Junior Mints, Goobers, and I'm pretty sure I've got some Reece's Cups in here somewhere too," she dug around in her bag and produced a packet with a triumphant smile, "and a small vat of coke."

"I'm impressed, you take your snacking seriously," he paused, "do you allow incursions?"

"Absolutely, but I'll be expecting popcorn in return."

"Deal."

Arrangements made, they smiled and settled back to watch the movie. Unfortunately for Edward, although it seemed that Bella was thoroughly enjoying herself, he wasn't able to keep track of the movie at all. Her scent swirled around him, as did the memory of his dream. He could feel the heat of her body soaking into his, and he revelled in it.

He wanted to write.

## **Ch8 – Limited French & Possibilities**

The closing credits began to roll, and the other movie patrons started to gather themselves and file out of the theatre. Edward and Bella remained relaxed in their seats, talking in quiet voices and laughing occasionally as they discussed the movie.

"That was," Edward said as he tried to find the right word and gave up with a laugh, "I don't know what the hell that was."

"I didn't know this one was screening until I got here, but some of his other movies are quite a trip. Did you like it?"

"You know, I think I did," Edward replied slowly, "I had no idea what to expect."

When he had decided to catch a late night movie, Edward had no other expectations beyond keeping himself occupied for a couple of hours. He had arrived at the cinema and purchased a ticket for whatever was screening at the next session, grabbed a snack and wandered inside to take a seat. At first when he had seen Bella walking up the aisle in the dim lighting he thought he was seeing things, but when he had realised that serendipity had again brought her to him, he had felt a rush of pleasure.

She had looked up when he had called her name, and made her way over, eventually settling down beside him. Again he had marvelled at how comfortable she seemed to be with herself, and with him. Given they had both elected to see a movie alone, it seemed they were both equally content to be with company or without, although now that she was here, he realised how empty his evening might have otherwise been.

Edward had followed the movie with a diminished level of attention as his mind kept wandering to the woman who sat beside him. He wondered if she realised she leaned into his shoulder during the more dramatic scenes, or bit her lip when the characters' torturously slow entanglement began to gain speed. He had enjoyed the movie, but enjoyed Bella's reactions to it all the more. She allowed herself to be truly immersed in the storyline. The way her breathing quickened, the slight involuntary movements she made told him that for her, a movie was a complete sensory experience.

"Who's the Director?" Edward turned a little in his seat so that he could see Bella's face more clearly.

"Uh, Jean-Pierre something, I'll have to check the poster on the way out," Bella admitted. "His movies are like a fairytale, but in no other world that I've ever seen," Bella went on. "You really ought to see some of his other films, I'd be curious to see what you think."

"What are they?" Edward asked. Even if he'd known, he would have asked. He just wanted to keep her talking, to keep her with him.

"*The City of Lost Children* and *Amelie* are two of my favourites," Bella replied, then had to stifle a yawn behind her hand, "sorry."

"Don't be," Edward looked at his watch, "it's nearly midnight." He got to his feet and extended a hand to help her up, which she accepted with a smile. It seemed only natural that he kept her hand in his as they walked down the aisle towards the exit, past the tired usher who was holding a garbage bag as he collected discarded drink cups and popcorn buckets.

They emerged into the evening, and stopped on the sidewalk smiling at each other. Edward released her hand with considerable reluctance. Was it his imagination, or did Bella's hand seem to linger?

"Have you got a busy week ahead?" Edward asked, still wanting to prolong their time.

"As always," Bella answered with a smile, "it never stops, but I guess I've only got myself to blame for that one."

"Oh I don't know, you don't look too sorry about it," he observed.

"Definitely not sorry, it's starting to pay off. My brother has been going over the books for me, and I'll be able to give myself more of a weekend soon." She yawned again, apologising with a laugh.

"You're going need a break," Edward said, "but for now we'd better get you home. Which way are you headed?"

"I'm in West Village."

Edward's eyebrows went up at that, "Really? I'm in West Soho." He'd wondered where she lived, and now he'd discovered they were closer than he thought. "You want to share a cab home?"

Bella looked up and down the street, which was quiet. "Sure," she agreed, "why not?"

Edward crooked his arm, which she accepted with a smile, and they began to walk. They'd barely gone a block before Edward flagged down a cab, and helped Bella inside. The cab took off with a lurch, sending Bella who had been settling into her seat, lurching against Edward.

"Oops, sorry," she laughed.

Edward looked at her and smiled, feeling brave. "I'm not."

They gazed at each other, and Bella smiled, biting her bottom lip. "Neither am I," she admitted.

"You know," Edward said in a low tone, "I know this wasn't a date, but would you mind if I-," he raised an eyebrow at her in silent query as he dipped his head towards hers.

"Not at all," Bella whispered, lifting her face towards his.

Their lips met in a soft kiss, parted, and went back for more.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It's about time," Alice commented with a raised eyebrow.

"What?" Bella was surprised at Alice's remark as she appeared with the tray of cupcakes.

"You've been daydreaming all morning, and for the first time ever you're-," Alice looked at her watch, "a whopping ten minutes behind schedule."

Bella laughed, setting down the tray and leaning forward into the cabinet to arrange the cakes, hoping that the action would hide her flushing cheeks. She hadn't gotten much sleep, and had felt out of breath all morning. It seemed that her mind wanted to replay the kiss with Edward at every opportunity.

The way his lips had felt against hers, the gentle hesitancy with which he moved, kissing her once, and then returning more decisively for another. The soft rasp of his stubble as he had trailed kisses from her mouth, across her cheek before returning to her lips. They had broken apart and regarded each other before sharing a breathless laugh.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella's eyes had flickered to the rear view mirror, and she had seen that the cabbie was watching the traffic, world-weary apathy oozing from every pore. No doubt he'd seen it all before.

"Well, for an evening that wasn't a date, I had a great time," Bella said with a smile.

"So did I," Edward replied, "may we should arrange to bump into each other again soon." It wasn't a question.

"That sounds like a great idea," she agreed, then looked up in surprise as the cab slowed to a halt, and realised that they had arrived at her address. "But for now I guess this is goodnight."

"Allow me." Edward had gotten out of the cab and opened her door. He instructed the cabbie to wait, and escorted her to the front door of the building. Edward quirked an eyebrow at her and offered a grin that made her bite her lip in anticipation. "One for the road?"

Their mutual eagerness had them bumping noses and exchanging a husky laugh again before their laughter subsided into the sweetness of each other's mouths.

"Well, Bella, I guess I'll be seeing you soon," Edward said, still holding her hand and tracing gentle circles on it with his thumb, "maybe we can arrange a date sometime."

"I'd like that," she'd dimpled in response, making him smile.

"Good night," he'd said, and turned to walk back to the cab.

"Sweet dreams," she'd called, and for a moment he'd hesitated, his gaze flashing back to her, before he shot her a broad smile and climbed back into the cab.

\* \* \* \* \*

"And you're doing it again," Alice's voice jolted Bella from her joyful reverie.

"What?"

"Daydreaming, come on girl, what's going on in that head of yours?"

Alice stood, hands on hips regarding Bella. Behind her, Angela stepped in to serve a customer, and Alice shifted out of the way so that Angela could get to the coffee machine.

"Nothing, everything," Bella smiled. "I guess Emmett's news about the business knocked me for a loop."

"I'll say, if you're like this at the prospect of a regular day off, you must really need it."

"Is it that obvious?" Bella laughed, then stood back from the cabinet and slid the Perspex door closed.

"It is to me, but then again you know I'm different," Alice commented, looking up to grin at a customer who stood dithering in front of the cabinet.

"Honey, when they made you they broke the mould," Bella replied. "Now get the chalk, I haven't told you what this one's called yet."

"What do you think this is?" Alice held up a stub. Bella hadn't even noticed her pick it up. She really had to work to get her focus back today. She'd never been this distracted after a kiss before. She thought for a moment, and then dictated, knowing full well that Alice was going to be curious, but was too happy to care.

Alice raised an eyebrow and wrote down the words with a smile, and then propped up the chalkboard, watching as Bella headed back into the kitchen. Something was definitely going on. She knew that if she asked too many questions, Bella would clam up, but she was content to wait and see.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward liked what he saw, as he leaned back in his chair, cracking his knuckles and shaking out his hands as he gazed at the screen. He'd woken up with words tumbling out of his head, his fingers itching to type them out and up onto the page. With barely a conscious thought, he'd stumbled out of bed and over to his desk, sat down and began to type. He had no idea what he was writing about, which for him was a departure from his normal style. His previous novels had been mapped out in meticulous detail, character biographies and interconnectives carefully noted and explored. This time, there was none of that, he simply sat and typed. By the time the stream of words had slowed to a trickle, he was aware of a mild ache between his shoulders.

Edward looked at his watch and snorted with surprise at the hour. He had been working for longer than he thought. He sat for a moment, considering options, and then with a sigh got up and changed into his jogging gear. He'd taken to going for early-morning runs, although glancing back at his laptop he couldn't find it in his heart to begrudge the altered morning schedule today. He stopped long enough to fill up his water bottle and grab his keys, and then he was gone.



Jogging around Washington Square Park again, Edward stopped for a few breathers and drink breaks. After his initial jog with Jasper, Edward had woken up stiff and sore, which had been a bitter lesson to learn. Without Jasper to spur him on this time, he set himself an easier pace, and noticed that he didn't seem to be struggling as much as he thought he would. His decision to quit smoking had definitely done him some favours. By the time Edward had finished the circuit, he was well and truly ready for a shower, and he jogged home slowly.

He let himself into the apartment and poured himself a juice, gulping it down as he checked through the mail he'd collected from downstairs. There was nothing of note, and he headed towards the bathroom for a shower. He wanted lunch, and he wanted to see Bella. There was no reason why he couldn't do both.

\* \* \* \* \*

*What to do ...*

Jasper closed the file and pushed it aside on his desk, tapping his pen as he weighed up his options, of which there were more than he'd originally thought. He leaned forward on his desk, chin in hands as he thought, and gave a start when his phone rang.

"Whitlock," he intoned, and then his face brightened as he heard the familiar voice. "Cullen! What are you up to?"

"I'm getting a late lunch in a while, and you said the other day you wanted to check out the bakery again. I'm going to head over there today, so how about it?"

"Sounds like a plan, what time?"

They arranged a time, and hung up. Jasper grinned for a moment, pleased that his old friend was starting to reconnect, and then gave the file on his desk another look. He had time for a re-read, so he might as well take an in-depth approach while he had the inclination. He opened the file and began to read, frowning in concentration. An idea began to glimmer in the back of his mind, and he indulged it. A few minutes later, the office surroundings became white noise as he immersed himself in the written word before him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The city noises hummed around Edward as he made his way towards the Village. He'd taken his time with a shower and a careful shave, and had picked out clean jeans and a button down shirt. The jog had left him feeling hungry and energised, and he found himself paying more attention to his surroundings as he walked, enjoying his newfound sense of purpose. He felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He dug it out and answered without checking the number.

"Cullen," he said, weaving through a group of students that were mingling outside a music store, "Marcus, hey."

"Hey yourself," Marcus replied, taken aback at Edward's voice, "how's things?"

"Good," Edward said, "I'm just taking a break for some lunch and then I'll be back working this afternoon."

"You're still writing?" Marcus worked to keep the surprise out of his voice, but wasn't entirely successful. After months of dealing with a dour-sounding Edward, this new incarnation had caught him off-guard.

"Don't worry," Edward replied in a dry tone, "I'm as surprised as you are."

"It sounds like it's going well for you."

"Whatever it is," agreed Edward, "I still don't know what to tell you about it, but give me a few days and I'll send through an outline."

"Well," Marcus found himself in a quandary. He was eager to get his hands on whatever it was Edward might be working on, but didn't want to push for fear of dampening this sudden onset of creativity, "whenever you're ready."

Edward snorted, "It's probably better I send you something soon before I change my mind."

"That's fine," Marcus agreed quick to seal the offer, "get it to me when you can." He paused, "And, Edward?"

Edward hunched his shoulders a little as he walked, trying to listen to Marcus's voice over the sounds of traffic. "What?"

"You sound good. Better than you have in a long time," Marcus chose his words with care, "whatever you've come across that's helping you out, hang onto it."

"Oh I plan to," Edward replied. He looked up at the intersection, and saw that he was only a block away now, "gotta go, we'll talk again soon."

"Alright then," said Marcus. He hung up, and shook his head in wonder. He'd been worrying about Edward over the last few months, watching as the deadline had come and gone with nothing to show for it. Now it seemed that there had been a change in fortune, and he wouldn't help but wonder what the cause of it was.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Worrying is like a rocking chair: it gives you something to do but doesn't get you anywhere.*

Edward smiled at the chalkboard and then stepped inside. Worrying seemed to be something he'd been doing less of lately. His gaze went straight to the counter inside, and he saw Bella serving some customers, engaging in small talk, and then turned as he heard his name being called.

Jasper gave him a casual wave from the table he'd commandeered, and was folding up his newspaper as Edward approached.

"I see you've brought your work with you," Edward said, nodding at the paper.

"You'd think so," Jasper snorted, "but I'm not so sure anymore."

Edward started to pull out a chair from the table to take a seat, and then glanced over at the counter again. Bella was nearly finished with her customers, maybe he'd go say hello first. He glanced at Jasper. "You want a coffee?"

"It's why I'm here," Jasper answered, then got up and tossed the newspaper onto the table, "let's eat."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice was emerging from the kitchen as Angela appeared in the doorway with a conspiratorial grin.

"He's back," she said.

Alice gave her a blank stare. "Who is?"

"The Lion, and he's brought his friend again," Angela said, jerking her head back towards the store.

Peering over her shoulder, Alice saw Edward flanked by a man with fair hair. "Oh great," she muttered to herself, "it's Mr Wonderful."

"You know him?" Angela looked at her in surprise.

"I don't need to," Alice said in a dismissive tone, "I know his type." She paused and gave Jasper a more considered once-over. He was looking good: not too preppy, not too casual. He clearly had a sense of his own style and knew how to work it to his best advantage. She gave her shirt a quick tug to smooth out any creases, and raked her fingers through her hair to freshen up the style. Today she was wearing her favourite navy blue Capri pants, and a fitted royal blue t-shirt that bore the slogan "100% organic". She was looking good today, and that made her feel even better. Two could play at that game.

Strolling out into the storefront, Alice gave Edward a broad smile of welcome.

"Hey, Stranger," she greeted, "great to see you again."

Jasper raised an eyebrow at this and glanced at Edward. How often had he been coming here? He watched Edward glance across at another woman who was serving some other customers, saw her give him a blushing smile, and got his answer. He glanced down to conceal his smile. He didn't know what was going on between the two, but his friend looked happy, and for Jasper that was enough.

The two men ordered and bickered good-naturedly over who was paying. Jasper was about to return to the table when he noticed Edward lingering at the counter. He glanced over to see Edward scrutinising the cupcake special, and then looking at the woman he had exchanged a smile with earlier. Jasper watched them closer this time, noticing how she bit her bottom lip slightly as Edward spoke in quiet tones. Her eyes widened as she replied, and Edward returned a low volley murmur that had her throwing back her head in laughter.

Edward looked pleased with himself, and Jasper didn't miss that as they spoke they leaned closer towards each other.

Curious, Jasper leaned forward to read the chalkboard propped up on the counter. *Sweet Possibilities*, Black Forest Cherry Delight. He looked at the cupcake name, and then at the quietly chatting couple. Interesting.

He glanced over at the barista machine to see that their coffees were ready, and he reached out to take the cups as they were slid across the counter towards him. With a careless smile of thanks, he took them back to the table.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice felt indignant. She'd offered Mr Wonderful a smile, gazing up him through her eyelashes in a manner that she knew worked well, and yet ... nothing. His gaze had flickered across her and he had offered her a smile, a polite smile at best, and then he was gone.

What the hell was wrong with her?

Better yet, what the hell was wrong with *him*?

Snatching up the dishcloth, she wiped the frothed milk off the steam spigot with quick, angry movements.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Jasper ordered lunch, Edward lingered by the counter to say hello to Bella. She finished with her customers, waved them off and then turned to him with a brilliant smile.

"Bonjour, Bella," he greeted, smiling as the words came easily, "comment allez-vous?"

"Très bien, merci," she replied, and then winked, "but that's all the French I've got."

"Same," Edward confessed, "lucky for us there were subtitles last night."

Bella laughed and leaned towards him, "Remind me to teach you my foreign language game sometime," she suggested, enjoying the way Edward's face lit with curiosity, "I think you'll like it."

"You're on," Edward answered. Standing in front of her, he knew he was already looking forward to seeing her again.

"Have you ordered?"

"Uh," Edward was distracted by her smile, and looked over at Alice who nodded, holding up two laden plates in silent answer, "yes, we have."

"Oh," Bella seemed a little disappointed at the prospect of their conversation running short, "well I'll send over dessert for you later."

"Only if you join me," Edward countered, surprised at his easy daring with this woman.

"Then you've got a deal," Bella replied.

"But we still don't have a date," Edward said, wondering where his words were coming from. In the past it had been nothing for him to labour for days over a page of dialogue, and yet here he was, tripping over himself to keep talking to a woman whose smile kept him warm.

"No we don't," Bella agreed, "but how about you ask me later? I'll make it easy for you and let you know in advance that my answer is going to be yes." She reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her ears, and stood regarding him with one hand on her hip, her face lit with a smile of easy challenge.

"That's good to know," Edward replied, turning from the counter with considerable reluctance as he heard Jasper call his name, "very good in fact."

"I'm glad you think so," Bella replied, glancing over at Alice who stood watching them both at the coffee machine, and she gave an inward sigh. No doubt this conversation was going to be dissected beneath Alice's loving scrutiny later.

Edward took the plates from Alice with a smile of thanks and strolled towards the table, already feeling satisfied and replete. Jasper sat waiting with a faintly amused expression, watching as Edward set the plates down and pulled out a with a low scrape against the tiles, Edward sat down and pulled his plate towards him, then glanced up at Jasper. "What?"

"Nothing," Jasper cocked and eyebrow as he sipped his coffee.

"Doesn't look like nothin'," Edward commented as he bit into his bagel and chewed slowly.

"Let's just say I'm beginning to see the appeal of this place," Jasper replied, flickering a glance back at the counter to where Alice was serving someone, and then indulging himself in a more leisurely study of her once he had assured himself that she was unaware of his scrutiny.

Edward followed Jasper's gaze, and then regarded his friend.

"You too?"

"Maybe," Jasper conceded, "but it's early days yet."

"Okay," Edward said, taking another bite. "So what's going on at work, anything you can tell me about that?"

Jasper sighed and ran a frustrated hand through his hair, making his blonde hair stand up in uneven spikes. He looked, Edward realised, tired and uncertain, which was rare.

"How much time you got, Cullen?"

"All the time you need."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella smiled as her customers left, and put the notes in the till, bumping the drawer shut with her hip. She stood and surveyed the store with satisfaction. Business had been at a steady pace for the morning, and all of the tables were occupied. People were laughing and talking over their meals, others had finished and were now giving the cupcake cabinet speculative looks that she knew would lead to buying. Everyone looked happy and content, and Bella gave a sigh of satisfaction, knowing that in some small way she had contributed towards it.

She glanced over to where Edward was sitting, and watched him as he talked to his friend. He half sat, half curled around the table and chair, leaning forward on his elbows, his shoulders hunched forward as he listened to his friend speak. He had a languid feline grace, and he listened with an intensity that suggested a long friendship.

His friend was still talking, occasionally waving his hand as he made a point, and Edward barely said a word. He nodded in encouragement now and then, and it seemed he only spoke when he wanted to clarify something. For the most part though, he sat and listened, soaking up all the words that were offered to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sounds like a good offer," Edward commented at last, when Jasper's conversation petered out.

"Yeah," Jasper sighed.

"And you know your parents would be thrilled," he added. Jasper gave him a tired smile.

"Well, I can't say that I've set my life course by what they wanted, but I'll admit that factor would be a bonus," he confessed, then slid his elbows forward on the table and propped his head in his hands. "Fuck," he cursed in a quiet voice, "I'm tired, Edward."

"Hey," Edward leaned forward and rested his hand on Jasper's shoulder, "can you take some time off?"

"Probably," Jasper's voice was muffled.

"Then do it," Edward suggested. "Come crash at mine if you want. Just get away from the office and have a think about what you want. Life's too short for this shit, you've got to do what makes you happy."

"Oh really? That's your theory?" Jasper looked up at Edward with a cynical expression, "because I don't think you've been following that advice for the last few months."

Edward shifted on his seat. Jasper's words had stung, but it had never been said that the truth would be easy. "True," he agreed, "but I think we both know my head was too far up my own ass to see straight."

Jasper looked at him with a straight face for a moment before his mouth quirked into a grin.

"And anyway," Edward continued, "things are different now."

"And how," Jasper replied, "I wouldn't say you're a happy camper yet, but you're at least interacting with the world again. What happened?"

Edward looked over to where Bella stood chatting to the other two women behind the counter. "I guess I got lucky," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Alice, it's your lucky day."

"Mmm-hmm?" Alice pulled herself away from her *Vogue* magazine to give Bella an owl blink. Things had gone quiet enough for Alice to make herself a quick coffee and flick through her glossy magazine indulgence.

"I should have known better than to disturb you when you're at your devotions," Bella said, "but I wanted to know that I've been thinking about what you suggested last week."

"You'll have to remind me, we've had a few chats since then," Alice replied, marking her place and flicking the magazine closed.

"The one about us getting a bit more style," Bella began.

Alice became more interested. "Keep talking," she said.

"I don't know what I want, but I'm thinking that you probably have it all mapped out," Bella went on.

"Uh-huh," Alice said.

"So, I can either pitch a few ideas at you, then you can do what you want and let me think it was my idea," Bella continued, "or I can just let you have free rein and accept that I'm going to love what you come up with."

The two women regarded each other.

"So what's your preference?" Alice asked after a pause.

"Well, either way I think the outcome will be the same, so how about you just go nuts and I'll prepare to fall in love with the results."

A slow smile began to appear on Alice's face. "Do you know how long I've been waiting for this moment?"

"Probably about as long as you've worked here," Bella supplied.

"You'd be right," Alice agreed, "so how far can I go?"

"I'm thinking whatever you come up with has to be machine washable, or able to withstand the occasional splatter in the kitchen," Bella supplied, "but other than that it's all up to you."

"Accessories?" Alice cocked her head.

"Within reason," Bella allowed, "you know I can't do frou-frou." She gestured to herself as an example.

Alice took in Bella's usual work attire: jeans, chucks and a t-shirt. "You mean can't or won't?" she asked. Bella had pulled her hair up into a ponytail, and today she had glass cherries swinging from her ears. Alice had to admit that Bella had style, and she was blessed with a lovely figure, but surely there had to be a way of showing it off a little more.

Bella sighed and gave Alice a long stare. Alice held up her hands in surrender.

"Okay," she conceded, "minimal accessories. But when you say free rein, do I have your word on that?" Alice looked at Angela who had been stacking some clean glasses on a nearby shelf, "Hey Ange, you're a witness to this, right?"

"Sure," Angela said, "but what am I agreeing to?"

"I'm giving Alice here artistic free licence to give us a new look here in the store," Bella answered.

Angela's face dropped. "But what's wrong with the place? I think it looks fantastic," she waved a hand to encompass the store.

"Oh no," Bella broke in, "the look of the store is my domain, I'm talking about *us*," she pointed from herself to Alice then to Angela, and gave Angela a shy smile. "You really think the place looks that good?"

"Absolutely," Angela nodded, "it's unique. I love how you've just jumbled everything in together. Have you noticed how some of our regulars don't even bother bringing a book with them anymore? They either help themselves to a book off the shelf, or they just sit and look at all the stuff you've got hanging up."

"Really?" Bella was pleased, "that's just what I've been hoping they'd do."

"It's working," confirmed Alice, "mind you, some of our regulars come in to look at *other* points of interest," she gave Bella an arch look, "not that I'm naming names or anything, *Bella*."

Bella shook her head in mock exasperation, and flicked a quick look at Edward's table. He was looking over at the counter towards her, and she gave a brief smile before glancing at Alice to see her wearing a smug *I told you so* expression. Without saying a word, Alice picked up her magazine and flicked it open, giving Bella a wide-eyed innocent look, and began to leaf through the pages as she strolled towards the kitchen.

"You know," Angela ventured, "for a smart woman, she can be a bit dense sometimes."

"Alice?" Bella looked at Angela in puzzlement, "really?"

"For sure. She can't see what's right in front of her," Angela shrugged, "it's a case of who watches the watcher."

"But who-," Bella began, stopping when Angela raised an eyebrow and tilted her head in Jasper's direction. She watched as Jasper kept talking to Edward, his eyes tracking Alice as she walked the length of the counter and



disappeared out the back. "I see," she said after a thoughtful pause. "Well this is going to be interesting. I don't think she even likes him."

"I know, but sometimes what we think we want and what we actually need are two different things," Angela speculated.

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"So what is it you want to do?" Edward ventured.

"I wish I knew," Jasper admitted, "but I've got a bit of time up my sleeve to work things out. Speaking of which," he looked at his watch, "I've got to head back to work." He got up from the table and walked around to stand beside Edward's chair, "thanks for letting me vent."

"Anytime," Edward replied, and meant it. "You take care. Call if you want some company, okay?"

"Will do," Jasper answered, and with a final smile he left the store.

Edward as Jasper walked out, waving at him through the window as he headed back in the direction of his office, then finished his coffee. It seemed just as his own work fortunes were changing, so were Jasper's, although time would tell just how successful each of them would be this time around. He looked up as he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, and saw Bella smiling at him.

"Are you staying a while longer?"

"Sure," Edward replied and was rewarded with a smile.

"Oh good, I'll grab some lunch then, it'd be nice to have some company," she made to return to the counter and then turned back, "fancy another coffee?"

"If you're having one."

"Coming up."

Bella walked back to the counter, sticking her tongue out at Alice who was beaming at her. "Not a word," she warned her as she grabbed herself a bagel out of the display cabinet.

"I didn't say anything," Alice protested.

"You didn't have to, your thoughts were screaming at me," Bella answered with a smile, "but in the meantime you can make a couple of coffees for us." Picking up another plate, Bella added two cupcakes.

"Sure, Boss."

"Don't call me Boss," Bella shot back automatically as she carried her two plates past a grinning Angela, "and that goes for you too, Angela."

"Okay, Boss."

Bella stopped short at that and turned to face a giggling Angela. "Did I just hear that?" She looked back at Alice, who was making a show of being very busy with her coffee prep, "have you gone viral now?"

"Looks like, Boss."

"No respect," Bella muttered in an amused tone as she carried on towards the table where Edward sat waiting. She set the plates down and settled herself on a chair, glancing at Edward and noting with an inward groan that her face was feeling warm.

"Are you okay?" Edward said, reaching out to brush a finger against her cheek, "you look a little flushed."

"I'm fine," Bella said, ducking her head as her cheeks flared warmer still at his touch, "but do you ever get the feeling you're being watched?"

"Feeling I'm ... oh," Edward glanced back to the counter in time to see Angela duck behind the coffee machine.

Alice swept towards them bearing two cups and a serene expression, setting the cups down and giving Bella a beatific smile. "You've been working hard, Boss. Give yourself a break, take as long as you like. Angela and I can hold the fort."

"Thanks, Alice, that's ... really subtle of you."

"Just trying to help."

"Thanks, Alice, and you can go away now," Bella replied, rubbing her forehead with one hand and looking mortified. She watched as Alice went back to the counter and fell into a whispered conversation with Angela, and then gave Edward a pained look. "Sorry about that," she offered.

"She means well," Edward suggested, as he stirred some sugar into his coffee.

"Try being on the receiving end sometime," Bella muttered as she picked up her bagel. "So how's your day going so far?" she asked as she took a bite.

"Getting better all the time," Edward commented. They fell into an easy conversation, and Edward again found himself wondering what it was about Bella that seemed to make talking so easy. He and Jasper had the ease of a long friendship between them, and more often than not Jasper sought him out as a sounding board. Listening and observing was something that came naturally to Edward, although with Bella he often found himself in situations where he *wanted* to talk. He wanted to tell her things about himself, and to get her talking in return. He felt greedy for her words, knowing that they would stimulate more of his own.

"So you're jogging now?" Bella looked impressed, "that's something I've never tried."

"It was hard at first," Edward winced, remembering the pain of his first run with Jasper, "but it's getting a little easier. It's just good to get out and get some fresh air. I've been cooped up for too long."

"So what made you decide to sniff the great outdoors?" Bella teased as she took another mouthful.

"You," Edward admitted, then felt surprised at the unexpected honesty. The admission had burst forth on his tongue before he could filter his answer.

Bella's chewing slowed as she regarded him with surprise, then swallowed. "Me?"

"Why not?"

"I'm-," she shrugged, looking bewildered, "well I guess it's a bit unusual to be credited with something like that." Bella had finished her lunch by now, and sat twisting her teaspoon, the clinking noises it made against the saucer breaking the sudden silence.

"Have I freaked you out?" Edward ventured after a pause.

"No, It's just I-," she began, and bit her lip. "Thank you," she said at length.

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Alice and Angela were still watching them from time to time from behind the counter.

"I think he's just paid her a massive compliment," Alice observed in an undertone.

"Really?" Angela looked over at their table, "how can you tell?"

"Because Bella is looking very pink, uncomfortable and pleased all at once," Alice said in a thoughtful tone. "I don't think I've ever seen her look like that before."

"I would've thought she'd be used to guys saying nice things," Angela replied, as she opened the fridge for a quick inventory. "She's easy on the eye so she must get guys hitting on her now and then."

Alice snorted. "Please, it happens all the time but she's absolutely clueless." Alice put her hands on her hips and regarded the pair who were still sat talking in quiet tones. "Well," she amended, "usually anyway. The Lion King seems to have gotten through her defences, so I'm hopeful."

"Oh," Angela's expression cleared, "she's been badly burnt then?"

"No," Alice said after some consideration, "but her track record isn't good. Her first serious boyfriend was Jacob, and look how *that* turned out. I don't know about you, but if I slept with a guy for a few years who then switched teams, I'd be a bit gun-shy too."

"She would've gone out with other guys since then though, surely?"

"Sure," Alice wiped down the coffee machine and flicked the dishcloth over one shoulder as she kept tidying up the counter, "but she uses the store as a great barricade. Which is why," she straightened a couple of trays with a deft touch, "I've given things a couple of very subtle nudges in the right direction."

Angela closed the refrigerator door and gave Alice an exasperated look. "Subtle? Alice I wouldn't call your comments to Bella earlier very subtle."

Alice turned and gave her a look of wounded pride. "I didn't say the nudges were to *her*," she glanced over at Bella and Edward, who were still talking, and felt a surge of glee as she watched Edward reach out and take Bella's hand, "I nudged *him*."

Angela stepped forward and peeked around a couple of glass jars holding cookies to see the latest development, then gave Alice an impressed look. "You're good, I'll give you that."

"Thanks," Alice said, looking pleased, "hell, I had to step in and do something. It was obvious they were attracted to each other, but they're both so damn shy it would've taken ages."

"You couldn't let things take their course naturally?" Angela teased.

"If there's one thing you should know about me by now," Alice replied, "it's that I don't do suspense."

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"So I know you've been waiting for me to ask," Edward began, smiling as Bella sat up a little straighter in her chair, "Bella, would you like to go on a date with me this Saturday?"

"Oh this is all so sudden," Bella smiled, "I don't quite know what to say."

"You *did* tell me earlier that you were going to say yes," Edward pointed out.

"That's right, so I did," she replied, "well then, thank you very much for asking, and I'd love to."

"Great," he looked pleased. "I have to say that knowing the answer in advance makes it a lot easier."

"Glad I could help," she said, "so what are we going to do?"

"I hadn't actually thought that far ahead," he admitted, making her laugh. "I thought maybe dinner somewhere?"

"That sounds great," Bella said, and meant it. It had been a long time since she had felt this comfortable with someone. She enjoyed talking to him, and with a surprise she realised that she was already looking forward to seeing him again, for all that he was already sitting right in front of her.

"Good," Edward smiled, "I'll book us in somewhere. In the meantime though, don't be surprised if we bump into each other again."

"You know you could always just drop that option and keep coming here, it's nice to see you anytime," she said, then stopped in surprise. Had she just said that? How was it that he managed to wheedle such an admission out of her?

"Done," he smiled, and bit into his cupcake. As always, it was perfect. The cherry flavour burst on his tongue, surrounded by bitter chocolate and sugar sweetness, "God this is good."

Bella glanced at her watch as she nibbled at her own cake. The afternoon was well on its way, and she had been keeping a casual eye on the number of customers coming through. Alice and Angela seemed to be staying on top of things okay, and a quick glance at the cabinet showed that they had enough cupcakes to see them through the afternoon.

"I'm sorry," Edward's voice broke into her train of thought, "am I keeping you from work?"

Bella blinked as she detached herself from her mental running tally. "Not at all, I was just checking to make sure we had enough stock for the afternoon. It looks like the girls are going fine," she reassured him, "but hang on, what about you? Do you have to be back at work somewhere?"

"Nope, I'm a free agent most of the time."

"Really? What is it that you do?" as soon as she asked, she regretted it. Edward's expression became more composed and he paused to lick his fingertips before he answered.

"I'm a writer," he admitted.

"Wow," Bella enthused, "are you published?"

"Sometimes," Edward replied. Modest by nature, he still had a hard time accepting praise for his work. It seemed strange that something that had come to him by accident should bring accolades and a very comfortable income. It was even harder to accept compliments when he had generated so little in recent times. Until Bella had happened in any case.

"Ah," she gave him a sympathetic look, "going through hard times?"

"Something like that," he gave her a tight smile, "but things are looking up."

"Well that's good news then," Bella answered, then bit into her cupcake. She was chewing with content when she noticed Edward was looking amused. "What?" she mumbled around a mouthful.

"You've got a little-," he began, and then reached forward. Bella paused and sat still as he gently cupped her chin and rubbed his thumb across her top lip. He held up his thumb long enough for her to see the smear of frosting, before he licked it off. She sat still, watching his tongue flicker over the pad of his thumb, and realised she wanted him to kiss her again.

Saturday suddenly felt too far away.

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Alice handed over some change to her customer and looked up in time to see Edward cup Bella's face in his hand, rubbing his thumb over her lips. He removed his hand and Bella sat frozen in place, high spots of colour in her cheeks as she watched him lick his thumb.

"Oh Bella," she whispered to herself. "He's the one. Don't be scared."

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Edward tasted the sweetness on his tongue before the sugar dissolved, and stared at Bella's pink lips. Her tongue darted out to moisten them, and it was all he could do not to haul her over the table and into his arms. He felt excited and terrified all at once.

Saturday was too far away.

"You know," he began, then stopped and cleared his throat as his words struggled against a throat that was suddenly tight, "we've got a few days until Saturday, but how about I walk you home tonight?"

"Okay," Bella ventured, licking her lips again, "I think I'd like that," then added, "very much."

They both gave each other a shy smile of recognition. This time, they were both aware that something was starting.

## **Ch9 Sweetness and Spice**

For Bella the afternoon passed with agonising slowness. She and Edward had sat talking for another half hour before he had departed, agreeing that Edward would meet Bella at the bakery an hour after closing. That would give her enough time to sort out the day's takings and get the store clean and ready for the following morning.

It was with some relief that Bella saw the last customer for the afternoon leave the store. The day had finished on a quiet note, and she was pleased to see that Alice and Angela were well ahead of schedule. The two of them she saw, worked together like a well-oiled machine, finishing tasks and trading gossip and friendly insults like the old friends they were.

She went outside and was just reaching up to take the chalkboard down from its hooks when someone grabbed her in a bear-hug from behind. She yipped with surprise and then relaxed when she heard and felt the deep rumble of laughter. She was set down and turned to see Emmett beaming at her.

"Bear," she gave his shoulder a laughing swat, "you're lucky I didn't try and elbow you in the nuts."

"Good to see you too, Sis," he laughed, grabbing her in a headlock and ruffling her hair, a move he knew she hated. Bella protested and managed to squirm away from him, reaching up to smooth her hair in what she knew would be a futile gesture. Emmett never did things by halves. He took down the chalkboard and carried it inside for her and set it down by the counter at Alice's direction. "So how's the day been?"

"We did okay," Bella answered, "I started a count earlier and the takings were looking good."

"Want me to finish?" he asked, and Bella gave him a surprised nod. "Thanks, that'd be great. That'll give me time to do a quick inventory of the kitchen for tomorrow."

"No problem," Emmett answered as he headed towards the till. He popped the drawer open and started to count the notes, scribbling down figures on the scrap of paper Bella had started earlier.

Bella went into the kitchen and started to check the industrial sized bins of flour and sugar, noting the levels and updating the checklist she kept on the door of the refrigerator. She stood for a moment, deep in thought, then yanked open the door and counted the eggs. She was only killing time until she could leave the bakery, and she knew it. Still, it was good to keep occupied. In any case, if she looked busy, it meant that Alice would be less likely to ask what was going on. Still, she doubted she was fooling anyone, least of all herself.

She was looking forward to seeing Edward.

A while later she strolled out of the kitchen to see Emmett rolling up bundles of notes and bagging loose change.

"Doing good Bells," he commented with a grin, "those weekends must be so close now you can almost taste 'em."

"They do sound pretty good," she admitted, "I'm thinking if we close Sunday or Monday it'll be a good start."

"A to the men," Alice chimed in, making Angela laugh.

"When do you think you'll start?" Emmett asked, putting the takings into a non-descript bag and zipping it closed.

"Probably two weeks," Bella replied. "Alice, we'll need to make up some kind of sign to give people the heads up."

"Already on it," Alice replied, "I figured we'd put notices up in the windows and a smaller version on the tables, so I'll bring them in soon."

"Let me know when your first weekend is going to be, and I'll come install those magazine pipes for you," Emmett offered.

Bella brightened at that. "You've got them good to go?" She walked over and gave him a hug, "I love my brother. How do they look?"

Emmett gave her a fond look and gave her a quick squeeze. "The copper polished up beautifully, the place is going to look great. Which reminds me," he released Bella and fished in one of the pockets on his cargo pants, "I found these for you the other day." He pulled out some octagonal pieces of cardboard and handed them over.

Bella accepted them, looking puzzled, and then started to laugh. "Where did you get these? I love them!"

Emmett looked pleased. Alice and Angela came forward to have a look, and Bella handed them over.

"Old Speckled Hen," Angela read aloud, and she began to laugh. Alice reached out for one as Angela finished reading. They were English beer coasters, and each one featured the same gentleman fox wearing a red hunting jacket, with a different slogan on each.

"This one's my favourite," Alice said, holding one up that showed the fox looking very pleased under the slogan *Nothing slips down easier than a hen with no bones*. "What are you going to do with them?"

"Oh they're going to have to be framed, what a foxy whiskered gentleman he is," exclaimed Bella, a broad smile on delight on her face. "They can be hung up next to Rosalie's fox, it'll be a great little display." She gave Emmett a grin, "thanks for these."

"You're welcome," said Emmett, smiling with delight at the pleasure they had brought to his sister. He'd found them in a bar when he'd been having a drink with some friends, and had known immediately that they would appeal to her quirky sense of humour. "And who's Rosalie?"

"She's the artist that did the fox print over there," Bella pointed, "as well as being the total hottie that stopped you in your tracks last week."

"Ah," Emmett's face lit with understanding, "and will she be stopping by again soon?"

"I think so," Bella replied, grinning at Emmett's interest, "I'll get her to drop in for a drink on Friday, so if you happen to be passing-," she trailed off and raised an eyebrow.

"I'll be here," he promised.

"I thought you might," Bella replied in a placid voice.

They all kept working a while longer, and then Alice and Angela announced that they were leaving for the day.

"See you tomorrow, Boss," they chorused from the door, giggling as Bella rounded on them.

"Get outta here," she called, "don't let the door hit your ass on the way out!" She turned back with a chuckle to see Emmett giving her a quizzical look. "It's an ongoing joke," she explained.

"Ah," he said. He hefted the bag of takings. "You want me to drop this off in the night safe?"

"Would you mind?" Bella said with relief, "that'd save me a trip."



"No problem, it's on my way home. Are you dropping it off every night?"

"Sometimes," Bella answered, "and then other days I stagger the drop-off night."

"Not a bad idea," Emmett said, "give me a call if you ever want an escort."

Bella gave him a concerned look. "Do you really think that's necessary?"

"Well," he shrugged, "business is on its way up, and I don't like the idea of you presenting a tempting target." He stood thinking for a moment, "we'll work something out."

"Okay, spot the cop's son, huh?"

"Something like that," he smiled. "Just keeping an eye on my kid sister is all."

"And it's appreciated."

Bella gave him a fond look. He was leaning against the counter with his arms crossed. For all that it was a casual stance, his muscles popped and his t-shirt was a snug fit across his chest. His outdoor work was reflected in the bronze glow of his skin, making him the epitome of health and strength. The overall effect however, was somewhat undermined when he swiped a cupcake off a tray as Bella passed, and bit into it, humming like a happy four year old.

"Remember that when you're talking to the fox," he said before taking another healthy bite.

"You mean Rosalie."

"I know what I meant."

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Bella had waved Emmett off and was pulling out a chair at one of the tables to wait for Edward when she heard a knock on the front window. She looked up to see Edward peering through the glass, his face breaking into a smile as she stood up from the table and walked over to let him in.

He stepped into the store, smiling down at her and then around the empty store with an expression of faint wonder on his face.

"It's so quiet," he commented.

"The people make quite a difference," Bella agreed, "but a bit of peace and quiet never goes astray."

Edward looked at her peaceful expression. "You really love it, don't you?"

She gave him a surprised look, "Shouldn't I?"

"Of course," he said, "but it's not just a business venture for you, it's a passion." He looked around the store, "I mean, just look at the place, it's amazing."

"You're the second person to say that," Bella replied, "Angela was saying the same thing earlier. She thinks this place is part home, part bakery and part gallery."

"And she's right," Edward said, "and it's very *you*."

Bella gave an embarrassed laugh, "and what's that?"

He took a step closer, reaching out to take her hand. "It's warm," his thumb made a slow circle on her hand, "welcoming," he dipped his head, "and entirely lovely." He brushed his lips across hers, and Bella's eyes closed as she leaned in for more. The kiss was very soft and sweet, and was over before Bella was ready for it to be.

Edward pulled away, still holding her hand and gestured towards the door. "Shall we?"

"Yes," she said, smiling and reaching back to the table to pick up her bag.

He waited while she locked the door, and then took her hand and set a leisurely pace as they walked.

"So how was the rest of your afternoon?" he asked after a short pause.

"Long," said Bella, looking up as he chuckled.

The streets were still busy as commuters made their way home from the working day, and Edward charted a careful course through the crowd, shielding Bella from being jostled. By the time they got to the next corner, Edward had taken to walking with Bella's hand held up against his chest, and she was close to his side. Their conversation had ebbed and flowed, and they seemed equally content to fall into an easy quiet now and then. The lights changed, and the crowd surged forward.

"Are you in a hurry to get home?" Edward asked as they reached the curb on the other side.

Bella thought for a moment. "I guess not, why?"

Edward's eyes crinkled at her. "How do you feel about a pre-date, date?"

Bella's mouth twisted into an amused smile, "You need a warm-up?"

"Well given you told me in advance you were going to say yes, I figure a practice date can't hurt."

Bella ducked her head and giggled, then looked back up at him, feeling carefree. "This is crazy, but sure, why not?"

"Great, come on," Edward kept walking, leading them up West 4th Street. Bella looked ahead down the block, and then up at Edward. "Washington Square Park?" she guessed.

"Well done," Edward replied. "I figured we've got time for a bit of a walk there before I see you safely home."

"I love that park," Bella enthused, "the dog runs there are wonderful."

"You have a dog?" Edward looked at her in surprise.

"No," Bella said with a rueful smile, "but I go there when I need some unconditional canine love, it's a wonderful tonic."

"I'll have to remember that," Edward mused.

Soon they entered the park, and were happy to stroll along the pathways until they found a park bench that wasn't occupied.

"Shall we?" Edward gestured towards the bench, and Bella nodded. They took a seat, and Bella adjusted her satchel to a more comfortable position against her hip as she sat.

"So what did you get up to this afternoon?" Bella asked after a brief pause.

Edward shrugged, "A bit of writing," he said.

"Anything good?"

"It's a bit too early to tell, but I'm enjoying it all the same." He paused, "it's been a while since I've been able to get anything down. Not long ago just writing a grocery list would have been a literary achievement."

"Ah, you had a block?" Bella asked in a sympathetic tone.

"More than just a block, it was like the Great Wall of China," Edward sighed.

"Sounds awful."

"It was, but it's getting better now."

"Then I'm glad for you," she said.

Edward looked down at her with a brief smile, and then they both went back to gazing at the park vista. After an infinitesimal pause, he carefully lifted his arm up and around Bella's shoulders, resting his hand on her upper arm. "This okay?"

"Better than," she agreed, and Edward stilled as Bella settled her head against his shoulder.

"So, keep talking," Bella encouraged, "what happened? How did you get writers' block in the first place?"

Edward grimaced, "I guess one day I woke up and realised I didn't like what I was writing," he sighed and looked down, crossing his legs at the ankles. "Then I began to hate it, and then-," he looked at Bella and shrugged, "one morning I woke up and discovered I had absolutely nothing to say. The words had just ... gone."

They both sat there in silence for a while.

"It was like that for me, losing Charlie," Bella ventured in a quiet voice, "one minute he and I were talking, just driving into town, nothing special, and then," her voice wavered for a moment before she continued, "and then ...," she trailed off.

"Do you remember anything?" Edward asked, intrigued that someone so small and vital could carry the weight of so much pain.

Bella shook her head against his shoulder. "No. Emmett told me later that they'd had to cut the car open to get me out," she went on in a faraway voice, "we got hit on Charlie's side, and it pushed the car into a power pole. By the time help got to us they knew that Charlie was gone, but I was still alive."

Edward rested his cheek on the top of her head, rubbing his hand on her arm, cupping her other hand as he pulled her closer. Bella closed her eyes, still talking.

"The next thing I knew, I was waking up in hospital, and just like that everything I knew would never be the same again."

"I'm so sorry," Edward murmured.

"You know what I keep thinking about though?"

"What?"

"Charlie's last words. I was teasing him about a song on the radio. He used to torment Em and I as kids by getting song lyrics wrong on purpose, so the last thing I remember is Charlie singing along to the Beatles," she paused and began to sing in a soft voice, "*Lucy knows this guy with lions ...*"

Despite the sombre conversation, Edward's shoulders twitched in amusement.

Bella lifted her head to look at him. "I know, right? No the most profound last words for a lifetime, huh?"

"No," he agreed, "but you have to admit that it gives his life joy." Edward gazed down at Bella's open face and continued, "there are worse ways to go out of this life, and I think going out singing is pretty good."

Bella blinked at him, "You know, I'd never thought of it like that." She gazed at him for a long moment, and then rested her head against his shoulder. "Thanks," she said at last, "that really helps."

"You're welcome," he replied.

The two of them sat quietly, watching the procession of pedestrians and dog walkers that ebbed and flowed through the park. The sun was beginning to set, and they found themselves watching the colours of the park shift from the warm hues of the day to the cooler tones of dusk. The conversation between them drifted from one topic to the next, and after a while they two of them drifted into a contented silence.

"Sometimes," Bella ventured after a long moment, "there's a lot to be said for a companionable silence."

A rumble of amusement came from Edward's chest. "Isn't that a contradiction?"

He felt Bella's shoulders shake with silent laughter. "I was hoping you wouldn't pick up on that."

Again they sat silent. Edward found himself glancing from the park vista to Bella's head, resting near his chest. *A companionable silence*. He'd never really taken note of the phrase before. And yet here he was, with a woman that gave him silence and words in equal and satisfying measure. Edward began to relax so much that he almost felt into a light doze with Bella in his arms. He managed not to jolt when Bella's voice roused him from his reverie.

"Edward," she said in a quiet voice, "how long have you been writing?"

"Ever since I could, I suppose." Edward frowned for a moment as he tried to remember, "Mom said I was always quiet, so growing up the only child of academics it's no surprise that books were always a good companion."

"True," Bella agreed, "you're never alone if you've got a book."

"Yeah," he sighed, "after college Mom went through some papers of mine, one thing led to another, and about 18 months after that I was published. People wanted more, so I kept writing. The rest of my life had to be scheduled in around publication dates." He gave a small chuff of laughter, "and then suddenly I found that I'd been writing for 12 years that had flown by, but had no idea what to do with my own time."

"Ah," Bella nodded, "you got busy burning up the decade when you should've seized the day."

Edward gave her a startled look, "you were the same?"

Bella's lips quirked with amusement. "A little, although not the same extent as you. I was always looking to the future, always trying to plan my next step. I studied literature at college, got my degree and was thinking about teaching. When I lost Charlie though, it made me realise that it's about making each day important, because you never know when they're going to stop."

"Is that why you and Alice do the special cupcakes and chalkboard quotes every day?"

She nodded, and some hair fell across her face. Edward watched as she hooked the strands with her fingers and tucked them back behind her ears, the movement setting the glass cherries at her ears dancing.

"It might only be a small thing, but it's my way of celebrating each day."

"I think it's beautiful," Edward replied. *Just like you.*

The day was drawing to a close by the time Edward and Bella began to make their way out of the park. They both walked at an easy pace, holding hands and talking with an easy intimacy. What had begun as a friendship was fast becoming something more, a fact the two of them were aware of. Neither of them felt compelled to rush into anything, and their mutual exploration of each other's personalities added to the pleasure of anticipation.

\* \* \* \* \*

*This is going to be good.*

Alice let herself in to her apartment and kicked the door closed. Finally the opportunity had presented itself, she'd known that Bella would come around in time, but the waiting had been a source of frustration. She dumped her bag on the sofa and headed straight for the stack of suitcases that held her treasures.

She took the neat stack apart, then knelt on the floor as she flicked each of them open. She surveyed the contents with a smile of satisfaction, and then got to her feet. She crossed to her wardrobe and began to peel off her clothes, pulling on an old pair of sweats and a ratty t-shirt that she never allowed to see the light of day outside of the apartment. It was going to be a long night, and she felt a buzz of anticipation at the prospect of the work that lay ahead.

She poured herself a glass of soda water and added a slice of lemon, set it down on the table and then hauled out her sewing machine. After her initial suggestion to Bella some months before, she'd already made a start. She would be able to get things ready soon enough, but now Angela had joined the team she'd have to design something else.

Once the sewing machine had been plugged in and set up to her liking, Alice got back down on the floor and sat cross-legged. She grabbed the TV remote and flicked it on for some background noise, humming as she turned her mind to the evening ahead. She began to pull out swatches of fabric and ribbon, spreading them over her lap and across the floor. Her eyes squinted in thought as she selected and discarded the colourful, silky shapes in a rapid process that appeared random, but for her pursed lips and carefully drawn sketches in the notepad beside her. Satisfied at last, she reached for her box of pearl-headed pins and set to work, humming contentedly to herself.

If Jasper had thought she was interesting to watch in the bakery, he would have marvelled at her now. Her hands flickered across the fabric, pinning and adjusting with a confidence that bespoke a mastery of the craft. Gone now was the happy-go-lucky attitude she presented to the customers of *Take the Cake*, and in its place was a fierce attitude of concentration. The tip of her tongue appeared from time to time as she adjusted swatches, humming with pleasure as she held out the samples from time to time to get a better look at them. Her hands darted back and forth from pin to fabric, and as the piece took shape beneath her hands, she began to smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emmett had reached the night safe and carefully deposited the day's takings. He double-checked to make sure the bags had fallen through the chute, then stuffed the bag into his backpack and turned to make his way back towards his apartment in the Lower East Side.

He was glad he'd stopped by. The coasters had caught his eye immediately and he'd known Bella would be pleased. He shook his head at her eclectic magpie taste, then his expression grew thoughtful as a random word association of foxes and long rippling blonde hair flitted through his mind's eye.

He'd been planning to catch up with a couple of friends from work for a drink on Friday, but the inducement of seeing the goddess again had him rethinking his plans. It was also a good thing, he reasoned, to see more of his sister. Maybe he'd give her a call again this week, see what she was up to of an evening.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella and Edward had reached her apartment, and stood at the foot of the stairs that led to the front door of the building.

"Here you are, safe and sound," Edward commented as they drew to a halt.

"Thanks," Bella smiled, "I enjoyed our walk, it was a great way to finish the day."

"Maybe we could do it again sometime?" Edward asked, raising an eyebrow with a slight smile, enjoying the flush of colour that the fresh air had brought to her cheeks.

"That'd be nice," Bella replied.

Now she was confused. It hadn't been a date, but they had just spent a couple of hours together, walking, talking and taking in the sights that the park and the city had to offer. Should she invite him upstairs? Would he say yes? What if he said no? She bit her lip in confusion, looking up when Edward began to speak.

"So, I guess this is the part where I leave you to enjoy your evening," Edward said, twining their fingers together and giving her a gentle tug to bring her a step closer towards him.

"Something like that," she agreed.

"It seems a shame though, to let you go without wishing you a goodnight," he breathed.

"Well, when you put it that way," she said, pretending to give the suggestion careful consideration, "it seems only fair that we end on a good note."

Edward dipped his head towards hers, and Bella noticed just before her eyes fluttered closed that they were both smiling. The kiss was soft and sweet. Their lips met and broke apart, returning again and again. Bella felt the tip of Edward's tongue brush gently against her lips, and she parted them slightly to allow him access. He tasted her carefully, breaking away and resting his forehead against hers for a moment before straightening.

"Good night, Bella," he said, reaching up to brush her hair off her face.

"And to you," she replied, her eyes drowsy. With a slight effort, she moved to walk up the stairs, pausing at the top to look back and wave.

Edward waved back, then stuck his hands in his pockets and watched her let herself inside, then turned to make his way home. As pleasurable as the afternoon had been, Saturday still felt too far away. He was going to have to visit the bakery again during the week.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella closed her door with a sigh, and reached up to run her fingertips over her lips. She could still taste his kiss.

She put down her handbag and took out her earrings, dropping the cherries with a clink into the teacup and drifted towards the bedroom to change. She glanced at the kitchen and wondered what to cook for dinner, but kept walking into the bedroom, peeling off her t-shirt as she went. She felt in a dreamy mood.

Saturday was too far way, she hoped she'd see him again before that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jasper flicked the last page onto the pile in front of him and reached for his glass of wine. He'd been comparing and contrasting the offers, but couldn't discern any pattern that would give him a clue as to which path to take. He'd finished work early that afternoon, and had come home to read and review his prospects. He swirled his glass, watching the red wine slosh around in the glass bowl, turning the stem in his fingers and holding it up to the light. The red wine gleamed, and he took an appreciative sniff before sipping it again. It was good.

His gaze flickered back to the papers. The offers were very tempting. He'd turned his back on that life, but now it had come back and enticed him at a time when his motivation was low. Was he taking the easy way out, or would it prove to be the right decision? He wished he knew. He gave a wry smile, wishing for a moment that he could see in the future and know that the decision he made would be the right one.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice rolled her head, closing her eyes as her neck clicked. She leaned back and surveyed the freshly sewn pieces, nodding to herself. She could see the patterns all coming together, and hoped the outcome would be as she could see it in her mind's eye.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella wandered into the kitchen, reaching under her t-shirt to scratch at her midriff as she opened the fridge. She felt restless now that she was at home she wanted something a little different. She foraged amongst the contents, frowning to herself as she selected a few ingredients and random, then her face brightened as inspiration struck.

She filled a saucepan with water and put it on the stovetop to boil, then began to chop up some smoked salmon. When the water boiled, she threw in a couple of handfuls of pasta and stirred it a few times, then leaned with her hip against the kitchen cupboards, arms folded as she thought about the conversation in the park.

She'd been surprised when Edward had coaxed the memory of Charlie out of her. The anniversary of his death had come and gone in recent weeks, so perhaps it was no wonder that he kept bubbling into her mind's eye.



She began to hum to herself, "Lucy knows this guy with lions," she sang in a quiet voice, a sad smile on her face. "Oh, Charlie," she sighed. She wished he could have seen the success her bakery had become. She wished he was still around to see the heart family of friends she had surrounded herself with. People like Alice and Jacob.

And Edward.

She wondered what Charlie would have thought of him.

Edward was a friend, or at least he had begun as such. Now she could feel herself standing on the precipice of something more. Something wonderful.

\* \* \* \* \*

The words were bubbling in Edward's mind as he unlocked his front door and strode into the apartment, kicking the door closed behind him.

Edward threw his keys onto the table and reached for the phone. He was an indifferent cook at best, and had his favourite Chinese takeout on speed dial. It was the work of a moment to place his order, and then he strode into the living room towards his desk to boot up his laptop.

He felt energised, and eager to write. Again, he had no clear structure in mind, but he knew once he gave the words access to the page they'd settle and grow, and flourishing beneath his fingertips.

It was an entirely new writing process for him.

It was something wonderful.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella stirred the smoked salmon into the cream and pasta, and chopped up some mushrooms to throw into the pot as well. A pinch of fresh fennel from her kitchen window garden, and then she threw in a splash of white wine. She gave the bottle a considering gaze, and then got out a glass and poured some for herself: no reason why the salmon should be the only one to have all the fun. She sipped the wine and stirred the wine, visions of Edward and Charlie swimming through her mind's eye.

There was a lot yet to learn about Edward, but she had a feeling Charlie would have approved at their mutually careful approach. She remembered some advice Charlie had given her, and her smile dipped for a moment. The cream began to bubble as the salmon danced across the surface, and she picked up the wooden spoon to stir, hoping for some distraction, but the memory once unlocked, unravelled and began to play.

"Bells," her father had begun, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand, a sure sign he was nervous. Bella looked at him, waiting for him to speak, "you know that since your mother passed we've never really spoken much."

"We said what's been needed to be said, Charlie," Bella said in a gentle voice. It was true enough. Whilst Charlie had never been big on conversation, since Renee's passing, the three remaining members of the family: Charlie,

Emmett and Bella had always made sure to voice 'I love you' whenever they could. Charlie might have been of the 'if you don't have anything to say, keep your trap shut' school, but when he spoke, they were words that stuck in the heart.

"Well just give an old cop a chance here," Charlie smiled. "I don't know what I'll do at retirement, hell, I might not even make it that far," he joked, pausing when Bella's face went white, "life can be long or short, but it's the quality of the hours in between, you know that, right?"

"Right," Bella had agreed, wondering where the conversation was going.

"I just," he paused, then started again, "I just wanted to pass on one bit of advice. It's what my Dad told me, and the old man was right, so I figure it might do my kids some good as well." He reached out and took Bella's hand, holding it between his own, rubbing the back of her hand with his thumb. His hands were warm and calloused, and smelled slightly of a curious combination of gun oil and fish. "When you do meet the right man and you want to make a life together, make sure you're friends into the bargain."

Bella had raised an eyebrow at that.

"No," Charlie patted her hand for emphasis, "hear me out. All that romantic stuff, and the ... uh," his ears had turned pink at this, "the other side of things," he squinted at her to make sure she was following what he was too embarrassed to voice to his baby girl, and at Bella's amused nod had continued with a slight sigh of relief. "You know," he said in a gruff tone, "that stuff don't always last. Passion can wax and wane, but a good intimate friendship will just keep getting better with age."

"Is that what you and Renee had?" Bella had asked, leaning forward slightly.

Charlie gave a wry grin, his gaze turning inward to the past. "Oh yeah, hell once I met that woman I knew my life was never going to be the same." He gave Bella a wink, "Renee and I loved each other hard for over 20 years, mind you," he went on, "we fought just as hard too."

He reached up and stroked his moustache with a reminiscent smile on his face until he remembered Bella was sitting quietly with him at the table. He cleared his throat. "Just promise me you'll remember that, Bells. Any good relationship has friendship at the core."

"Sure thing, Dad," Bella had replied, a little puzzled at Charlie's quiet insistence. "Have you had this talk with Em?"

"Yup," Charlie had subsided at that, reaching for his beer and took a swig. "My old man told me I'd know when the time was right to pass the advice on. Seems to me that today was the day."

Charlie gave her a small smile and sipped at his beer again, clearly uncomfortable with the sombre conversation. Bella gave him a smile in return, and then reached over to give him a kiss and a hug.

"Love you, Dad," she whispered in his ear.

"Love you too, Bells. Always. You remember that."

He was dead a week later.

Bella sighed as she remembered his words, wiping her eyes against the sudden moisture and telling herself that it was from the cracked pepper she was adding to the dish. She didn't like feeling maudlin, and knew that even Charlie would be shaking his head at her if he could see her now. And anyway, there was plenty in her life to smile about these days. More so now that she had met Edward.

She smiled as she thought of his gentle smile, and the way his copper hair had ruffled in the breeze as they'd walked. The wind had blown the scent of his aftershave around her in delightful clouds, and the combination of that with the touch of his hand, brush of his lips and the comfort of his arm around her shoulder had left her with a sense memory that made her feel warm.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward drew in a sharp breath as the chilli hit his tastebuds, and scooped some steamed rice into his mouth to try and cool the burn. He chewed and swallowed with caution, wiping his eyes as they began to water. He hadn't eaten spicy food for a while, and now his tastebuds were going into overdrive, protesting at the sudden abuse. Getting adventurous now and then seemed to come with a price.

As his mouth began to cool, he stirred some rice into the other container, hoping to reduce the chilli effect for the next mouthful. Just because the first taste of adventure was a shock it didn't mean that he wasn't keen to go back for more.

He sat cross-legged on his sofa, picking at his takeaway containers and squinting at his laptop that he had set up on the coffee table. After ordering he had started to write. The food had been delivered, and he had absently paid for it and gone straight back to work. By the time he realised he was hungry, his meal had long gone cold and he had to reheat it in the microwave. Now he was re-reading what he had been working on during the week. He still had no clear sense of what he was hoping to achieve, but found that the mere act of writing again was more soothing than he had ever given it credit for. Perhaps if he gave his words some more structure ...

Twisting on the sofa, he peered across at his desk. He could see a stack of blank index cards that hadn't been touched in weeks. For years now they'd been an integral component of his writing, and yet this time he'd started work without even giving them a moment's thought. Dropping the fork back into one of the containers, he set it down on the coffee table and uncoiled himself to walk over and pick them up, along with a pen.

He made his way back to the laptop in a thoughtful mood, turning the cards over and over in his hands. Sitting down again, he stared into space, the pen poised over the top card on the pack. Words flitted through his head, possibilities, characters, plot devices, and yet none of them held any appeal. He sighed and flicked the pen towards the table, not caring as it skittered across the surface and over the edge, landing silently on the rug. The cards followed, spraying in a graceful arc across the wood grain of the table.

Edward leaned forward and snagged a container towards him, and then retrieved his fork and began to eat. He chewed slowly, staring at the cards on the table. Indexing and mapping out his characters and storylines had always been his style. Meticulous planning and attention to detail were his trademark, and yet this time it seemed his well honed habits were going to languish in a corner somewhere. His writing this time around seemed to be far more organic, evolving and developing into something unexpected.

Edward wasn't used to dealing with unexpected, but he had a feeling he was going to like it.

He scooped some more take-out into his mouth and chewed with relish. He'd gotten used to the burn now, and it was good.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice gave a jaw-popping yawn and rubbed eyes that were burning with fatigue. She stood up from the table and stretched her arms towards the ceiling, standing up on tiptoe as she felt her muscles stretch and pop. She needed a shower, and she needed bed. Of course, someone waiting for her in bed would be nice too, but she couldn't have it all. She sat back down at the table and pulled the finished garment towards her, then picked up her scissors and carefully snipped off the dangling threads at the end of the stitching.

She'd done it. A bit of foresight and planning, and she'd been good to go as soon as Bella had given her the green light. Of course, she could have taken her time, but she had been carrying such a clear vision of what she wanted to achieve that she had been impatient to see the finished product. She looked at the three garments and frowned.

They were good. Gorgeous even, but she knew she could do better. She shook her head and stood, gathering the garments with gentle, loving hands, and draped them over the back of the sofa. Bella was going to love them, and the next ones she made would be even better.

She looked at her watch as she yawned, and peeled off her t-shirt as she walked towards the bathroom. Standing under the warm spray, she let her eyes drift shut as she let the water soothe the ache that had come from sitting hunched at her sewing machine all evening. Towelling herself dry, she pulled on clean underwear and a t-shirt filched from one of her conquests and crawled into bed. She checked her mobile phone to assure herself that the alarm clock was set, and then scrolled through the ipod that sat in its speaker dock on the bedside table. She found the playlist she wanted and clicked the button. Alice reached around behind her and pulled a pillow up snug behind her back, and then wrapped her arms around another. Surrounded and comforted, she closed her eyes. Soon the tiny bedroom was filled with the soothing sound of falling rain.

\* \* \* \* \*

"When it rains, it pours," Jasper muttered to himself and took a swig of his beer. He'd gone from feeling pedestrian in his job to suddenly juggling three very different career path offers. He'd made his decision, and was now making his head around the changes that would soon follow. He looked around his apartment, looking at the stylish furniture and artful prints on the walls. Everything looked well worn and cared for, in particular the collection of guitars that stood on stands and hung on the walls. He thought about strumming a few riffs, but a quick glance at his watch dispelled that idea soon enough. He liked his neighbours, and wanted to ensure that they liked him as well.

Eyeing the guitars with regret, he stood up and chugged back the last of the beer, then put the bottle in the kitchen trashcan. A shower before bed would settle his mind. He made his way towards the bathroom, flicking off lights as he went, shutting down the apartment for the night. He left the bathroom light off, but turned the overhead fan on, standing under the warm shower spray in the darkness.

He was so tired he leaned against the wall of the shower recess, and then flinched away from the cold tiles. After a while he turned off the water and got out, towelling himself off while his eyes struggled to stay open. Giving up on clothes, he crawled naked into bed. He fumbled with his ipod dock and queued up the playlist that he knew would help him get a restful night's sleep.

Rolling onto his back, he stared up at the ceiling, closing his eyes as the sound of falling rain began to fill up the room. Options flittered through his mind before he gave a heavy sigh and concentrated on the sound of the rain. After a while, his breathing evened into a slow, deep rhythm.

The rain continued to fall.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Morning, Boss," Alice yawned.

"Alice, don't call me Boss," Bella answered as she unlocked the door. She shot Alice a sidelong look as she opened the door and stood aside to let her enter. "You okay?"

"Sorry, Boss," Alice gave a jaw-popping yawn again, "just get me caffeinated and I'll be fine."

Bella watched as Alice disappeared into the kitchen to hang up her coat and bag, and then reappeared to lug the chalkboard outside. Bella shed her coat and bag as well, and then switched on the coffee machine. She was waiting for it to warm up when Alice stumbled back through the store, almost sleepwalking.

"Did you get any sleep last night?" Bella asked in concern.

"Sure," Alice yawned again, "but I was up late working on some gear for the store, and watching a bit of TV."

"Right," Bella said in amazement, "as you do. What was on?"

"A documentary about Woodstock," Alice answered as she collected the glass jugs from a shelf behind the counter and filling them up with water from the tap. "Free love in the sixties might have sounded like fun, but it came with a price."

"Oh, really?" Bella started to froth some milk, and after a considered gaze at Alice, got out a grande sized cup for her. Alice really looked like she needed all the caffeine she could get.

Alice wandered inside, ruffling up her hair with one hand as she plinked the chalk into the teacup by the till, then slumped against the counter as she waited for Bella to finish the coffees. They both looked up at a whoop of laughter from outside, and smiled as Angela giggled her way past the chalkboard and into the store.

"Okay, Alice," she said as she reached the counter, "I have to ask. How on earth did you think that one up?"

Alice grinned. "I was just telling Bella that I watched a show about Woodstock last night."

"Ah," Angela nodded, "that explains it then."

"Right, now I have to see for myself," Bella said, setting down the milk jug and, against Alice's protests, walked outside. She had to smile when she read Alice's artful scrawl.

*When you give freely of yourself, your reward might be a serious case of crabs.*

Bella laughed and shook her head, wagging an admonishing finger at Alice, "And this," she said, "is why we're not uptown."

"And it's why you love me," Alice replied, poking her tongue out, "now finish making my coffee, Woman!"

"Yes'm," Bella drawled as she made her way back to the machine. She smiled to herself as she poured the foamy milk into their cups, and the three of them took a quick break to enjoy their morning ritual.

"So what's the special going to be today?" Angela asked.

"I've been thinking of a few variations," Bella replied, "but Alice's little effort out there has just bumped one to the front of the queue."

Alice tried to look modest, "just doing my bit to help," she answered, and then straightened up as a thought hit her. "Fuck, I must be more tired than I thought, I forgot to show you the pretties."

Bella and Angela exchanged a baffled look.

"The what?" Bella said.

"Stay there," Alice instructed, and disappeared into the kitchen, reappearing with a brown paper carry bag, which she set down on one of the tables and pulled out three flat packages that had been wrapped with black tissue paper.

"Alice," Bella began, "what have you been up to?"

"Nothing that you hadn't given me permission to do," Alice replied with a wide-eyed look.

"But we only had that conversation *yesterday*," Bella objected, "you can't have done them already."

Alice stopped unpacking and stood with an exasperated hand on one hip. "I could if I started them back when we first started talking about it."

Bella regarded Alice with an amused expression. "That sure of yourself, huh?"

"Something like that," Alice shrugged, "now check these out and prepare to fall in love." She looked on as Angela began to pick at the package Alice had handed her, with careful fingers. "Ange," she sighed, "it's *tissue* paper, you're meant to rip the shit out of it."

"Oh," Angela replied, "well in that case," she ripped the parcel apart with both hands, and Bella followed suit.

There was a long silence, broken only when Alice huffed out the breath she had been holding. "Will one of you saysomething?"

"Alice," Bella began, and then stopped and swallowed, "I don't know what to say, they're-,"

"Beautiful," Angela supplied.

Bella gave a mute nod, her throat suddenly tight. The colours of the fabric blazed against the black tissue paper. She reached in and pulled the garment out with reverent hands, holding it up to inspect it closer.

It was an apron, the likes of which she had never seen before. It was made of sturdy black cotton, but that was where the practicality ended. Alice had sewn a patchwork of Chinese brocades, ribbons and braids in a multi-hued pattern that sang to the eyes. Bella glanced over to see Angela regarding hers with an expression of awe, and knew that her face must mirror the other woman's expression.

"They might look delicate," Alice broke in, "but they're machine washable, like you wanted, and look," she stepped towards Bella and pulled out a smaller package, "yours is a bit different." Opening the bundle, she revealed a sheet of soft, clear plastic that affixed over the apron panel by way of a series of clear press-studs. "There you go, so anything will wipe off." She gave Bella an anxious look. "Have I done good?"

Bella looped the apron over her head and tied it around her waist, then swept Alice into a tight hug. "You've done good, kiddo," she said in a muffled voice, "I love them."

"I need to get in on that action too," Angela chimed in, insinuating herself for a group hug.

When they broke apart, Bella and Alice both sniffed a little and then laughed at their foolishness.

"You really like them?" Alice asked again.

Bella gave her a sigh of amused exasperation. "Alice, if we don't start wearing them, I'll have them framed and hung up instead because they're works of art."

Angela nodded in happy agreement, and Alice beamed.

"Now," Bella looked at her watch, "I've gotta get baking."

"Speaking of which," Alice said, "what was it about the chalkboard quote that gave you the cupcake idea?"

"You'll find out."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You know I'm capable of being a patient man, but you're going to have to tell me sooner rather than later."

"I know, Marcus," Edward replied, "but I don't really know what it is myself, so how the hell can I describe it to you?"

"Interesting point," Marcus conceded.

Edward leaned forward and rested his elbows on his desk as he listened to Marcus. The phone calls from his Editor were fewer these days, but all the same, he knew that the publishers were going to want something soon.

He'd woken refreshed after another night of solid sleep. It hadn't escaped his notice that his words had returned and taken the place of his insomnia. The nights he slept the best were inevitably the days that he'd seen Bella. He'd gone for his morning job through the park, past the bench where they had sat together. Today he'd taken a different route, stopping in at the large dog run. He'd stood leaning against the fence watching the dogs run and play together. Some of the more inquisitive ones had trotted up to the fence and sniffed at his hand, allowing a quick pat. Bella had been right, the unconditional acceptance and enjoyment of the day seemed to rub off. He had jogged home, feeling more awake than he had in a long time.

"Look," Edward suggested after a while, "why don't I send you the first few chapters of what I've done, and you can see if you can make any sense of it."

There was a startled pause.

"Did you say chapters? As in *plural*?" Marcus asked.

"Yes," Edward couldn't help but smile at the careful way Marcus posed the question.

"What, uh," Marcus cleared his throat, "how many words are we talking about here?"

Edward flicked a glance towards his laptop. "Last time I checked, about fifty thousand, give or take."

"Right," Marcus replied, sounding a little hoarse this time. "Okay, Edward, if you're comfortable letting me have a look, then I'd love to see it."

"Okay, give me a minute and I'll send it through," Edward replied, tapping the spacebar on the laptop to active it from sleep mode, and jammed the phone between his ear and chin as he began to type.

"You're sending it now?"

"No time like the present."

"Edward," Marcus said, "I have no idea what changed in your life recently, but keep it up."

A vision of Bella flashed into Edward's mind. "I plan to."

\* \* \* \* \*



Jasper had set out with a plan, and yet despite his well thought out intentions for the day, he found himself pacing the sidewalk across the street from the bakery. He jammed his hands into his pockets and scuffed his shoes on the pavement while he thought.

He'd made his career decision, and now it was time for the other one that he had been considering. He looked over at the bakery, squinting as he saw movement again. He thought he caught a glimpse of her dark head as she bent over at a table to collect a cup, and then she moved towards the back of the store.

Jasper sighed and looked down at his feet, scuffing again. Finally he looked up, and set his jaw.

"Fuck it," he muttered, and set off across the street. He'd had enough indecision in the last month to last him a lifetime. He knew what he wanted now.

As he reached the door to the bakery his gaze flickered across to the chalkboard, and he grinned at the phrase before stepping inside. He took a moment to orient himself, and looked at the counter to see where she was.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, isn't that the guy that's been in here with the Lion King?" Angela asked with a nudge as she passed.

Alice looked up from her task, snorting when she saw who had come in. "Yeah, it's Mr Wonderful," she answered in a dismissive tone, bending over the cups to pour in the milk and then traced a quick pattern in the milk froth.

Angela watched as Jasper approached the counter, his gaze rarely shifting from Alice who seemed to be going to great lengths to avoid acknowledging his presence. "I dunno, Alice. Seems to me you might want to think about cutting him a little slack."

"Whatever," Alice straightened and picked up the saucers, "but for now I'm busy."

Jasper reached the counter just as Alice slid away and carried her order out towards her waiting customers, a bright efficient smile on her face. He watched her go, and then turned to Angela who gave him a sympathetic smile.

"Give her time," Angela suggested, startling Jasper.

"You knew?"

Angela looked over at Alice who had paused at the table for some conversation with some customers. It seemed that as long as Jasper stood at the counter she wasn't in any hurry to come back. Angela pursed her lips and watched her. It wasn't like Alice to run away from something. Or someone. She fixed Jasper with a measuring gaze.

"You be gentle," she cautioned him.

"I always am, but how did you know?" he said, confused.

"You're not the only one paying attention around here," Angela replied. "Now, what can I get you?"

Jasper had thought any further than seeing Alice again, and now he floundered. He looked around and then gave Angela a hopeful look. "What do you recommend?"

"Well, there's always the cupcake of the day," Angela suggested.

"Which is?" he asked.

Angela inclined her head towards the small chalkboard that sat on a brass easel. Jasper followed her gaze and read the name, then gave a short laugh.

*Woodstock Afterburn: Spicy Chilli Chocolate Temptations.*

"You've talked me into it," he said with a grin, then remembered the quote outside, "but hold the crabs."

"Done," Angela winked. "Now you go take a seat and we'll be right over."

Jasper made his way to an empty table, feeling confused. What the hell was it with this store? First Edward had fallen under its spell, and now he was back here again, watching the small dark headed woman with the bird-like eyes and quick smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella finished piping the latest batch of cupcakes, cleaned up after herself and carried the tray outside. She was setting them down in the display cabinet when she looked out into the store and saw Jasper's familiar blonde hair. She straightened up and looked around for Edward.

"No, honey, he's not here," Angela supplied.

"Oh," Bella tried not to look disappointed.

"But if he's here, maybe Edward isn't too far away."

"Maybe," Bella answered. After last night, she'd had a sleep that had been filled with sweet dreams, and she'd walked to work singing along to her ipod under her breath. Just thinking about Edward made her raise a thoughtful hand to her mouth to brush her fingertips over her lips. She really wanted to see Edward soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Alice," Angela called.

"Yeah, babe?" Alice said in an absent tone. She was slicing lemons to add to the water jugs. She'd made it a point to keep herself occupied with small tasks that kept her behind the counter.

"We're getting low on cups, you mind checking out front?"

"Kinda busy here, Angela," Alice replied.

"Really? Looks like you're hiding to me," Angela said. Alice shot her a disgruntled look, then silently picked up a large plastic tub and hitched it onto her hip, stalking out to the front of the store to clear tables. "Atta girl," Angela replied with a slight smile.

Alice worked her way through the tables, leaving Jasper's until last for a faster getaway back to the sanctuary of the counter. She reached for his cup and saucer, and added them to the tub without making eye contact.

Jasper watched her and then cleared his throat. "So," Jasper said, "I take it you and the Boss get along?"

"She's the best," Alice answered, picking up his plate and adding it to the plastic tub she balanced on her hip.

"So I see, you've put it out there so it's obvious she's good to work for."

"Huh?"

Jasper pointed to Alice's apron, then over to where Bella was serving behind the counter. "She's earth, the other one," he indicated Angela who was walking back from delivering a coffee, "is water, so she must be easy-going as well," then he turned back to Alice, "which makes yours wind." He gave her a pleased smile, "Am I right?"

Alice stared at him, dumbfounded.

"What?" he said under the weight of her scrutiny.

"You're the only one that's picked up on that," she said, choosing her words with care, "it's ... unexpected."

"What's the big surprise?" Jasper waved a hand at her apron again, "the patterns are obvious if you look." He glanced again at Alice's apron. The brocades shimmered as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. The patterns swirled in tones of blue, silver and grey, coiling swirls and then stronger gusts that danced and buffeted against each other. Silver ribbons fluttered slightly in the breeze that wafted into the store from outside.

"Maybe I just didn't think you seemed the type to notice," she admitted at last.

Jasper leaned back in his chair with lazy grace and regarded her with amusement. "I think you'll find I always pay attention."

"Really." Alice was intrigued, despite herself.

"Oh yes," Jasper leaned forward again and in a quick movement plucked at a ribbon that floated off the hem, tugging at it in a way that had her taking an involuntary step towards him. "I often take in the details of beautiful things, particularly when they don't know that they're on display."

Alice regarded him for a moment, wondering why she was indulging him. He wasn't her usual type at all, and his self-assuredness made her feel as if she was charting unfamiliar waters. Used to having the upper hand, she realised he made her feel unsettled. She wasn't used to that at all, and she wasn't sure if she liked it, but felt compelled to stay nonetheless.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella wandered out of the kitchen and saw Angela standing quiet, watching the front of the store.

"Whacha doin'?" she asked, and was surprised to see Angela shush her to silence. She walked over to where Angela was standing, and saw Alice and Jasper talking. Jasper reached out and tugged at a ribbon on Alice's apron, making her step forward. Alice hesitated, and then put down the plastic tub and pulled out a chair.

"Works every time," Angela said in tones of quiet satisfaction.

"What does?" Bella asked, not taking her eyes off the duo.

Angela gave her a quick look and then resumed her gaze. "I've worked in a few bars here and there. It's the oldest trick in the book. Take two regulars, mix them together, and let them stew."

"Really?"

"It never fails," replied Angela. "You wait, it won't be long now."

"It might take Alice a while to realise that though," Bella commented.

"She's a smart girl," Angela said. "She'll get there if Mr Wonderful is patient."

"Mr Wonderful? Is that what you call him?"

Angela gave her a droll look. "No, that's Alice's name for him. Thing is," Angela glanced back at Jasper, "she was being ironic, but it turns out she might be right."

"Angela, you're an interesting woman," Bella said after a moment.

"I know. Modest, too."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was with some regret that Bella watched Alice carry the chalkboard inside, lean it against the wall and then flip the window sign to *Closed* and pull the door shut. Edward hadn't come in after all. She gave a quiet sigh, and then went back to taking the remaining cupcakes out of the cabinet, putting some aside for Angela to take home as she'd requested.

The three of them made short work of cleaning up. Bella counted up the takings and bagged it up, throwing the bag into the small safe that she'd had built into one of the kitchen cupboards. She'd drop it off at the night safe later in the week, staggering the drop off day as she'd mentioned to Emmett.

"So I guess we'll head off," Alice appeared in the kitchen doorway, "see you tomorrow."

"I'll be here," Bella smiled. "Did you have a nice chat with Edward's friend?"

"Jasper," Alice supplied, standing awkwardly in the doorway as she mentioned his name, "uh ... it was ... interesting, I guess."

"Interesting can be good," Bella agreed, "He seems like a nice guy."

"Yeah, well we'll see," Alice said in a carefully dismissive tone."

"Mmm-hmm," Bella smiled.

Alice narrowed her eyes, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Bella said. "You go have a nice night."

"Yeah, you too."

Bella was shrugging on her coat when a barrage of rapping on the front window brought her to the doorway. Alice was standing with her face up to the glass. When she saw Bella, she gave her a happy thumbs-up, and then went on her way. Bella stood there for a moment, baffled, and then went back into the kitchen to collect her bag.

When she opened the door to leave, she saw what Alice had looked so happy about.

Edward.

He was leaning against the wall, hands in pockets as he gave her an easy smile. The breeze ruffled his hair, blowing his scent towards her.

He was there. For her.

"Hey," he smiled.

"Hey yourself," she answered, not bothering to hide her broad smile of delight. "What are you doing here?"

He shrugged, then straightened up and took a step towards her and waited as she pulled the door closed and locked it behind her, then pulled down the rollup security door and locked it, tugging it to make sure it was secure. "I thought I'd walk you home again."

She straightened up and smiled at him, biting her lip for a moment as she took a step closer.

"Plus of course, I'm being greedy. I've been thinking about you all day."

"Well, if we're playing true confessions, I've been thinking about you today too."

"Really?" he was pleased, "what about?"

"Oh, you know," Bella looked up at him through her lashes, and then dropped her gaze to his chest, fighting and failing to keep the flood of colour to her cheeks.

Edward reached up to put his finger under her chin to draw her gaze back up to his. "I think I can guess," he said, "what it ... this?" He dipped his head towards hers and gave her a soft kiss. They drew apart a fraction, and looked at each other. Bella nodded, and Edward smiled before leaning down to kiss her again.

Bella closed her eyes and stepped closer still, until her chest was pressed up against his, feeling a rush of pleasure as Edward wrapped his arms around her to hold her close while their mouths explored each other's.

They broke apart and regarded each other. "I don't know about you," Edward admitted, "but Saturday is just too damn far away for my liking."

"I'll second that," Bella replied. "But if it'd make you feel better, you can keep kissing me."

Edward's mouth twisted into a grin. "You'd let me do that?"

"Just trying to help the situation is all," Bella said with a smile, dropping her eyes to his lips.

"I think I'll take you up on that offer," Edward said, and leaned down to kiss her again. This time he reached up a hand to cup her head against his lips, stroking his thumb against her throat. She gave a small hum of pleasure and ran her hands up his arms to hold him closer still.

They stood underneath the canopy of the store, kissing for a few minutes more before breaking apart with a quiet laugh.

"Come on," Edward said, giving her another quick kiss. "Let's get you home." He looped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. He'd ended up working most of the afternoon, and when he realised the time had all but rushed out of his apartment to get to the bakery, hoping to catch her before she left for the day. Alice had stopped short when she'd seen him quietly waiting, and he'd held a finger to his lips for quiet. The look on Bella's face when she'd seen him had been worth the haste.

Bella felt a rush of pleasure at Edward's words, and settled her bag into a comfortable position on her shoulder. The weight and warmth of Edward's arm around her felt good, and she smiled up at him as they began to walk.

"So, how was your day?" he asked, glancing down at her as she began to speak, looking forward to her words.

Soon they were lost in each other, and then they were lost in the afternoon crowd.

## Ch10 The Fox and the Bear

"Morning, Boss."

"Alice, don't call me Boss," Bella chided. She wasn't going to admit it, but the morning banter with Alice always made her smile. When she first realised she was going to need staff, it had taken a while for her to get her head around being an employer. The fact that Alice made a game of it had made the assimilation process much easier for the two of them.

"Sorry, Boss," Alice said, waiting for Bella to unlock the door.

"Have you got a quote for the day yet?"

"Getting there," Alice replied. She was considering a few options that had sprung to mind on her way to work. "Have you ever noticed how office workers look?"

"Huh?" Bella looked up at her as she opened the door and ushered her inside. "Can't say that I have, why?"

"Most of them wear black."

"Well I guess it's a serviceable colour, it goes with everything," Bella said, flicking on the coffee machine and heading through to the kitchen to put her bag away. Alice followed, still talking.

"I know, but c'mon, a bit of colour here and there wouldn't kill them. You look next time you're at the lights. They all look like a big flock of crows."

"Murder," Bella replied absently.

"What?" Alice looked puzzled.

"They're called a Murder of Crows. You know, like a Pride of Lions," Bella explained as she got out a couple of cups, then smiled and waved as she got out a third. Angela had just arrived.

"Hey guys," Angela said as she walked past. Bella and Alice chorused a greeting in return.

"Pride of Lions, huh?" Alice said with a speculative glint in her eye. "Speaking of which, how's Edward?"

"Good, he's good," Bella replied, as she became very focussed on the task at hand, so that she could avoid Alice's gaze.

Edward had stopped by the bakery once more during the week for lunch, but had turned up twice more at closing time to walk Bella home. Although Bella was quite used to walking home alone, the days when Edward hadn't been waiting for her gave her a slight pang, and she was aware of the lack of his presence more than she was ready to admit. He never assumed he didn't have plans, and told her in advance when he would be there, and even when he wasn't expected she found herself watching for him all the same.

"Tomorrow night's the night, huh?" Alice continued, smirking as she saw the telltale show of colour on Bella's neck.

"Mmm," Bella replied in what she hoped was a casual tone. She poured the coffee into their cups and spooned on some extra milk froth. Angela appeared, and they toasted each other before taking their first sip of the day.

"Oh that's good," Angela sighed in appreciation, "I swear this job is turning me into a cake and coffee addict."

"Right there with ya, babe," Alice replied, then glanced back at Bella, "So what's today's special?"

"Depends, I've got a couple mind, but what's your quote of the day going to be?"

Alice thought for a moment. "I think we'll go with *Remember you're unique, just like everybody else.*"

"Oh I *like* that one," Angela gave a happy endorsement as Alice picked up the chalk and walked around the counter.

"Of course, I could come up with a lovey-dovey quote, but maybe I'll save that for tomorrow," Alice said over her shoulder as she headed towards the door.

"Thanks, no pressure or anything," Bella called after Alice, who blew her an unrepentant raspberry as she carried the chalkboard outside.

Angela and Bella regarded each other over their cups. "Don't you start," Bella warned.

"I wasn't even thinking of it," Angela countered. "Besides, Alice is all smug now, but she's next."

"Good," Bella replied, "it'll be fun when it's not me in the spotlight."

Alice returned, "Right, so that's done. What's the cupcake going to be?"

"Let's go with *Nothing Beets You Baby*, chocolate beet cupcake with chocolate ganache frosting."

"Nice," Alice commented, scribbling on the smaller chalkboard and setting it on the counter. "Now on to more important things, what are you going to wear tonight?"

Bella had taken her apron down from its hook in the kitchen and was tying it up at the back, giving herself a bit of time to think. "I haven't thought it through yet." Alice looked at her, aghast. "What?" Bella said in a defensive tone, "I haven't had a chance to think about it."



She was lying. Bella had been thinking about the date all week, although it was safe to say that her thoughts had been wrapped up in Edward, rather than what clothes she happened to be wearing at the time.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you," Alice said in apparently despair.

"Maybe you could pick on someone else?" Bella replied as she checked that the plastic cover was clipped onto the apron properly, "Angela hasn't said much about her mystery man lately."

Both women turned to regard Angela, who had looked up from her bagel preparation at the mention of her name and was now giving her best 'deer in the headlights' impression. "Thanks, Boss," she muttered as Alice advanced towards her.

"Anytime, now if you'll excuse me, these cupcakes aren't going to bake themselves," Bella replied, and made a quick getaway.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward went from sound asleep to awake in the space of a breath. He opened his eyes and looked at the bedside clock, then turned his head and burrowed back into the pillow. He'd been dreaming again, and was in no particularly hurry to let go of Bella just yet. *She'd been smiling as he'd leaned in to kiss her, running her hands up his arms and over his shoulders as she -* He opened his eyes and sighed. He wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep, and dream Bella was gone. At least he had the real Bella to look forward to. There was only one more day to go.

He was looking forward to the prospect of spending an evening with her, and began turning his mind towards where to take them for dinner. She deserved something special. Somewhere intimate. Somewhere stylish.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I've gotta say Alice, people have been raving about the aprons," Angela commented as they stood drying glasses and stacking them in rows on one of the counter tops.

"Really?" Alice asked with a pleased smile. Bella looked up from doing a quick inventory of the remaining cakes and nodded her agreement as she kept a silent tally running in her head.

"Yup, everyone wants to know where they're from, and the compliments have been coming in thick and fast," Angela continued. She put down the dishcloth she'd been holding and ran a gentle hand down the front panel. "They're so gorgeous, I can't believe I've got one."

While Bella left her apron in the store each night, Angela had been taking hers home, lovingly spot-cleaning it when required, and pouring over the stitches and beading that Alice had worked into the design. She loved finding the tiny details Alice had included, and last night had been delighted to find a tiny silver seashell bead dancing on the hem of the main panel of watermarked blue silk, and seed pearls sewn over the white oriental blossoms on another.

"What are people saying?" Alice said, curious and wanting to hear what sort of reaction her work had garnered.

"Oh," Angela thought for a moment, "they comment on the fabrics, and the patchwork, and that they're something really funky for a bakery."

Alice nodded thoughtfully, intrigued that it had been a few days and still no-one else had cracked the code but Jasper. She frowned a little, thinking of the way he had gazed at her, and then had seemed to see right *through* her, as if there was nothing she could hide from him, and she had moved towards him, instead of away.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was ready to take the next step. Jasper re-read the email a third time to be sure and then clicked *send* on the email containing his acceptance of the job offer. He leaned back in his chair with a sigh, feeling as if a massive load had been lifted from his shoulders. All he had to do now was wait for the confirmation letter to arrive and he'd be able to resign.

The newspaper had rolled out another round of cut-backs and he had been sorry to see the latest group of people go. Some of them he'd known well, others had been more of a passing acquaintance. All the same, he disliked the way the office felt now. People were worried about their job security, and the underlying fear in some areas of the building left a metallic taste in his mouth. He'd taken to spending more time wandering around talking to people, making them laugh, listening to their stories, anything to try to lift the mood as much as he could.

He was tired of that now. It felt like gallows humour. Relief from the fact that he was still employed had tempered any joy he'd found in the job itself. Living under the shadow of the axe wasn't living, and it was time to try something different.

Jasper turned back to the article he'd been working on, trying to focus his energies anywhere. For a while it almost worked, but soon his eyes were darting back to his email inbox. He managed to conceal his sigh of relief when the new message notification popped up on his screen. He opened it and read the email quickly, his smile growing. He printed it out, signed his acceptance on the contract, then headed over to the copier to scan and email it back to the sender. Twenty minutes later, it was a done deal, signed and sealed on both sides.

He swivelled in his chair to look at the Editor's office, then waved to catch the secretary's eye and held up his hand, mouthing the words *five minutes* at her. She checked something on her screen and then nodded. Jasper grinned. Luck was with him today. He sent another couple of emails, and then stood up from his desk, checking to make sure that his shirt was tucked in.

Time to take the next step.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward was walking back to the apartment after his jog when his cell phone began to ring. He fished it out of the zip pocket in his running shorts and managed to answer it before it could divert to voicemail.

"Cullen," he said as he continued walking.

"Edward, hi. It's Marcus, just calling to let you know I got your email yesterday."

The careful tone of Marcus's voice had Edward slowing down his pace. "And?"

"And it's-" there was a considered pause, "it's good."

Edward reached an intersection and waited for the lights to change. "You're not saying very much, Marcus."

"Probably because I don't quite know what to say."

Edward snorted. "That's rare." The lights changed, and he began to cross. "Just cut the bull and tell me what you really thought."

"Edward, I don't know what the hell you're on," Marcus began. *It's crap. He thinks it's crap. I've been wasting my time. I'm right back where I started.* "Or what the hell you've been doing," Marcus continued, yanking Edward's attention back to the call, "but keep it up. I think this is-,"

"What?" Edward frowned as a bus took off from the curb, drowning out Marcus's voice. "Sorry, I didn't catch that, could you repeat it?"

"I said I think this could be your best work yet," Marcus said in a slow, careful tone. He didn't want to jinx the process any more than Edward did, but he'd been asked to critique and praise had to be given where it was due. He'd received the email from Edward with a heavy heart, not knowing what to expect. Twenty minutes after he had started reading, he'd had his assistant clear his schedule for the day, and he had hunkered down in front of his computer in complete absorption. By the time he'd finished reading, his heart had been thumping with stealthy excitement.

"Well that's," Edward began, and then cleared his throat, "that's unexpected."

"Just calling it how I see it, Edward." Marcus replied.

"And it's appreciated," Edward admitted with a reluctant smile. *It was good. Marcus has said it was good. He was back.*

"Seriously, I don't know what's been going on, but your whole tone has changed. It's very ... optimistic."

"There have been a few changes lately," Edward allowed, "but that's all I'm willing to say."

"It's okay," Marcus said quickly, "you don't have to tell me anything more than you're comfortable with. Just tell me you're going to keep writing."

"I will, Marcus. As long as the words keep coming, I'll keep writing."

"Then that's all I need to hear," Marcus said, and Edward could hear the smile in his voice.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Whatever you're going to say, I'm not listening," Bella said as she brushed past Alice with another tray of cakes. The morning trade in the store had been brisk busy, although things were now down somewhat in the afternoon as more folk left the city to escape for the weekend.

"Come on, you didn't know what I was going to say," Alice protested.

Bella slid the tray home and then put her hands on her hips. "Was it something about shoes?"

"Maybe," Alice mumbled, swirling a piece of ribbon from her apron around a finger. "I wasn't going to talk *clothes*, I wanted to talk about *accessories*."

"Same difference," Bella replied, and then stopped and gave Alice a hug, "but points for trying."

"It was worth a shot," Alice admitted, "better luck next time, huh?"

"Something like that," Bella laughed, and carried the empty tray into the kitchen.

Angela approached Alice where she stood at the counter and leaned towards her. "You know full well that Bella could show up wearing sackcloth and he'd still think she's gorgeous."

"Yeah, I know. But I was trying to get her to think of her image a bit more," sighed Alice.

"Image isn't what he's interested in either, for all Bella's wrapped up in a pretty package. He likes her for what she is, pure and simple."

"It must be nice," Alice said in a quiet voice, "to have someone like that." Her gaze flickered towards her feet, and then she looked at Angela, who was startled to see her looking so vulnerable.

"He'll find you, Alice," Angela replied.

Alice bit her lip, and then shrugged, putting on a brave face. "Well he's taking his time. He doesn't write, doesn't call ..."

\* \* \* \* \*

The sound of the phone ringing startled him out of his reverie, and he fished in his pocket to pull out his mobile phone, and steered the cart off onto the side of the trail.

"Yello?" he said in a cheerful tone after he'd checked the call ID.

"Hey, Bear, s'me."

"Babycake, how's my girl?"

"Doing good, Em. I was calling to see if you're up for a drink at the store this afternoon?"

"Sounds good, what time?" He leaned back against the seat, enjoying the heat of the sunshine as it soaked into his skin.

"Alice is going to crack a bottle open at closing, and a certain someone is going to be there."

"Then it's a done deal,"

"Great, I'll see you later on this afternoon then."

"Okay, Sis, and thanks for the call."

"Bye."

Emmett snapped his phone shut and he stuffed it back into his pocket, before steering the maintenance cart back out onto the path. He grinned to himself, already looking forward to the afternoon. It was a beautiful day, and he was going to cap it off by getting to know a beautiful woman. Life was good.

\* \* \* \* \*

"That was a short conversation," Alice commented as she finished serving.

"Asking Em if he wanted to come for a drink when Rosalie was going to be here was going to be a rhetorical question at best," Bella shrugged as she hung up the phone.

"He's that keen?"

"You didn't see his reaction when he saw her the first time?" Bella asked as she opened the door of the dishwasher for Alice to stack the plates inside. "He's gone."

"Does Rosalie know?"

"Ah," Bella rubbed her nose, "No. I don't know how she feels about setups, so I figured I'd just put them in the same room and see what happens."

Huh," Alice thought for a moment. "Well I guess that could work."

Bella winked at her. "It's called subtlety, you should try it sometime."

\* \* \* \* \*

The afternoon wound its way to a close, and Bella had just switched off the coffee machine when she heard a tap at the window. She looked up to see Rosalie waving at her through the store window, and hurried over to open the door and let her in.

"Hi," Bella said, wrapping her arms around Rosalie for an impulsive hug, "I'm so glad you were able to make it."

"It's my pleasure, and thanks so much for calling," Rosalie replied as she hugged Bella back.

"Come on in," Bella gestured, "the girls and I are just finishing up, and then we'll have a drink."

"Am I too early?" Rosalie asked as she followed Bella, dropping her bag on one of the tables.

"Not at all, my brother Emmett is stopping by soon too."

"Wow," Rosalie breathed as Bella turned around to grab the dishcloth she'd thrown on the counter, "who did your aprons?"

"That would be me," Alice declared in a proud voice.

"They're stunning, may I?" Rosalie had stepped closer, and at Alice's nod, gently ran her fingertips over some of the Chinese brocade.

"Here," said Alice, slipping the apron off and handing it over, "you'll be able to have a closer inspection without feeling me up." This was said in such an impish tone that Rosalie couldn't help but laugh.

Rosalie carried the apron over to one of the tables and spread it out, bending over it and taking a close look. Bella glanced at Alice, who was looking pleased at the level of scrutiny her work was getting, and then went out the back to get some wine glasses.

"How're you going there Angela, nearly done?"

Angela looked up as she shut the dishwasher drawer and slung a dishcloth over her shoulder. "Just about, Boss," she began, laughing when she saw the look on Bella's face. "I can't help it, blame Alice!"

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you two," Bella said, shaking her head.

"It just kinda trips off the tongue," Angela explained, "but anyway, I'm about finished up here. All the dishes have been washed and stacked, we're fine for supplies tomorrow, and I've updated the order sheet," she turned to wave a hand at the inventory order sheet that Bella kept on the refrigerator door, "so it's all good."

"Excellent, then I think it's drink o'clock," Bella said. "I'll get the glasses, you get the booze." She walked to the kitchen doorway looked at Alice and Rosalie, who were deep in conversation. "Hey guys, ready for a drink?" The two women broke off what they were saying and looked up, nodding.

"Angela, you want to get out that dip platter I made earlier?" Bella asked as she collected some wine glasses out of the cupboard and carried them out into the store.

"I'm on it," Angela replied, opening the fridge and getting out a large serving plate, then tucked a bottle of wine under her arm to follow Bella.

By the time Bella reached the table, Alice and Rosalie were busy discussing design concepts and fashion construction. Bella listened in for a while, and then abandoned the idea and waited for Angela to set the platter

down on the table before swooping on it for a snack. The wine bottle followed, and Bella picked it up, still chewing as she poured everyone a glass.

There was a rat-a-tat at the window, and Bella looked up, waving enthusiastically for Emmett to come in as she finished chewing. Alice opened the door and Emmett stepped inside, beaming at everyone, his smile growing just a little wider as he spotted Rosalie. Bella had warned him that Rosalie didn't know of his interest, and the big man played his part to perfection. He sassed Alice and Angela, introduced himself to Rosalie, and then swept his little sister up into a big brother bear-hug.

Bella wrapped her arms around his neck as her feet cleared the ground, and had just enough time to plant a noisy kiss on his cheek and flinch away in surprise.

"Did you shower and shave after work?" she whispered, "Nice work bear."

"Shutupshutupshutup," whispered Emmett in a fierce undertone as he set her down with a flourish.

Bella staggered a pace, Emmett's twirling had been a little more enthusiastic than usual, he was like that when he was nervous, and gave Rosalie a brilliant smile.

"Rosalie, I take it my brother had the sense to introduce himself before he attacked me?"

"Sure," Rosalie said, who had accepted a glass of wine from Angela in the meantime, "Emmett, right?"

"Yup, and you're ...," he flickered a gaze back to Bella, "Rose?"

"Rosalie," she confirmed, "but Rose is fine too."

They shook hands, and Emmett was handed a glass of wine.

"No Speckled Hen?" he questioned Angela with a grin.

"Not yet, but we'll get some for next time," Angela assured him.

"I'm missing something," Rosalie added, which of course gave Emmett the perfect excuse to step forward and fill her in on the story. Soon Emmett had her laughing, and the five of them fell into an easy conversation, pulling up chairs and settling themselves around the food and wine.

Bella sipped her wine and joined in the discussion that wound its way from one topic to the next. Sewing, fashion, art, cupcakes, Central Park, all interspersed with teasing and laughter. Rosalie, Bella noticed, looked very comfortable sitting within a reasonable proximity of Emmett, who used reached out on occasion to lay a gentle hand on her wrist as he emphasised a point, or wanted to draw her attention to something one of the women had said. It was slight physical contact on his part, but didn't seem unwelcome.

Later, when Alice was regaling them with tales of dating disasters in honour of Bella's impending evening out, Bella watched Rosalie watch Emmett. And then she watched the way Emmett watched Rosalie. And then she had to sip her wine to conceal her smile.

It wasn't a late evening, as the bakery was going to be open the following day. Even so, it was a reasonable enough hour for Emmett to suggest that he and Rosalie go somewhere for a bite to eat. Unlike the other women there, Rosalie *didn't* have to work, and so she accepted Emmett's invitation with a smile.

Bella walked home alone, thinking of Edward. One more day to go. She wondered what Edward was doing tonight, then tried to push the thought aside as she walked. She didn't want to dwell over him all evening like a lovesick girly-girl. She'd done that enough over Jacob over the years, and that had all ended in tears. On both sides, now that she thought about it. Her lips tightened as she walked, eager to get home. To her sanctuary.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward opened the door to his apartment, tossing his keys onto the hallstand and hooking his dry cleaning over his shoulder as he dug his cell phone out of his pocket.

"Cullen," he said.

"It's Jasper."

"Correct," Edward drawled, smiling at the startled silence.

"So," Jasper cleared his throat, "I did it."

"Did what?"

"I took the offer, and I've resigned."

"Hey, that's great news," Edward replied, "you want to celebrate?" He sat down on the couch and put his feet up on the coffee table.

"Cullen, it's why I'm calling. We're going out for a drink tonight."

Edward glanced around the apartment, listening as Jasper made plans. The cleaner had been, everything was spick and span. Everything was as it should be, but there was no warmth. Nothing about the apartment enticed him to stay. When his words had disappeared, he had all but holed himself up in the apartment, trying to force the words, punishing himself for second-guessing what he wanted to do. Now that he was writing again, he found that he was eager to get out and explore.

Edward got up and headed towards the kitchen to get a bottle of water. Jasper sounded pretty upbeat, which meant that it was going to be a long night. He opened the cupboard and took out a bottle of vitamin B capsules, washing a couple down. There was no way he was going to risk having a hangover the following day. Not when he was going to see Bella.

"You're on, where?" he said, and laughed when Jasper told him the location.

"What's wrong with that?" Jasper said, affronted.



"Nothin' man, it's fine, I just knew you were going to suggest that bar."

"What can I say? I'm a creature of habit," Jasper retorted, "besides, you know they do good skins there."

"I know, but the day you want to drink somewhere else, it'll be news."

"Fuck off, and get ready for a good night out."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Morning, Betty," Alice greeted as she got to the newsstand.

"Alice, now you're a sight for sore eyes," The vendor looked up and beamed, dropping her reading glasses so that they swung off the imitation gold and pearl chain around her neck, "you want your usual?"

"Yup. How you doin' Bets, still breakin' hearts?" Alice grinned.

"Now don't you sass me," the old woman said, sliding the latest copy of *In Style* and a packet of gum towards Alice, who handed over a few bills in exchange.

Alice waited for her change, and then stopped and looked at Betty. She'd been stopping at this newsstand for her magazine fix on the same day every month, and Betty was always there, rain, hail or shine. "Hey Betty, can I ask you something?"

"Don't see how I can stop you," Betty replied in a placid tone.

Alice rested her elbows on the magazines and leaned in. "What did you want to be when you grew up? Did you have any dreams about what you wanted out of life?"

Betty regarded Alice for a moment, and then gave a dry chuckle. "Oh the things you young ones come out with, no wonder you're all screwed."

"Huh?" Alice stood and watched as Betty rolled up a magazine, and then flinched as the older woman swatted her firmly across the head with it. "Fuck, Betty, what was that for?" Alice yelped as she jumped back a pace. The old woman laughed until she was overcome with a coughing fit. All Alice could do was stand and wait for her to recover.

"Oh god that was good, the look on your face," Betty wheezed.

Alice waited, her lips twitching as she tried not to laugh at the woman's mirth, even though it had been entirely at her expense.

"You kids," Betty went on, "you're all dumb shits. *Living the dream, chasing your dreams*," she said in a mocking tone, "Honey, you're never going to find a damn thing if you think there's always something better ahead."

"Is that what you did?" Alice asked, leaning in again after making sure Betty had put the magazine away.

"Hell no," Betty went on with a twinkle, "I was going to be a artist, but I figure it's never too late to pass on a bit of wisdom once you get as far down the track as I have."

"An artist, huh? What happened?"

"I met Earl, we got married, and I got knocked up is what happened," Betty said, reaching over to take some bills from another customer.

"Any regrets?"

Betty shrugged. "Can't miss what you've never had, and Earl and I have certainly had some times," she gave the kind of reminiscent smile that Alice could see hinted at a youth that had seen its share of fun. "You just have to make the best of what you've got, and grab opportunities when you can."

"Gotcha."

"And then when you get to my age and the kids have moved out, you go enrol yourself in an art class."

"You have?" Alice replied, charmed. "Are you enjoying it?"

"Let's just say I'm enjoying it more these days than I would've in the fifties," Betty leaned forward, "they have *nudemodels* at the community college these days," she said in a loud whisper.

"Betty," Alice laughed, "you're a dirty old woman."

"Hey, I can dream, and some of those men are *fine*. But like I tell Earl, those boys would be wasted on me. It'd take me all night to do what I used to do all night." She flicked a second packet of gum at Alice. "Now go on, you get, and have a good day. I've got a business to run."

"Yes'm," Alice said, leaning over to kiss the old woman's powdery cheek. "You have a good weekend."

"You have a good one too, Alice, and whatever or whoever you're up to, get some for me while you're at it."

Alice walked away laughing, wondering if she'd be as free with her words at Betty's age. She hoped so.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward jogged around the park, thinking about Bella and seeing words everywhere. Carved into stonework around the park, describing statues, sprayed on fences. Words everywhere. Amazing that he hadn't noticed them before now. He was going to be seeing her tonight. He picked up his pace, jogging faster, trying to speed the day.

He paused at a water fountain to catch his breath, and stood stretching his calves, then checked his watch. It was earlier than he'd thought. He sighed and looked around the park. He had a whole day to kill. Maybe he'd jog a bit more.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Morning, Boss," Alice called, waiting as always.

"Alice, don't call me Boss."

"Sorry, Boss," Alice gave her an unrepentant grin, popping her gum and standing back as Bella unlocked the security door and rolled it up. "So, tonight's the night, huh?"

"Yeah, thanks, Alice. It's good that you're not trying to make me nervous or anything," Bella said, standing aside to let Alice in.

"No problem."

"I'll do the coffee, you put some music on," Bella instructed as she got out a couple of cups.

"Gotcha."

"And," Bella pointed an admonishing finger, "no Barry White."

Alice pouted, but sifted through the disks, and soon the lilting songs of Lily Allen filled the store. Angela arrived, and the three of them got ready to start the day.

"Got a quote yet girl?" Bella asked as she leaned against the kitchen doorway.

"As a matter of fact, I do," Alice replied, tossing the stub of chalk from hand to hand. She picked up the chalkboard and wrote, a slight smile on her face, then turned and showed it to Bella and Angela.

*I'm not going to follow my dreams, I'm just going to find out where they're going and hook up with them later.*

"Very zen," Angela nodded.

Bella gave Alice a quizzical look. "I'll say, what happened to Little Miss Plan?"

Alice gave a happy shrug, "Meh, just a thought, we'll see how long it lasts."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward stopped off and grabbed a newspaper on his way home, flicking through to the music section on his way back to the apartment and grinning when he realised he was reading some of Jasper's work. Not for much longer though he realised, as he thought back to the night before.

"I've fucking done it, Cullen," Jasper whooped as he toasted Edward's glass with his own, "I'm outta there."

"And I'm pleased for you, Whit," Edward answered, toasting Jasper back, "here's cheers to you re-entering academia as Associate Professor Whitlock."

"Damn straight," Jasper said, throwing his drink back and getting up for another round.

The night had wound its way on as the two men laughed and celebrated Jasper's new career. By the time Edward fell into bed, there was a definite stagger in his step, but he had drifted off to sleep thinking of brown eyes.

Edward folded up the newspaper and tucked it under his arm as he got to a set of lights, and then jogged across the street when the lights changed. He wanted breakfast, and then maybe he'd do some more writing. It was going to be a nice day, but he was looking forward to the evening more.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you looking forward to it?" Alice asked as Bella slide a tray of cupcakes into the display cabinet. "Of course you are," she said as Bella shot her a look of amused exasperation. "Have you thought about what you're going to wear?"

"Well," Bella slid the cabinet door shut and leaned against it. "I figured I'd start with clothes and take it from there."

Alice sighed. "You really don't care what you wear do you?"

"Of course I do," Bella snorted, "but the whole evening isn't going to depend on what I'm wearing."

"I know that," Alice said, "but it can certainly help. Just tell me you'll be wearing good underwear." This was said with a hopeful expression as Alice slid a coffee towards an eavesdropping and therefore startled customer, with a broad smile.

Bella gave a startled whoop of laughter. "Alice! I'm not putting out on the first date."

"I wasn't saying you had to," Alice replied, "but knowing she looking totally hot inside and out can do wonders for a girl's confidence."

"Duly noted," Bella said, flipping a quick salute, and then turned as some more customers approached. It looked like it was going to be a busy day.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward looked at his watch. Two hours to go. He stood up from his desk and paced the length of the apartment, picking up the occasional book off a shelf and giving it a cursory glance before discarding it. He felt nervous, which he told himself was ridiculous. He and Bella had been getting to know each other for a while now, there was no reason why this evening should feel any different.

Except this wasn't just bumping into her, or walking her home after work. This was a date.

Somehow that made it entirely different.

Now that he realised how anxious he was feeling, he was glad he hadn't confided in Jasper. He didn't think he could have handled the teasing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella had departed the bakery under a chorus of catcalls from Alice and Angela, who remained unrepentant after Bella had fired back a volley of empty threats to fire them both. She glanced at her watch, and seeing that she had two hours before Edward was going to collect her, decided to spring for a cab. The cab would cost her a few dollars, but would give her a few hours minutes up her sleeve to get ready, and she knew there was one thing she wanted to do before all else. Sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Letting herself in to the apartment, Bella headed for the bedroom and after a quick bathroom stop, stripped down to her underwear and crawled onto the bed. She set the alarm on her cell phone, and curled up under the coverlet for a quick half hour nap. She had no idea how late the evening would be, and wanted to be as fresh as possible. Yawning, she closed her eyes, and had just enough time to wonder if she would be able to get any sleep before going under.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice had jammed her ipod headphones into her heads, and was mouthing the words to a Lily Allen song when she collided straight into someone's chest.

"Sorry," she muttered as she stepped aside to walk around them, and was then startled when a hand shot out to grab her arm. She looked up with a quick retort, but the words died on her lips as her eyes rounded in surprise.

"You?" she said, blinking as her shock was greeted with a low rumble of laughter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angela left the bakery and walked slowly through the Village, lingering outside the bookstore as she dithered over whether or not to go inside. She bit her lip in frustration, wishing she had the confidence of Bella or Alice, wondering what they would do in her place. She glanced through the door and could see him serving a customer, making small talk as he rang up the order. She liked his smile. At that moment, he looked up and saw her there, and his face lit up with a smile. Angela lifted a hand to give him a small wave, nodding as he beckoned her inside.

"Here goes," she muttered to herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

The phone beeped in a chorus that grew louder until Bella woke up and switched it off. She was surprised: she hadn't expected to fall asleep so quickly, but was pleased that she had. Getting off the bed, she made her way to the shower, stripping and standing under the hot water spray for a long time, turning this way and that as she felt the heat loosen the work day tension out of her muscles. She got out, and towelled herself dry, and rubbed scented moisturiser all over herself.

She wanted to feel good about herself.

More importantly, she wanted to feel good about herself when she was with Edward.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward spent a long time shaving. The last thing he wanted was a shaving cut. He walked into the bedroom, hitching his towel up into a better position on his hip, and opened his wardrobe to survey his choices. Jeans and a button down, but he wanted it to be a good one. Maybe he should have gone shopping.

He looked at his watch. Nearly time to leave. He was going to meet Bella downstairs at her apartment, and then they were going to dinner.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella applied some perfume, and then flicked her hair off her shoulders, glancing at her reflection in the mirror. Light makeup, loose hair, and one of Alice's creations. It was a simple halter-neck dress that fell in a graceful empire line with the hem brushing her ankles. Flat sandals completed the look. The last thing she wanted after day on her feet was a pair of heels, and in her mind's eye she could all but see Alice sighing and shaking her head.

She looked at the time and realised Edward would be there any minute. A thought struck her. Maybe he was as nervous as she was. On impulse, she walked towards the front window and peered down towards the street, smiling when she saw Edward pacing. He was there already.

She grabbed her purse and headed for the door. She was ready.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward looked up as he heard the front door open, and then Bella appeared. He gazed at her as she made her way down the front steps towards him.

"Hi," she said in a soft voice.

"Hi," he answered, "you're beautiful," and raised a finger to trail it across her suddenly warm face.

"So are you," Bella replied, biting her lip as he grinned. She hadn't meant to blurt it out like that, but damn it, he *was*. Angela had been right. God *did* love her work.

He stepped closer and reached out, cupping a hand in the small of her back to draw her close as he dusted a kiss against her lips. She swayed against him for a moment as their mouths met again and again. In the quiet moment of sweetness, Edward done what he had wanted to do for along time, and reached up to cradle the nape of her neck, turning her head slightly to kiss her eyelids, and then the side of her throat. When he drew away, Bella's eyes stayed closed for a moment, before they fluttered open to regard him with a soft smile.

He slid his hand down her arm to twine his fingers with hers. "Shall we?"

\* \* \* \* \*

He had taken them to a small restaurant called Resto on 29th Street, and they had been shown to a quiet table for two. Edward had seated Bella with old fashioned courtesy, and then had ordered a bottle of wine after checking what she liked. Two glasses were poured, and they settled into their evening.

"So," Edward began, "this is-," he paused.

"Good but kinda weird?" Bella completed, making him laugh.

"Something like that," he admitted, "I might have worded it differently."

"Of course," Bella inclined her head, "you're the writer after all."

"Now and then," he admitted with a smile, touching his wine glass to hers for a quiet toast.

Bella paused to watch his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed, and curled her hand around the stem of her wine glass to curb the sudden impulse to reach out and trail her finger down the column of his throat. He put his glass down and she realised she had been caught staring, and sipped at her wine. It was good.

Edward watched the play of light over the wine in Bella's glass, and against her hair. He wanted to twine the long dark strands around his fingers, and pull her face towards his.

They both looked up as the waiter appeared with the menus, and the quiet mood was broken as they chose their meals, then they were left alone again.

Edward reached out and took Bella's hand. "I don't know about you, but maybe if we keep close we can get through the jitters."

Bella laughed and gave his hand a squeeze, fluttering her fingers over his wrist, feeling his pulse beneath her fingertips. He was right. The warmth of his hand over hers made her feel better already.

"It's going to make it hard when our meals arrive," she commented.

"True," he agreed, "but there's always footsies," grinning in delight as she had laughed again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Like almost every other time, they had fallen into an easy conversation. Their meals had arrived and were enjoyed, then the table was cleared, and still they kept talking. Edward soaked it all up, a wellspring of words and worlds between them to explore. Bella had started encouraging him to talk about his writing career, and although he wasn't ready to reveal everything just yet, he found that he was willing to share details with her that he had rarely shared with anyone else. He wanted to get to know her better. He wanted her to get to know him.

"It must be amazing, creating whole new worlds and taking people on an adventure of your own making," she commented.

"Sometimes," he admitted, "When it was all working, it was an amazing rush. Other times, not so much."

"Did you get pleasure out of the process?" Bella cocked her head and regarded him, running her fingers in small circles over the back of his hand. It was a soothing gesture that relaxed him even more so, and the coil of words inside his chest loosened further.

"I'm not sure," he replied after considering it for a moment, "it used to feel like a ...," he tried to find the words. Bella waited, and the words came to him. "It used to be like a compulsion, and it was as if writing was what sustained me for the better part of a decade." Edward frowned to himself, trying to articulate the situation. "I guess," he ventured after a while, "once the writers' block kicked in, I realised that I didn't have much of a life outside of writing."

"No life?" Bella asked, "Surely you must have had something else besides your writing, what about dating? Relationships?"

Edward looked amused. "I've had a few," he allowed, "although occasionally they complained that my writing was always the third wheel and they didn't like competing."

"Were you writing about them at the time?"

"No I wasn't, although I'm not sure if that was the factor working for or against me at the time." He glanced down at Bella who was looking thoughtful. "What about you?"

"Me?" she looked startled.

"Yeah, you," he teased, "come on, 'fess up."

"Uh," she floundered for a moment and then recovered. "There isn't really much to tell," she began. "When I first opened the bakery I was in a dating wasteland, which suited me just fine. I was channelling so much of my energy into the store that there really wasn't any room in my life for anything else. Or anyone," she added.

"Surely there must have been someone," he pressed. He couldn't imagine a woman like Bella being single, although now that they had met, he was very grateful that she was.

"Okay, so there *was* someone serious," she said in a guarded tone. Edward was beginning to regret asking the question when he saw the flicker of hurt on her face but she rallied soon enough and continued. "I'd been in a relationship for a couple of years, and we kind of drifted apart-," she drifted off into thought for a moment and



then gave a short laugh, "and by the time we split we had become friends more than anything else." She sipped her wine, licking her lips as she set the glass back down on the table. "Probably a good thing really, given what happened," she said, and then looked amused at Edward's obvious curiosity, "but that's for another time. Suffice to say that yes, I've dated since then, but nothing really serious. I guess the bakery has been my main squeeze for a while now."

"Has that situation been by choice?" Edward asked.

"A little," she agreed, "a bit by necessity, and mostly by circumstance." She looked at him with a wry smile, "Think about the logistics," she said, "all of my time and energy had to go into the store, so I guess I really didn't have much of a life for a while there. I don't know of many guys that would be patient enough to date someone who'd say *thanks for dinner, see you next month*."

"I know I would have," Edward replied, realising the truth as soon as he spoke.

"Really?" Bella couldn't stop the shy smile of delight.

"I couldn't wait a week, which is why I've been hanging around the store. Walking you home might not be much, but it's a way of spending time with you, so I'll take what I can get."

"Flatterer," she laughed, giving his hands a playful swat.

"You're welcome," he replied, reaching to snare her hand as she began to withdraw, and lacing his fingers with hers.

"It's not easy in this town," Bella went on, "finding someone I mean. For all that we're surrounded by people everyone seems to lead quite solitary lives. It can be hard making the connection."

"I guess," Edward answered, "I suppose it's not really something I've thought about all that much. Other things have kept me busy."

"There's the rub," Bella replied, "everyone's in a hurry all the time in this town."

A waiter appeared and took their plates away, returning with the dessert menu. Edward cast a quick glance at it and then left it on the table. The menu was full of mouth-watering words like *chocolate* and *cream*, but he found Bella's words to be all the more tempting.

"Is that why you have a store that encourages people to take their time?"

Bella gave him an amused look. "Have you seen the store when it's busy? There's not much leisure going on there."

"Ah, yet you've got a supply of books and magazines for people to read, the walls are covered with art, I've even watched people stand and talk to you about the cupcake names, and Alice entertains people with her quote of the day. You might have started with the cupcakes, but it has become something much more."

*So much more*, he added silently as he watched Bella chewing her bottom lip as she thought, realising that he wanted to kiss her again.

"You know," she sudden suddenly, "I think I understand your writers' block now."

"I'm glad someone does," Edward replied with feeling.

"How were you feeling just before it all happened, before you stopped working?"

Edward gave the matter some thought, aware as Bella sat across the table from him, swivelling her glass of wine back and forth between her fingers, that she was prompting words about a subject he had rarely spoken about to anyone else.

"I guess," he began slowly, "I was feeling tired," he sipped his wine and shrugged, "burnt out I suppose. The fun had gone out of it."

Bella leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, and he instinctively mirrored her position as their heads bent towards each other. "So you found yourself in a position where the occupation that had sustained you for so long felt like a monumental chore?"

"Yes," he said, surprised that she could understand him so well.

"And then you began to resent it?"

"Yes," he said with feeling. "It was draining. At first a stopped writing out of spite I guess, which in retrospect wasn't the smartest thing to do."

Bella gave him a sympathetic smile, "Like you were cutting off your nose to spite your face?"

Edward chuckled at her turn of phrase, "Something like that," he admitted.

"I guess writing would be like being in a relationship of sorts," Bella mused, "you spend your time with it, and it has its ups and downs."

Edward sipped as his wine, watching Bella as she half talked, half thought out loud. Their hands were still entwined on the table top, and he ran his thumb over the palm of her hand. It was a curiously intimate moment, and one he was enjoying.

"When you're in love with a story, you have to take your time to follow it and to fall in love again," Bella said. "You need some time. And maybe you need to be in love with a story because you're am going to spend years of your life inside without seeing anybody; working 16 hour days and at the weekend; you need to be in love with every detail. If you don't have that, then how can you write if you don't love what you do?"

Edward raised Bella's hand to his mouth and placed a gentle kiss on the centre of her palm, making her breath hitch in her throat as his breath tickled against her skin. "Is that what the bakery is like for you?"

"Sure," Bella replied, trying to focus on what she was saying, rather than the warmth of his hand and the feel of his lips against her skin, "getting the business up and running was never going to be easy. I can't tell you the number of times I cried myself to sleep from sheer exhaustion wondering when things were going to get better."

"But you kept at it," he said in a soft voice, dusting a kiss across her fingers.

"It felt like it was all that I *could* do," Bella replied, mesmerised by the way he kept brushing his lips across her hand. She could feel a tingle of heat beginning in her chest, swirling over her clavicle and up into her face, flooding into her lips and cheeks.

Edward regarded her across the table. He wanted to be closer to her, he wanted to feel her warmth.

He turned her hand in his and kissed the inside of her wrist. "You want to go somewhere else?"

Bella looked at him with luminous eyes. "Yes please."

## **Ch11 Skyscrapers and Dumplings**

After settling the bill Edward guided Bella out into the street and, taking her hand, began walking. Bella looked up at Edward, as he seemed to be walking with a sense of purpose.

"Where to next?" she asked.

"I thought maybe an after dinner drink somewhere different might be nice," he offered, "a friend of mine told me about a bar down on 32nd and said it was good."

"Sounds like a plan, lead on," she replied, tucking her arm through his as they walked, "it's not often I get to do stuff like this."

"Like what?" he glanced down at her in surprise, "you mean dating?"

She smiled and nudged him as they walked, "No, I mean ... well that too I suppose, but what I meant was getting the chance to go exploring of an evening." She blinked up at him, "it's nice." Edward gave her a pleased smile, and Bella realised again how tall he was. She barely came up to his shoulder, and every time he put his arm around her she felt comforted and protected all at once.

"What's that smile for?" Edward's voice roused her from her thoughts, and she glanced up to see him smiling down at her before shifting his gaze back to the sidewalk.

"Nothing in particular," she replied, "I'm just having a really nice time." The air was crisp but not too cool, and there were lots of people out enjoying the evening. Nothing about the evening seemed forced at all, they were just two people taking an interest and delight in each other.

"Glad to hear it, I am too," he said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

A few minutes later they had reached the building Edward had been heading for. Bella shot him a curious glance as he led them inside and pressed the button for the elevator.

"Can you guess yet?" he said with a grin.

"I'm thinking it's a bar, but I don't know which one," Bella answered, "but then again, I haven't been to anything like this, whatever it is."

The elevator doors opened with a soft chime, and Edward led them inside. They were the only ones there, and so he took the opportunity to wrap his arms around her and give her a soft kiss.

"Thanks for this evening," he said in a quiet voice.

"Shouldn't I be the one thanking you?" Bella answered, looking up at him. The cupid's bow of her lips curled into a smile before Edward bent his head to claim them with his own. They were still kissing with the elevator stopped and the doors opened, and Edward broke away with reluctance as they stepped into the foyer.

"The M Bar," Bella said, reading the sign on the door. "Good call, I never would've thought of doing this."

"Well I figured it would be a chance for us both to do something different," Edward said as they went inside. "You spend so much of your time at street level, I thought you'd like the chance to look up."

Bella looked around the bar and then up at Edward with a beam of delight. "I love it, this is wonderful."

The bar opened up into a rooftop area, with round tables and chairs set up in random order, and one end of the room was covered with twinkling Christmas lights. The overall decoration was minimal, as the real backdrop to the bar was the New York skyline itself, and the eye was drawn straight to the illuminated Empire State Building.

He ducked his head to hers, brushing his lips against her temple. "Would you like a drink?"

"Please," she replied, "vodka, lime and soda."

He nodded as he ran his fingers down her arm to take her hand again and began to lead her through the crowd. Finding a space at the bar, the two of them made small talk while they waited, and then Edward noticed a couple of guys nearby giving Bella's bare back some covetous glances. Moments later, Edward noticed they had moved a few judicious steps closer so that they could see more of her. Oblivious to their blatant interest, Bella kept smiling and talking to Edward, who kept her hand in his.

The barman arrived, and Edward placed their drink order with some relief. He'd be glad to get away from the crush at the bar, and from the unwanted attention. The drinks were dispensed, and Edward turned with both

glasses and indicated an area of the room with an inclination of his head. Bella glanced back at him as she pointed to a bench seat, and he nodded.

Each wall of the bar had long bench seats with red cushions, and they managed to find a space over at the far wall. Edward set their drinks down on the low table in front of the bench and sat, watching as Bella settled herself beside him. Their easy intimacy remained, and Bella rested comfortably against his side as they toasted each other and then sipped their drinks and gazed at the brilliantly lit cityscape.

"It's so beautiful," Bella sighed, tipping her head back to rest it against the padded wall behind her.

Edward tilted his head to rest it against the top of Bella's, breathing in the sweetness of her scent. No matter where they were, she always seemed to smell of sunshine and cupcakes. "Yes, you are," he murmured in reply, smiling when he got a soft chuckle in response. Bella let herself lean more against Edward's side, and felt a surge of pleasure as he automatically lifted his arm to rest it around her shoulders.

Their conversation drifted on. Edward's thumb drew lazy circles on Bella's upper arm, and Bella rested her hand on Edward's knee as she made a point, and it felt only natural to leave it resting there, her hand soaking up his body heat, feeling the muscles flex as he shifted. As Bella spoke, Edward gave in to the temptation that had been at him all evening, and twined his fingers in her hair, running his fingers through the silken lengths in a languid caress.

Seeing their glasses were empty, Edward glanced over towards the bar. Bella watched the tendons in his throat as he moved his head, and then acting on impulse, reached up to brush a kiss against his jaw.

Edward had looked over to see what their chances were of getting another drink, when he felt Bella's lips brush against his neck. He turned back and gently cupped her chin in his hand so that he could kiss her, taking his time, exploring her warmth with his. When they broke apart, he was surprised to see Bella give him an urchin grin.

"That might have been a bit forward of me, but I couldn't resist," she admitted.

Edward rubbed his nose against hers, giving her another small kiss. "You don't hear me complaining, maybe you can blame the alcohol?"

Now it was Bella who reached up to slide her fingers around the nape of his neck, licking her lips as she leaned in for more. "I don't think so," she breathed before their lips met, "I know exactly what I'm doing."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice glanced around the crowded restaurant, wondering not for the first time what the hell she was doing here.

"You okay?"

She glanced back in time to see Jasper pop another piece of dumpling into his mouth. He chewed, watching her with a steady gaze as she toyed with her chopsticks.

After enjoying some wine with Bella and the others, Alice had hung around long enough to tease Bella about her impending date before leaving the bakery and heading home. She had no plans for the evening, and was beginning to speculate about the possibility of hitting a bar somewhere when she had rounded a corner and collided with someone's chest. A warm, muscled chest attached to someone that had laughed as she had looked up in shock.

Mr Wonderful.

"I'm fine," she shrugged, "just surprised is all."

"What, you don't like the food?" Jasper asked in a mild tone, his eyes not leaving hers.

Alice shook her head, and scooped up some steamed crab, chewing it with pleasure. "The food is great, I just don't know what I'm doing here."

"I'm flattered," Jasper drawled, "but if it makes you feel any better, everyone has to eat, we just happen to be doing it together."

Alice grimaced. "Sorry, that came out wrong." She scooped up some more crab, watching Jasper as she ate. He was working his way through his dumplings with every sign of enjoyment, glancing around the restaurant, exchanging small talk with the other couple that was sharing their table.

Nothing about the evening was expected. The shock of their collision had been followed by the surprise of recognition. That surprise had continued, as he hadn't done the expected polite sidestep so that he could keep walking. He'd checked she was okay, and then stood there and talked to her. He'd asked her questions, about her day, if she'd made any more aprons, wanting to know if anyone else had cracked the secret code. She'd found herself answering, and as she'd talked, he'd listened. Alice had taken a few tentative steps to get away, back on track, back to her apartment, but he'd stayed with her. Together they had started to stroll along the streets of the Village, still talking, and it wasn't until she'd seen the lights of Chinatown that she had realised he'd been steering them both here all along.

Stopping in her tracks, she had looked further down at the neon lights and crowds of people, and then looked at Jasper who watched her with a patient smile.

"It's Friday night," he had shrugged in answer to her silent question. "I don't know about you, but I'm not much for cooking, and I want dinner." His hands were in his jeans pockets, but he crooked an elbow towards her invitation. "Join me?" After a pause, she had slipped her arm through his, and they'd kept walking. "I should probably warn you that where we're going is more about the food than the look of the place."

"Fine by me," she replied, her eyes darting everywhere, wondering where they were going.

"Good," he'd grinned, "I figured you placed just as much importance on substance as well as style, but I wanted to be sure."

She'd raised an eyebrow at that. He had been making assumptions about her already? She wasn't sure how she felt about that. She also wasn't sure how she felt about the fact that he was right.

They'd ended up in the New Green Bo restaurant, a tiny place with nothing elegant about it whatsoever. Tiled floors, bright overhead lighting, and ten tables at best where people could either share with strangers or leave. The reception area doubled as a station for making the seeming battalions of dumplings and buns that were dished out with an attitude that could be taken as being efficient or rude. It was usually both, but the food made up for any lack of courtesy to those that came to consume it.

Once they were seated and their orders taken, Jasper had settled himself in his seat and then steepled his fingers as he gazed at her, and then broke into a sudden grin. Alice noticed the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled, and then felt annoyed that she had noticed. Normally she tracked how men were watching *her*, not the other way around.

"So tell me, Alice," he said, and then waited.

She frowned, not following what he meant.

"Tell you what?"

"Anything you want," he said, waving a hand in a vague gesture.

She had picked up her chopsticks and played with them while she thought. He was deliberately being open-ended in his questions, either to put her at her ease or to give her enough rope to hang herself. Well, two could play at that game.

"Coco Chanel had an affair with a high ranking Nazi official during the second World War," she offered, "which meant that she was able to keep living at the Ritz during the German occupation."

Jasper's eyebrows went up in mild surprise. "Really, go on."

"Not long after the war ended, Christian Dior's *New Look* in 1947 generated such a response that two women wearing his new dresses got attacked by a mob of angry women in the streets of Paris, because they were intent on tearing the dresses to shreds."

"Why?" Jasper leaned forward, smiling as he watched Alice thaw a little. *Come on little fishy.*

"After years of wartime rationing, Dior went a little crazy with fabric. At one end of the spectrum there was Coco Chanel, who was the queen of minimalism, and then there was Dior using up to twenty yards of fabric on one dress."

The conversation stopped as their orders were thrust onto the table in quick succession, and they barely had time to order a drink before the waitress left them to their own devices once more.

"Go on, you were saying? What did people learn from this?" Jasper said, fascinated.

"Same that we learn from history all the time: there's always two sides to every situation, and people are going to love it or hate it, but they'll live with it. Either way, if you're doing it right there's going to be a passionate response."

Alice watched Jasper. He'd asked her to tell him something, and she had. She waited for his expression to change into one of bland courtesy, and was even more curious when his smile had widened.

"So," he said, "you like history?"

She shrugged. "The bits that interest me, yeah, and no," she held up a cautionary hand, "not just what they were wearing."

"Really? So what history interests you then?" Jasper was leaning forward, resting his chin on his hand, and listening with rapt absorption. If he was faking his interest, then he was *good*.

"Some of the usual I guess, Egyptian, Mayan, Greek, French Revolutionary-," she stopped as Jasper cut in.

"Hang on, Mayan? That's not one of the usual."

"Maybe not, but the written language was beautiful. Perfect to decode into fashion here and there, and," it was her that leaned forward this time, "their written language has only seen any major translation breakthroughs since the 1930s."

"True, but the 1970s have heralded the most breakthroughs on that front," Jasper added, and then, "What?"

"I'm sorry, but ... what?"

Jasper gave her a smile and ducked his head. "Okay, sorry, you got me going as well."

"What, on the fact that you know about the Mayans?" Alice stared at him. This evening was turning out to be very unexpected indeed.

"History. It's a passion of mine, along with music."

"Really," Alice narrowed her eyes. "Music, huh?"

"Yup," Jasper answered, "and if I hear so much as a word of disagreement from you that Radiohead's *Ok Computer* was the best album of 1997 then we could be in for either a very long, or a very short night, depending on how well you argue." Now it was Jasper who stared back at Alice. "Okay," he ventured, "what've I said this time?"

Alice sipped her drink while she considered her answer, and then began to speak.

"Radiohead are incredible, that's one of my favourite albums although their latest one, *In Rainbows* rocks pretty damn hard, and let me just get this out there right now," Alice put her hands palm down on the table and took a deep breath, "I want to lick Jonny Greenwood's brain."

"Well that settles it then," Jasper said, tossing his napkin onto the table with a sigh, "guess we'll have to get married."



Alice was snorted into a burst of laughter. "You're pretty damn sure of yourself aren't you?"

"When it matters, but I've got one more question and it's a big 'un, you understand."

Alice sat up straight in her seat, realising that she was enjoying herself far more than she had expected to. "Fire away."

"What's your stance on ice-cream?"

Alice stared at Jasper, and then deliberately popped a piece of dumpling into her mouth and stared off into the middle distance as she chewed, prolonging her answer. She swallowed, and gave him a serious look.

"I say bring it on."

"Good," Jasper nodded slowly, "that's very good to hear."

"Your reason being?"

"The Chinatown ice-cream factory across the street," he gave her a look of mock amazement. "Don't tell me you missed it?"

Alice gave him a pitying look. "Dude, why do you think I tripped on the curb when we got here? It was all I could look at."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I see a gap at the bar," Edward said later, "I'm going in."

"Kiss for luck?"

"Absolutely," Edward murmured, dipping his head to hers again before getting up and moving inside to get some fresh drinks. Bella watched him go, admiring the way he wove his way sinuously through the crowd with little effort.

She sighed, feeling more relaxed and happy than she had in a long time.

"Excuse me," a voice came from Bella's right, and she glanced over to see a couple of women regarding her. "Sorry to intrude, but we were wondering, are you on like your third date?"

"It's our first, actually," Bella admitted with a smile.

"You're kidding," both women looked surprised. "You two are looking pretty tight, and by the way," the woman speaking inclined her head towards the bar where Edward stood, "congratulations."

"Thanks," Bella answered, grateful for the fact that the low lighting hid her blushes. It suddenly dawned on her that she and Edward had probably been necking like teenagers. Her mortification must have shown on her face, because the woman kept talking.

"Don't worry, you guys look great together," the woman reassured her, "and if he has a brother, let us know."

"Sorry, only child," Bella said with an apologetic smile. *And he's mine.*

"Figures," both women sighed with a smile. "Have a great night."

"Thanks, you too," Bella answered, glancing back over to see Edward making his way back. She accepted her drink, a Cosmopolitan this time, and took a sip as Edward settled himself on the bench.

"How is it?" he asked, as he picked up his own glass.

"Nice, sweet but refreshing," Bella critiqued.

"May I?" Edward leaned forward, bypassing the glass in Bella's hand to cup her face as he kissed her, his tongue sweeping over her lips, "You know, I think I'm inclined to agree."

"Glad you think so," she dimpled.

Edward had made his way to the bar and managed to order in quick succession. He watched the bartender mixing drinks with practised ease, and had glanced back over his shoulder to see Bella had fallen into conversation some a couple of women sitting at a table nearby. He watched her as she smiled and chatted, thinking she had never looked more beautiful. *And she's mine.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, hey, hey," Alice protested grabbing Jasper's wrist, "we said this one was *mine*, remember?" She gave his wrist another tug in a bid to pull him away from the ice-cream cone they were both clutching.

"Can't talk," Jasper said as he gave the ice cream another swipe, "eating. Here," he held his cone up in offering.

"Uh-uh," Alice said, "c'mon," she wheedled, "I really like this flavour."

"I know, so do I," Jasper laughed as he straightened and wiped a dot of ice cream off his chin.

"So why didn't you order it for yourself," Alice huffed as looked to see how much he'd manage to pilfer before she took her first lick.

"Because sometimes stuff tastes better when it's someone else's," Jasper explained. "Didn't you ever raid fruit trees as a kid? Sneak an extra cookie sometimes?"

Alice's lips tugged into a reluctant smile. "Yeah."

"Then you know what I mean," Jasper replied, steering her out of the store as they began to stroll in a leisurely pace, amongst the crowds of people that were out for an evening stroll. They began to wind their way home, still talking, even arguing occasionally, and Alice was surprised when they drew to a halt outside the bakery.

"We're back here?"

"Sure, I don't know where you live so I figured this would be a good place to start. How are you getting home?"

"I usually walk," Alice said, and then looked at her watch, "but maybe a cab is a better idea now."

"What area?" Jasper said as they began to walk again.

"Nolita."

"Figures," Jasper said with a smile.

"Oh really? I love Nolita, so what are you grinning about?" Alice gave his shoulder a nudge.

"Nothing, it's just very *you*. Fashionable, unique, feisty even. I like it."

"Okay then history boy, how about you?"

"West Village."

"Huh, close to NYU. Is that why you took the job?" Alice glanced up at him as they walked. West Village typified his style as much as, she had to admit, Nolita suited hers. It seemed they had both gravitated to areas that were a physical manifestation of what they wanted out of life.

"Not at all, any job has to be about more than just geography."

"Right," Alice nodded, "there's all that history too."

"Smart-ass," Jasper laughed.

Alice gave him an indignant look. "Hey, that's *Miss Smart-Ass* to you, I demand respect."

"Duly noted," Jasper tipped two fingers to his forehead and flicked them out in a salute. "But for now, let's get a cab and see you home."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward and Bella left the bar and walked the streets, feeling warm and relaxed from a combination of the drinks they'd consumed and the intimacy that was growing by the hour between them. Bella stumbled slightly on an uneven piece of pavement, and Edward wrapped his arm around her waist to steady her, his fingers

splaying around her, grazing the underside of her breast. She turned as he righted her, so they were standing face to face.

"You okay?" he smiled as she hiccupped.

"Better than," she affirmed, "and getting better and more betterer all the time."

Edward threw his head back and laughed, and Bella laughed as she watched his Adam's apple bob. She'd never seen him laugh like this before, and it was intoxicating.

"More betterer? That's a word?"

"It's a Charlie word," Bella grinned.

"Then that's good enough for me," Edward said, his smiling fading as he looked at her smiling up at him. She had so many different smiles. This one turned up at the right slightly, creating a dimple that was provocative and challenging. He dipped his head and kissed it, before trailing kisses to her lips. Bella gave a low hum as she wrapped her arms up around his neck, shivering slightly as Edward's hands ran over her bare back.

They drew apart and smiled at each other, before Edward wrapped his arm around her waist once more as they continued on their way.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cab pulled up at the curb and Alice gave Jasper an uncertain smile. "So, I guess this is where I say thanks for an unexpected dinner."

"At least let me discharge my duties first before you brush me off," Jasper objected in a mild tone.

"But I wasn't-," Alice began, and stopped as Jasper got out of the cab to jog around and open her door.

"Hold the cab," he instructed the driver as he helped Alice out. Tucking her hand through his arm, he escorted her with due ceremony up the stairs to the front door of her apartment.

"Now, fair Alice, Miss Smart-Ass, this is where I thank you for a delightful evening, and say that I hope to see you soon."

"Uh," Alice was nonplussed, although she didn't know why. Nothing about this evening had been what she was used to. She stood bewildered as Jasper kissed her hand, flashed her a quick smile and jogged back down the steps towards the cab.

He was just climbing in as Alice found her voice. "Uh, hey, Jasper?"

He paused and looked up.

"Thanks for tonight and," she twiddled with the hem of her shirt, "maybe I'll see you round sometime." Damn, that had come out sounding like more of a question than a statement. What the hell was wrong with her?

"Count on it," Jasper smiled, "sweet dreams."

And with that, he got into the cab, and was gone. Alice stood at the top of the stairs until the taillights had turned the corner, before rousing herself enough to get out her keys and let herself in.

Had that been a date?

It hadn't felt like a date at all, but maybe it was.

Either way, it was the first time a man had stood at the door to her apartment block and not come upstairs in a long time.

All he had done was kiss her hand and bid her sweet dreams before leaving.

Alice closed the door behind her, and walked towards the ancient elevator. Just who the hell *was* Jasper?

Even more curious, who was *she* when she was with him?

She was used to being the vixen, the matchmaker, the designer, and the sassy waitress. But she had been none of those things tonight.

She felt raw and exposed, and the more she thought about it, the more she liked it.

She hoped she'd see him soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I know the night is barely over, but can I say that I want to see you again soon?" Edward asked as they drew closer to Bella's apartment. Their pace had slowed the closer they got, as neither of them were willing to see the evening end.

"Same," Bella admitted with a smile. "Perhaps it's just as well that we're as bad as each other."

"Or as good, depending on how you look at it."

"This is true," Bella agreed, "and I bet we can be very good," she added, biting her lip when she realised what she'd said. Those Cosmopolitans had definitely left her feeling relaxed. She was relieved when Edward gave a low chuckle.

"We'll see," was all he said, and she gave an internal sigh of relief that she hadn't overstepped the mark.

"So I guess this is it then," Bella said, turning to face him. "Thanks for a wonderful evening, I had a great time."

"The first of many I hope," Edward said, running his hands up her forearms and resting them on her shoulders as he drew her into his chest.

"Yes please," she agreed.

This time their kiss was long and sweet, their lips were gentle as they said a silent goodnight before either of them said the words that would bring the evening to a close. When they parted, Bella turned with a reluctant smile towards the door, and Edward waited until she had her keys out before he began to turn away. He had gone a few paces when he heard Bella's voice.

"Edward?"

He turned to see Bella leaning out of the door, her hair blowing in the soft breeze, sending more of her scent towards him.

"Yes?"

"I hear tomorrow's going to be a beautiful day, especially in the afternoon."

He couldn't stop the smile that started to spread his face. "Really?"

"It's the word on the street," Bella said in a solemn voice, "or at least, from here anyway." She cocked her head and smiled, "spend it with me?"

"I'd love to."

"Great," she grinned, "I'll see you then."

Edward waved at her, and turned to go home, this time a bit lighter at heart.

They were going to see each other soon.

## **Ch12 Honey to the Bee**

The digital alarm clock came to life and music filtered into the silent bedroom. Jasper woke up, rolling over to lay face down, groaning into his pillow. The radio didn't let up until he flailed at it and made contact with the off switch, and then he got out of bed and headed for the bathroom. Ablutions complete, he grabbed at the running clothes he kept on a hook behind the bathroom door and pulled them on, stumbling slightly as he pulled on his running shoes, as he headed towards the door. Grabbing his keys, Jasper left the apartment, closing the door with a bang after him. Seconds later the door opened again as he re-appeared, cursing quietly to himself before chugging down a couple of glasses of water before leaving again.

Jogging down the stairs, he flicked a glance at his watch. He'd allowed enough time to extend his run and meet Edward at the park. It was a bit out of his way, but he felt like seeing Edward, assuming he was going to be

there. He grinned as he reached the street and set off at a gentle loping stride as he warmed up. He was pretty sure he'd see him. Now that the two of them had started jogging on a regular basis, their competitive spirit borne of a long friendship had rekindled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward wrapped an arm over his chest, pulling against it to stretch the muscles, and then repeated it on his other side, going through his routine warm-up stretches. He'd half walked, half jogged his way over to the park, and after his warm-up was completed he set off along the path. As he jogged, he exchanged nods of acknowledgement with other runners whose faces had become familiar. He felt his body begin to grow warmer, and sweat prickled between his shoulder blades. His head felt hot, and he ran an impatient hand through his hair, pushing it off his face, although after a few paces his hair fell forward into his eyes again. He was going to have to get a haircut soon.

Edward ran on, thinking about his writing, thinking about Bella. He increased his pace, willing himself to push through the burn that was beginning in his thighs and chest. He gulped for air, running faster still, his long stride devouring the path before him.

He'd completed half a circuit when to his surprise Jasper appeared on one of the smaller arterial paths and joined him. The two of them exchanged a quick grin and a fist bump before settling into a matching pace. Neither of them spoke until the circuit was completed and they slowed to a stop near the park entrance, their usual starting point.

"Good weekend?" Edward asked by way of greeting.

"Yep," Jasper nodded, "Yours?"

"Great," Edward replied, grinning as he thought of the time he and Bella had spent together.

"Do how did the date go? Did you guys end up at the M-Bar?"

"We did, and thanks for the suggestion," Edward said. "That's a great place, you go there much?"

"Now and then," Jasper replied as he did some quick cool-downs stretches, "it's my go-to place when I want a low-maintenance evening." He raised an eyebrow at Edward. "So, what sort of an evening did you have?"

Edward shrugged and gave a slight smile. "It was good."

Jasper nodded. High praise indeed: for all that he was a writer Edward was inclined to be a man of few words when something was important to him. Jasper suspected that the bakery was going to have more of an impact on his friend that even he was aware of. There was also, he realised, the matter of Alice.

Bumping into her on Friday night had been serendipitous, and a situation he had taken full advantage of. He had steered them towards Chinatown for dinner, and kept her so busy wondering about what was going on that she had no time to assume the flirtatious manner he'd seen her don at the bakery.

Their conversations had roamed far and wide, but he had realised within minutes of her citing historical fashion references and ancient cultures that it was going to be an interesting night. By the time they'd started trading friendly insults about music and movies, and squabbling over ice-cream flavours, he knew that in Alice, he had at last found a remarkable woman.

"You got a busy week ahead?" Edward asked as they both headed out of the park at a brisk walk, still cooling down from their jog.

"Patchy, but yeah," Jasper shrugged, "I gave them two weeks' notice so I just have to finish a few articles and tie up a few loose ends and I'm outta there."

"How were your folks with the news?" Edward said, stretching his hamstring muscles as they waited for the lights to change. It was still early but the morning traffic was already getting busy. The two men stood in their running gear chatting, as other people in business clothes gathered at the intersection.

"How do you think they were? They're over the moon, it's what they've always figured I'd end up doing anyway," Jasper said with a rueful smile, "although points to Mom, she managed to hold off on any *I-told-you-so* comments."

Edward laughed, the lights changed and the crowd surged across the street.

"Want to grab lunch later this week?" Jasper asked as they reached the curb on the other side.

"Sure, give me a call," Edward replied, "usual place?"

"Uh-uh, I'll see you at the bakery," Jasper replied.

"Oh, really?" that stopped Edward in his tracks and he looked at Jasper, "so, the place is getting to you too, huh?"

"Something like that," Jasper conceded, "but it's still early days yet."

\* \* \* \* \*

She still had time. Alice dropped to her knees and rummaged under the bed, emerging with a huff of frustration when her search proved fruitless. She sat back on her heels, thinking for a moment, and then got up and headed back to her closet. She'd looked there earlier but perhaps she'd missed it. She opened the door and peered amongst the shelves, then gave a small cry of triumph just as she was about to close the door. The tip of the scarf was just visible from a bundle hanging from a hook on the inside of the door.

Skidding to a stop at her door, she gave herself a quick once-over. An old pair of jeans, a t-shirt with a faded 'Oui' on the front, and a miniature silver Eiffel Tower ear-ring, for which she hadn't been able to find the mate. She knotted the scarf at a jaunty angle at her throat and then checked her reflection again. Not up to her usual standards, but it would have to do.



Alice checked her watch again, a vintage Mickey Mouse face told her she was still on schedule, but only just. She was going to have to hustle to beat Bella this morning. She jogged down the stairs and rummaged in her bag when she hit the pavement, popping the last piece of gum in her mouth as she set off. No time to visit Betty for a top-up this morning, she had to get to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella glanced at her watch and then slid a bookmark into her paperback and then uncoiled herself from the old armchair beside the window. She'd set her alarm a little earlier than usual so that she could catch up on some reading. Setting the book down on the arm of the chair, she stood up and stretched, and then wandered over to stand in front of her bookshelves. Reaching out, she ran a finger along the spines, wondering just what it was that Edward wrote. She made a mental note to ask him. Gathering up her things, she headed out to start the day. Moments later, Edward was, for the moment at least, forgotten as she walked towards Greenwich Village, wondering what cupcake she was going to come up with today.

"Morning, Boss," Alice popped her gum as Bella approached.

"Alice, don't call me Boss," Bella smiled, unlocking the security grill and then the door lock, pushing it open with her hip.

"Sorry, Boss," Alice shrugged, giving her gum another unrepentant pop. "So," she continued, shrugging off her light coat as she followed Bella through the store towards the kitchen, "how was it?"

Bella flicked on the coffee machine and went out the back to dump her bag. She straightened, and made a play of looking at her watch. "I'm impressed, you almost waited whole seconds before you asked how-," she broke off as Angela appeared in the doorway, breathless.

"I'm here," her announcement was unnecessary as she hurried in to hang up her bag, "have I missed anything?"

"Not yet," Bella said in a resigned tone.

Alice snuffled a laugh as she and Angela followed Bella out towards the coffee machine. Bella picked up the stainless steel jug and held out a hand in silent request. Angela had anticipated this and had already grabbed the milk for her. Bella accepted it with a smile, and began to get the coffee ready. She shot the two women a look as they both stood leaning against the bench, watching her work, waiting for her to talk.

"You're both driving me nuts and you know it. Would I be right in thinking that you're going to stalk me until I tell you about the date, right?" Bella ventured at last.

"Is that what we're doing?" Alice looked at Angela with an expression of mild surprise.

"We're just standing here, is all," Angela offered.

Bella poured the frothed milk into the cups, sketched a quick line into the foam that created a coffee coloured leaf, and handed the girls their morning heart-starter.

"Well," Bella said, "if that's the case maybe we ought to start-,"

Alice held up a finger to stop Bella's words. "Uh, Boss, now that you mention it, Angela and I *might* be a bit curious about your date, and maybe it would be nice if you told us about it now," she said, "you know, otherwise it could be hard to get things going."

"Hard to concentrate, and all that," Angela offered.

"Right," Alice agreed with a quick sidelong look at her cohort, "we could be slow to get going until you-,"

"Fess up and tell us everything," Angela completed.

Bella sipped her coffee and slumped against the counter. "Oh god," she said in a long suffering tone, "alright, what do you want to know?"

"Just the important details," Alice said as she sipped her coffee, "like *everything*."

"Well," Bella sipped her own coffee and thought, unable to stop the smile of satisfaction that was spreading across her face, "it was wonderful." She took another sip and smiled again.

"What was?" Alice was all but vibrating with impatience, "What did you wear? Did he kiss you? Of course he kissed you," Alice answered her own question as Angela laughed, "Where did you go?"

"Calm down," Bella said, flapping her hand at Alice in a shushing gesture, "I'll talk. It's obvious you're going to be useless until I tell you anyway."

"You got that right," Angela said, watching Alice who had hoisted herself up to sit on the counter, crossing her feet at the ankles and swinging them back and forth as she waited for Bella to keep talking.

"Okay, but I'm going to keep this short because we've got work to do," Bella admonished. "First off, I wore that lilac halter neck dress you made for me, Alice,"

"Great choice, the colour on you is stunning," Alice nodded.

"Thanks, glad you approve," Bella replied.

"It leaves her back bare, perfect for a bit of hand on skin contact, and it makes her tits look fantastic," Alice said on an aside to Angela.

"I-," Bella stopped, nonplussed. She hadn't even considered that when she chose the dress, she just liked the colour. Alice waved her free hand in a wind-up gesture for Bella to continue, so she did. "Uh, yeah. Anyway, he took us to dinner at a little place called *Resto* on 29th, and then afterwards we went for drinks at a rooftop bar on 32nd called *M Bar*."

"And there was much kissage?" Angela asked with a knowing smile.

Bella felt her cheeks warm up as she grinned again, "Yes," she supplied, "there was *much* kissage."

Alice hopped down and finished her coffee in an unladylike swig before throwing her arms around Bella, "Well done girl," she declared, then held Bella away at arm's length, "and did he stay the night?"

"Alice," Bella wriggled away with a laugh, "he did *not*."

"Huh," the smaller woman said in a thoughtful tone. "Really."

"Really," Bella shot her a glance as she picked up their empty cups and put them in the dishwasher. "Now, have you got a quote for us today?"

"Hmm, tricky," Alice said, putting a finger to her lips in apparent thought.

"When you're ready," Bella said, glancing at Angela who shrugged. No help there, but she knew that Alice, or rather the chalkboard, was going to have something to say about things.

"I've been thinking about this over the weekend, about *you* I should point out, and can think of nothing better than: *If life is the flower, then love is the honey.*"

Bella laughed at that, and watched as Alice gave a nod of satisfaction as she picked up her stub of chalk and collected the chalkboard to carry outside. Angela followed Bella as she wandered into the kitchen and stood, hands on her jeans-clad hips, deep in thought.

"Don't tell me she has you stumped," Angela began, but was waved into silence.

After a minute, Bella looked up with a gleam in her eyes. She'd known Alice was going to make some sort of comment about love or sweetness, and had been wracking her brains all weekend to think of some sort of baked retaliation to the chalked gauntlet. "I think I've got it," she turned towards the industrial oven and switched them on.

"Can't wait to see the comeback," Angela grinned, and then went back out into the store to start the day. She watched as Alice came back inside looking very pleased with herself. Angela waited until Alice was occupied with slicing the oranges and lemons for the water jugs before launching a quiet attack of her own. "And how was *your* weekend, Missy?"

"Me?" Alice faltered and the knife skittered off the lemon and onto the chopping board with a dull thud. She recovered fast enough, Angela noted. "It was fine," she answered in a noncommittal tone.

"Really?" Angela said, "because I was in Chinatown on Saturday night and I could've sworn that I-," she broke off she glanced over and saw Alice standing still, chewing her bottom lip. "What?"

"What did you see?" Alice said in a quiet voice.

"Uh, well I saw you with-," Angela flicked a glance towards the kitchen doorway and then leaned over and spoke in a quieter tone, "a guy, and you looked ... happy."

"Did I?" Alice looked a hesitant smile.

"You did, actually at first I wasn't sure if it was you because you looked different."

"How?"

Angela thought back. She'd been out getting dinner with company of her own, and her gaze had flickered into the restaurant for only a moment, but it had been enough for a double take and a knowing smile. "I don't know really. Quiet? No, that can't be right, you were talking, but you just looked more,-" she paused and searched for the right word as Alice stood waiting, "*involved* in the conversation."

"Really?" Alice mused. She turned back to the chopping board and began slicing, slower this time as she pondered what Angela had said. Perhaps she had a point. Her dinner with Jasper had certainly been something different.

"Were you guys on a date?"

"No, maybe, I don't know," Alice stumbled. She huffed and glanced up again. "We bumped into each other, or rather, I bumped into him, and then we ended up getting some dinner," she turned back to her task and then looked up again, "but nothing happened," she pointed out, "he saw me home and that was it."

"I believe you," Angela said quietly.

Alice went back to work, still chewing her lip. After a while, the frown of concentration eased into a calmer expression as she lost herself in the mindless chore.

Angela went back to making up the bagels, shooting Alice a glance from time to time. After a few minutes, Alice went to the stereo and put on some 1970s disco. It wasn't long before the two of them were singing along under their breath, swivelling their hips and shuffling around in time to the music, good mood restored. It was impossible to stay in an unsettled mood when disco was on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella poured flour into the mixer and watched the beaters whirl it into a creamy batter with the other ingredients, spinning to pick up the vanilla essence, shaking her groove thing in time to the music as she added the sweet spice to the mix. She smiled as she watched the batter smooth out, humming as she got out the trays, thinking about the weekend.

"Is that them?" Alice arched an eyebrow as Bella later appeared from the kitchen with the first tray.

"Sure is," said Bella, feeling smug. "Alice my girl, get your chalk."

"Okay Boss," Alice touched two fingers to her forehead and flicked them out in an odd little salute that Bella had never seen before. "Fire when ready."

Angela put down the storybooks she had been tidying and strolled over, interested to see what Bella had come up with.

Bella put the tray into the display cabinet with a flourish and stepped back, hands on hips as the girls surveyed the special for the day, and then looked at her expectantly.

"Today's is *Bee Still My Heart*," she intoned. Angela choked back a laugh as Bella continued, "Bee hive honey cupcakes with honey buttercream frosting, topped with peanut butter crunch."

"Damn," Alice muttered.

"I believe you mean *touché*," twinkled Bella.

"Do you think there will ever come a day where you don't have a cupcake to match the quote?"

Bella gave her a laugh and a hug, "We'll just have to wait and see."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice glanced up at the door as a shadow of movement blocked the morning light, and then she went back to work as the customer walked inside. It wasn't him.

Angela handed over some change to her customer and bid them a good day, then turned to regard Alice. "Hey girl, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Alice jerked her head up in surprise as she frothed milk for another coffee order. "Why's that?"

Angela shrugged. "Every time a customer comes in your head goes up like a hound catching the scent. Are you expecting someone?"

"I don't know," Alice admitted. She was silent as she finished getting the coffee order ready, and slid the takeaway cups across the counter to her customers with a broad smile.

It was true. She wasn't expecting Jasper to come into the store today. They hadn't made any plans. Saturday night certainly hadn't been planned, and yet here she was, watching the door like a lovesick teenager.

"So," Angela went on, "that guy I saw you with-,"

"Yep?" Alice held up an empty cup in silent query to Angela who nodded. She got out a third for Bella and started to make them another coffee. "What about him?"

"He looked an awful lot like Mr Wonderful," Angela said, pausing in surprise as she saw a slight flush on Alice's cheeks. "Alice, are you blushing?"

"No, it's just warm in here," Alice said, giving Angela a pointed look.

"Right, my mistake," Angela nodded, "but c'mon, was it him?"

"It might've been," Alice admitted. "We ... ah ... bumped into each other, literally, and ended up getting something to eat."

"Really," Angela said, watching Alice froth the milk with an ease that spoke of years of experience. Alice was a little different today, a little more subdued than usual. Even her clothes were a little quieter than usual. Usually she dressed in an eye-watering array of colours and styles that came across as effortlessly stylish. Today however, she wore jeans and a vintage t-shirt, with a scarf knotted at her throat. Fashionable to be sure, but it wasn't her usual cutting edge style. "And did the two of you get up to anything else?"

"Uh, we got ice-cream," Alice said, "and we talked."

Angela accepted her coffee from Alice, and carried the third cup into the kitchen for Bella, who accepted it with thanks, before she returned to the front where Alice stood sipping from her cup.

"Okay, so you *talked*," Angela repeated, picking up the thread of the conversation, "and then what?"

"He saw me home," Alice said simply, and sipped her coffee while Angela processed what she'd said.

"That was it?"

"Yup."

"He didn't come upstairs?"

"Nope."

"Did you offer?"

"Nope."

"Did he want?"

"I'm not sure."

The two women stared at each other.

"Huh," Angela said after a while. "Well I have to say I'm a little confused."

"Tell me about it," Alice agreed, sipping her coffee and sighing.

Some more customers came in and Angela turned towards them with a smile. "I'll look after these guys, how about you take a break?"

"Okay, thanks," Alice stepped away from the coffee machine and instead of grabbing one of her beloved glossy magazines that she kept a small stack of in one of the cupboards, stood in thought for a moment. She fingered the waistband of her jeans, flicking the small locket that hung there so that it swung back and forth while she thought and then, decision made she went into the kitchen.

Bella was bent over a tray of cupcakes, piping on thick swirls of honey buttercream frosting. She looked up as Alice appeared and flashed a quick smile before getting back to her task.

"Hey Boss, I've been thinking," Alice began.

"Mm-hmm?" Bella hummed as she kept frosting.

"About earlier when we were talking about your date," Bella nodded but said nothing, so Alice continued. "You know when I asked you if Edward had stayed the night and you said no," she paused for a moment, flicking the locket again. "I was kinda wondering-," her voice trailed off as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

Bella looked up at this, and finished the cupcake she was working on with a flourish, then straightened up and put the frosting bag on the bench. "Spit it out," she said, "what do you want to know?"

"Well," Alice chewed at her bottom lip for a moment and then rushed on, "isn't that kinda hypocritical?"

"Huh?"

"You know, after Mike," Alice went on. "I mean, he was a date and you slept with him, so what's different about Edward?"

Bella sighed and glanced down at the floor for a moment, toeing her chucks against the floor tiles as she thought, and then leaned against the counter and folded her arms over her chest in a protective gesture. "I get what you mean, and yeah, you're right," she said at last, "but there was a difference."

Alice leaned against the kitchen doorway, waiting for her to speak, so she continued.

"Mike was ... well-," she floundered, "you know the history with Jacob, right?" at Alice's nod, she went on, "with Mike I wanted, *needed* to feel that I still had what it takes to feel attractive to a man."

"But, you *are*," Alice said.

Bella sighed, hugging her arms tighter to her chest. "Thanks, Alice. I guess I just wanted to know I could go out with someone that knew what they wanted, knew what they were,-" her voice became quieter, "without taking me along for their journey of discovery."

"Is that what it was like with Jacob?"

"Huh?" Bella looked up with eyes that were still gazing into the past. "A bit, I guess, although that's what I realised in hindsight. Her mouth pulled into a wry smile, "he tells me now that he'd always had his suspicions, but he loved me all the same."

"Everyone loves you, Bella. You know that, right?" Unable to help herself, Alice stepped forwards and rubbed her hands on Bella's forearm. "You're a strong, sexy woman."

"Thanks, babe, but there are times when I need to get that feedback from the opposite sex, you know?"

"Ah," Alice replied as realisation dawned, "you mean the kind of feedback that's-,"

"Horizontal," Bella supplied, "yes."

"Right. So Mike was a booty call for your self-esteem, and Edward's for your heart?"

"Maybe," Bella allowed, "I think so."

Alice gave her a hug. "Good luck then, Boss."

"Alice, don't call me Boss," Bella replied automatically. She stood there for a moment, and then her arms crept up around Alice's shoulders as she returned the hug.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward let himself into his apartment and broke into a light jog towards the kitchen bench as his phone starting to ring. He grabbed the phone and tossed his keys onto the counter, rolling his eyes as they skidded across the granite top and fell onto the floor with a metallic clatter.

"Cullen," he said.

"It's Marcus," the voice said. Edward walked around the counter and bent over to pick up his keys, spinning the key-ring on his forefinger as Marcus spoke. "Any news for me today?"

"Hard to say," he hedged, "what is it that you're wanting to know?"

"Have you written more?" Marcus shifted a little on his seat, anxious for the answer.

"Surprisingly, yes," Edward replied.

Marcus felt his shoulders relax as he released a level of tension he hadn't be aware he'd been carrying over the weekend. He had to report on the progress of the authors within his portfolio this morning, and he had paced the corridors of the office biding his time until it seemed a respectable hour to call the shining star on his list. "Anything more you can send through to me?" he asked, and when Edward paused, hastened in to fill the silence, "when you're ready of course."



"Of course," Edward repeated, amusement clear in his tone. "Not that you're wanting to rush me or anything."

Marcus gave an internal sigh of relief. Edward was relaxed enough to make a slight joke, so things were still going well. Granted the man wasn't one of his more high maintenance writers, but the man had a talent that made the publishing market hungry, and the appetite for Edward Cullen was growing.

"Sorry, but you know how it is," he admitted.

"Yeah, Marcus, I think I do. I've done another few thousand words since the last time we spoke, but can you give me another couple of days? There's a bit I want to finish before you have a look."

"Sure," Marcus agreed, "I'll be looking forward to it."

Edward hung up and set the handset back in its cradle before strolling over to his desk and switching on the laptop. He'd work for a couple of hours, and then he'd go see Bella. As it powered up, he headed towards the bathroom for a shower, making a deal with himself as he began to peel off his sweaty clothes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did you get a whiff of that?" Alice asked as Bella passed her with a stack of plates.

"Of what?"

Alice jerked her head towards the departing customer. "That guy, his aftershave was *hot*." She gave another appreciative sniff. "I tell you Bells, a guy could look like a total dog but if he smells good I'm prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Alice," Bella laughed.

"And what does the Lion smell like?"

"Um," Bella added the plates to the stack on the shelf, "I'm not sure which one it is, but it's nice."

"*How* nice are we talking here? Like a pleasant little whiff now and then, or more of the 'oh god just take me now' variety?"

Bella laughed and shrugged off the question, but the slight smile she wore gave Alice her answer. Bella disappeared back out into the kitchen, and started to clear away the trays and bowls from the most recent batch of cupcakes. After a couple of minutes she paused and pulled her ponytail over her shoulder to sniff her hair. There were still slight traces of scent, and she smiled, thinking of the previous afternoon.

Edward had appeared on Bella's stoop mid afternoon. She had looked out of her window to see him sitting on the steps, quietly reading the newspaper waiting for her to appear.

"You know, we really ought to exchange phone numbers," Bella had said by way of greeting as she opened the front door. Edward had stood up and folded his newspaper with a smile.

"I realised that on the way here," he admitted, extending a hand to guide her down the stairs to the pavement, where he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss, "but I figured you'd show up here sooner or later."

"How about we get that sorted before anything else," Bella suggested, and handed him her iphone. He fished his out of his jeans pocket and they swapped handsets. Bella accepted her phone back with a smile and glanced at it before tossing it back into her handbag. Edward Cullen. It sounded familiar for some reason, but she paid it no heed as he took her hand and they started walking.

"It's a beautiful day today," Edward said, "how would you like to spend it?"

They had walked and talked, stopped and kissed, laughed and joked. Stopping to purchase some bagels, they had made a small picnic at Washington Square Park, and then dozed in the sun together, Bella's head tucked beneath Edward's chin. The day had been drawing to a close when Edward had delivered her safely home once more, and kissed her goodnight. She still hadn't asked him what he was writing, and he hadn't volunteered the information.

It wasn't until Bella was getting ready for bed that she realised she could still smell Edward's aftershave on her hair. She had kept her hair carefully dry when she showered and changed, and she fell asleep with his scent weaving around her, the book she had been reading on the pillow beside her.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dammit," Alice grouched as she stacked the magazines onto the bookshelf again. "Hey, Boss," she called, "when did Bear say he was going to put up those magazine racks?"

"Next weekend," Bella answered, slicing a bagel in hand and putting it onto a plate for a waiting customer, which she handed over with a smile.

"What's happening?" Angela returned with some cups and plates that she began to stack into the dishwasher.

"Emmett's going to do some chores here next weekend when we have our first two-day weekend, speaking of which," Bella looked up at Alice, who held up a handful of flyers.

"They're on every table," Alice confirmed in response to Bella's silent question.

"That's my girl," Bella said with a grateful smile.

"I know," Alice sighed, "I'm just that good."

"The guy that gets you will be a lucky man," Angela said, giving Alice a sly wink, which the smaller woman endeavoured to ignore. Alice muttered about tidying the front of the store and made her escape.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward had given his laptop a light shove as he got up and pushed his chair out from the desk. He'd made enough of a start for today, and it was looking good. Getting up he walked the length of the room, stopping to look out one of the tall windows, watching the people and traffic below. He glanced at his watch. It was already late morning, although he'd known that from the thick shafts of sunlight that were streaming through the windows onto the hardwood floors.

Shoving his hands into his jeans pockets, he stood and stared down at the floor, lost in thought. His writing was going well, and if he was going to be honest, it was one of the more pleasurable writing experiences he'd had of late. He ran his hand through his hair, and then with a grimace headed towards the phone to make a long-overdue call. He'd left it until the last minute as usual, but maybe he'd get lucky.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Speaking of lucky men," Angela murmured, nodding her head towards the door when Bella looked at her in confusion. Angela watched as Bella looked towards the door, and her face lit up at the tall man who entered, an answering smile on his lips.

Bella dropped the dishcloth she'd been holding and walked out from behind the coffee machine, pausing with her hand on the end of the counter, feeling oddly shy as Edward started towards her.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey," Bella said with a smile as Edward approached, "I wasn't sure if you'd be seeing you."

"I wasn't sure either, but my feet just kind of steered me here," Edward grinned.

For a moment the two of them hesitated with just the right amount of awkward, and then closed the gap between them. Bella smiled as Edward slid his hand around her waist to pull her towards him as he dipped his head to give her a quick kiss. He was pulling away when Bella caught his wrist with her hand.

"Is that all I get?" she said, feeling bold. She saw Edward's teeth flash as he grinned before lowering his mouth to hers again.

He'd smiled when he had seen the chalkboard quote outside. Bella had told him that the board was Alice's domain, and then had told him about the friendly rivalry the two of them had between the quotes and the cupcakes. He was already curious to see what Bella had come up with in response.

"How's your day going so far?" Bella asked, and he twined his fingers with hers as they spoke, swinging their joined hands slightly as they spoke

"Good, getting better all the time," he replied, "but I shouldn't be keeping you from your work." He felt an irrational surge of pride as her face fell. She wanted him to stay. He wanted to stay too, but he looked at the oversized clock hanging on the wall behind the counter. "It's nearly lunchtime, so I'm guessing you guys will be getting pretty busy."

"Probably", Bella agreed.

"More than likely," Alice quipped as she strolled past with a coffee order, "but if you two want to play sucky face some more then that's fine too," and then laughed at the indignant blush on Bella's face.

Edward reached up to cup the nap of her neck with one hand as he rubbed his thumb across her pink cheeks. "What are you blushing about?" he whispered.

"That she was right," Bella replied, smiling as he gave a low chuckle and then brushed his lips against hers.

"Listen, I'll leave you to it for a while," Edward said, breaking away at last, "I've got some errands to run, but I'll see you here this afternoon."

"Really?" Bella gave a smile of delight that he wanted to spend more time with her.

"I'd like to walk my girl home, if that's okay with her," Edward replied, and then stopped, his eyes widening a little as he realised what he'd said.

They stared at each other for a moment.

"Your girl, huh?" Bella said at last.

"Something like that," Edward agreed, "assuming that you agree of course. If it helps your decision any, you always have in my head."

"Really," Bella commented.

"Yup," Edward said, venturing a slight grin.

"Sounds like you've put a bit of thought into this situation, Edward."

"It does, doesn't it," he agreed.

"Seems a shame to waste all that mental effort, guess I'd better go along with it and see how we go."

"You're a woman with a discerning mind," Edward said giving her another kiss, "yet another reason I'm crazy for you."

"Another reason, huh? So how many are you up to?"

"Oh," Edward scrunched his forehead in apparent concentration, "last count I think it was up to seven."

"Seven?" Bella gave his arm a light punch, "only seven?"

"Well," Edward laughed, dodging away, "if you work a bit harder then you could-," he broke off as he saw the display cabinet. He read the cupcake sign and turned to her with a look of mock lust, "I think I'm up to number eight now."

"Yeah right," Bella reached for the dishcloth she'd left on the counter and started twirling it in preparation to snap it at him, "you can tell your story walkin',"

"I'm going," Edward said, side-stepping Bella to lean in to give her another kiss, "but I'll see you later this afternoon." With that, he waved to the other two women and left the store.

Bella turned back to the counter with a snort of amusement, slinging the dishcloth over one shoulder. She stopped short when she saw Alice and Angela regarding her with twin expressions of interest. "What?"

"Nothing. Did we say anything?" Alice said.

"I didn't say anything," Angela replied, and then got back to work on her bagels.

"Right, just as it should be," Bella retorted, feeling her cheeks warming up again as she walked towards the kitchen.

"Just one little thing though," Alice commented, popping her head around the door. Bella looked up from washing her hands.

"Go on," she said warily.

"So you're more at ease with him than I've seen you with any other guy," Alice started, pausing as Bella shook the excess water off her hands and reached for a handtowel. She didn't refute what she had said, so Alice continued, "so if you guys are like that and you haven't even slept together yet then,-"

"Then what?"

"Then I don't know really. One minute you guys look like the cutest couple on the planet, the next you're treating him like a friend, like Jacob."

"Huh?" Bella was confused.

"Hey," Alice held her hands up, "I'm just sayin' those are some confusing signals you're putting out there."

"Is that what I'm doing?" Bella began to wrap a strand of hair around her finger, pulling it as she thought.

"Maybe, maybe not," Alice said, "but it's safe to say that the Lion is pretty taken with you. How do you feel about it all?"

"Good," Bella conceded, "really good." She thought about it some more and elaborated. "Scared, terrified." She gave Alice an uncertain smile. "You know what that's like, right?"

"Please," Alice scoffed, "I could give you a master class on the subject. The thing is," Alice gave her a stern look, "deciding what you're going to do about it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jasper hung up the phone and glanced at the article notes he'd typed up on the screen. Another collection of words that would be read and disposed of within hours of being printed. He sighed. It was nothing like Edward's writing, and perhaps that was why history had been such a lure. To be able to tell and teach stories of people from years, even centuries ago had an indefinable allure that he had never been able to resist.

He wondered when he was going to see Alice again, and contented himself with the thought that he and Edward would be back at the bakery soon enough. Maybe he'd stop in there again soon though. He glanced at the object on his desk and smiled. At least he had a good reason to stop by.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward took a seat and waited, picking up an outdated magazine and discarding it almost straight away when he saw a copy of *The New York Chronicle*: Jasper's newspaper, at least for the time being anyway. He picked it up and rifled through the pages until he found the music and review section. Scanning the pages he stopped when he saw Jasper's by-line, and began to read, smiling here and there at Jasper's witty turn of phrase.

He envied his friend's light touch with words, the way his deadlines came and went on a daily basis, the way Jasper could write something and have it go to print that day without spending slavish hours over it all. His name was called, and he looked up and gave a nod, then stood and set the newspaper aside.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Boss," Alice said, "tall and handsome heading your way."

Bella looked up with a smile, and her mouth dropped in a 'oh' of surprise. "Wow," she said at last, "you look different."

Edward's striking auburn hair was nearly all gone. The scruffy waves he had run his hands through impatiently of late had been cut short. It may have been carefully styled when he left the barber, but the combination of wind and his own nervous habit had ruffled it up considerably. It stuck up in spikes and clumps that looked chaotic and endearing all at once.

"Oh," he gave a self-conscious laugh, "yeah. It's been a while since I've had a haircut, so I thought I'd better get myself looking decent."

"Fuck," Alice muttered, "if that was him looking scruffy, how good must he look when he makes an effort?"

"I hear ya, sister," Angela said in a fervent undertone.

"I'm back ahead of schedule, but I've managed to leave my phone at home, so I wanted to drop by and see if I could walk you home tonight."

"I think I'd like that," Bella replied, folding her arms on the counter and leaning over towards him. "In fact, I know I would." She watched him smile, and wondered again how Alice thought she was giving out mixed signals. She liked this man. A lot.

"That's good to know," he said, making her feel a little startled. Had he just read her mind? "So it's a date then."

"Sounds like, I'll see you at closing time," she smiled.

He turned to go, and then hesitated and turned back. His gaze dropped to her lips and then he looked at her with a shy smile. "One for the road?"

Bella gave him a lazy grin, "C'mere," she invited. Edward walked up to the counter and, bracing his hands on it, lifted himself up so that he could lean over and kiss her. When they parted seconds later, Bella could already feel the warmth beginning low in her belly. Edward gave her a crooked smile and left the store. Bella watched him go.

It was going to be a long afternoon.

### **Ch13 Argon and Shiraz**

Edward half walked, half jogged towards the Village, checking his watch. He'd gotten caught up on the phone with Marcus again, who had been pestering him for details about his writing.

"Marcus, I really don't have much to tell you. It is what it is. Hell, even I don't know what's going to happen," Edward admitted, jogging to a stop at the lights. A small part of his mind registered he wasn't even out of breath. His morning jogging was paying dividends.

"You *what*?" Marcus was astonished. He had been working with Edward long enough to know the man's habits. Edward had meticulous planning, and was one of Marcus's more methodical authors who made his editing role that much easier.

"You heard me," Edward grunted. He was getting tired of this conversation. He looked up at the lights, willing them to change. He only had another block to go. "What else can I say?"

"Uh," Marcus temporised, "well that changes things somewhat."

"Tell me about it," Edward agreed, "if it makes you feel any better, I'm as much in the dark as you are."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I think she's seen the light," Alice commented to Angela.

"How so?" Angela was stacking plates on one of the shelves behind the counter. It was approaching closing time and they were going through the usual late afternoon ritual.

"You saw her at lunchtime with Edward?"

"Yeah, what of it?"

"I called her out on her behaviour," Alice replied, "all that flirtation and retreat thing she's got going on." She snapped the lid closed on a container and put it back into the refrigerator.

"Which would be different, how, exactly, from what you do yourself?" Angela said, shooting a look at Alice who looked up in surprise.

"Me? What are you talking about?"

"I see you Alice, you're the original femme fatale when you think you've got the upper hand, but Mr Wonderful has put you on the back foot and you've got no idea what the hell you're going to do about it." Angela slid the last plate onto the pile and turned to face the smaller woman, leaning against the counter with one hand on her hip.

Alice stared back at Angela, momentarily speechless, which told Angela that she had hit her mark.

"You sound pretty sure of yourself," Alice managed at last.

"Hey, you're not the only one keeping an eye on what's going on," Angela shrugged. "And anyway, I can't help but notice that you're happy to call Bella out on her behaviour, but I'm the one that you've confided in about your date."

"It wasn't a date," Alice was quick to object, "and anyway, you're the one that spotted us, Bella didn't."

"Whatever," Angela said, "but you're confiding in different people about different things and stepping in when you think it's needed. When are you going to let people look out for you for a change?"

"Huh?" Alice was confused.

"Honey," Angela moved closer and slung an arm around the smaller woman's shoulders to take the sting out of her words. "You're always pushing us into the spotlight, but staying behind the scenes as much as you can for yourself. When do you think you'll decide to step out and have a go yourself?"

"I don't push *everyone*," Alice replied, but the denial sounded weak even to her ears.

"Don't think I didn't miss that my bookstore guy just happened to have one of our specials when I saw him last Friday. What was that mystery errand you popped out for that afternoon?"

Alice stayed silent, but a slight upward curl of her lips admitted her guilt.



"You know we love you, but sooner or later you're going to have to take a chance."

"Take a chance on what?" Alice asked.

"On yourself," Angela said, tweaking Alice's nose with a fond smile, before turning back to the final tasks of the day.

Alice watched her for a moment, and then slowly went back to work, mulling over Angela's words.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella had finished cashing up the register, and was bundling bills that she added to the zip-up bag. Bending over, she flicked the combination on the concealed safe and added the bag, before closing the door and turning the lock again. She opened the cupboard and pulled out her bag, resting it on the bench, before picking up the paperwork that she would need to work on that evening. It was time to complete her monthly order for ingredients, and she found it quicker to do it online at home rather than fuss about with the paperwork too much in the store. Besides, the task always seemed that bit more bearable when it was accompanied by a nice glass of wine.

She headed out into the front of the store to see Alice and Angela were nearly done. The floor had been swept, the tables wiped down, and now they were just finishing stacking the freshly washed cups and plates.

"You guys nearly ready to go?" she said as she set the order book on the counter.

"You sound pretty eager," Angela teased, "could it be because you're expecting a certain someone?"

Bella groaned. She was going to have to accept the teasing as one of the perils of dating in front of an attentive audience. "Is it that obvious?"

"We're just happy for you," Angela clarified, "and besides, it's really exciting isn't it?"

Bella cocked her head. "Is something going on with you as well?"

"There might be," Angela conceded with a modest nod, "Bookstore guy and I are going to a movie later this week."

"You didn't tell me that," Alice accused.

"Didn't I?" Angela gave her a wide-eyed look, "gosh, I guess it must've slipped my mind."

"Yeah, right," Alice groused, and then brightened. "So who asked who on the date?"

"He did," Angela answered, "but try not to congratulate yourself too much."

"Am I missing something?" Bella asked, giving the two of them a curious look.

"Nope, we're going to head off in a few though, leave the coast clear for you-know-who," Alice said.

"Uh-uh," Bella replied, giving them a curious look as the two women exchanged a conspiratorial grin and quickly finished their jobs before getting their bags. She waved them off and had just gotten back to her paperwork when she heard the girls exchanging greetings with Edward outside the store. True to his word, he'd arrived to walk her home.

"I won't be long," she said as he approached, "I've just got to finish up a couple of things and then we can go."

"No rush," he said easily.

Her eyes crinkled in a smile before she bent back to her task, working her way quickly through the list, her pen flicking across the checkboxes as she scribbled quantities. Edward folded his arms and leaned over the counter, watching her in silence as she worked, noting the line of concentration that appeared on her forehead.

Looking up, she hesitated and then reached over with a smile to brush her fingers over the tips of the shortened spikes of hair on his head. "This is going to take some getting used to," she commented.

"You don't like?" Edward asked.

"It's great, I just haven't seen you with short hair before is all," she answered. She turned her attention back to her paperwork. She registered Edward shifting away from the counter, but wanted to get her last task done before she could relax for the night. A moment later, she felt the warmth of him as he stood behind her, resting his chin on her shoulder.

A shiver of delight rippled through her as he spoke, his breath sending warm puffs of air against her cheek.

"Do you think you could get used to it?" he asked, nuzzling against her neck.

"I'll try," she answered. She had intended to sound teasing, but the feel of him against her had the words coming out as a croak.

Edward began to kiss the side of her neck, something he'd wanted to do all day. "And how about now?"

"Getting there," Bella replied, closing her eyes and swallowing hard before looking at the paperwork again as she tried to focus.

"How's the paperwork going?" Edward said, peering over her shoulder at the sheet of paper, before turning and kissing her cheek.

"I'd, uh," Bella stopped and cleared her throat before continuing. "I'd say it's coming on nicely." She felt his smile against her skin.

"You're talking about the paperwork, right?"

"I thought I was," she laughed, "but I could be mistaken."

Edward wrapped his arms around her waist, offering nothing more than support while she finished. Bella blinked at the page, realising that she had been staring sightlessly at it, and then gave up. She folded up the pages and stuffed them into her bag. As long as Edward was providing that level of distraction there was no way she was going to be able to think straight.

The two of them had fallen into an easy physical intimacy that was growing by the day. The more time she spent with him, the more she wanted him, and the suggestion of hardness behind her before he shifted his hips away told her that he felt the same.

She gathered up her bag and turned in Edward's arms to face him. "Shall we?"

"I was thinking we could stop in at a wine bar or something on the way home for an after work drink," he suggested.

"That sounds great," Bella agreed. Edward was wearing a plaid button down shirt over a grey t-shirt, and she could see a few chest hairs poking over the neckline. Unable to resist, she dropped a quick kiss at the base of his throat. Edward dropped a kiss on the top of her head in response, running his hands up her arms and onto her shoulders so that he could steer her towards the door.

Once outside, he waited for her to lock up, and then took her by the hand as they started to walk. They had barely gone a few paces before he shook her hand free and wrapped his arm around her waist. "You were too far away," he grinned, "I like being able to hold onto you."

Bella laughed as she hooked her thumb into one of the belt loops on the back of his jeans as they kept walking. "So where are we off to this time?"

"How does the 8th St Wine Cellar sound to you?"

Bella considered it and gave a nod. "I've been there a few times, but not for a while. It's a nice place."

The last time she'd gone there had been for a few drinks with Alice, and had woken up with Jacob in bed beside her the following morning. The memory of that made her realise she'd not heard from Jacob for a while now, and she smiled, thinking that his date had obviously gone well for him to have dropped off the radar.

"I figured we could always end up having dinner there as well," Edward suggested, and then watched as Bella bit her lip.

"Okay," she said, "but I probably shouldn't have too late a night because I've got some paperwork to process at home."

Edward slowed their pace as he glanced at her. "I'm sorry. I didn't think to ask if you had something else on, I'm making assumptions here."

"No it's fine, really," Bella reassured him, "it's something that doesn't take too long." Bella paused and gave it some thought, "actually I can probably hold off on it for a day or two."

"If you're sure," Edward said in a cautious tone. He hadn't stopped to think about any commitments she might have had. The luxury of determining his own working hours and his eagerness to see her had clouded his judgement.

"Sure I'm sure. We had a busy day, so a glass of wine will be a great way to decompress," she said, and then added, "of course, the company doesn't hurt either."

"You've read my mind," Edward answered as he hugged her closer.

"Speaking of reading, how's the writing going?" Bella looked up at him expectantly.

"Not bad," Edward admitted, "better than I expected as a matter of fact."

"Is that your own humble opinion?" Bella teased.

"Actually it's my Editor who's the one getting excited this time around." Edward thought for a moment and then went on. "I never know what to make of my writing until someone else has had a look at it."

"It's a very introspective thing to do," Bella agreed, "don't you get lonely sometimes?"

They crossed the street and kept walking, Edward steering them out the way of oncoming pedestrians now and then, keeping Bella firmly tucked against his side. Her thumb was still hooked on his belt loop, and now and then he felt her hand tap against the small of his back as she made a point when she spoke.

"A little," he admitted. "But it became a habit. I got used to my own company so it became a way of life." He gave a dry laugh, "then of course the writers' block kicked in, and Marcus got a lot of mileage out of calling me his reclusive author."

"Marcus?"

"My Editor," Edward explained. "I'd withdrawn a lot over the last few months. I stopped doing a lot of things because I was just so caught up in what wasn't happening."

Edward glanced down at the ground as they walked for a moment, and then shoved his free hand in his pocket, hunching his shoulders forward a little as he clutched Bella tighter. Bella was quiet. Judging by his self protective behaviour body language, she could tell that the conversation had hit a nerve.

"That can't have been much fun," she ventured after a few more paces, surprised when Edward gave a dry chuckle.

"No, it wasn't much fun at all." He huffed out a sigh at the thought of how his life had been a few short weeks ago. "I stopped going out, stopped seeing my friends, pretty much just holed myself up at home and got bitter," Edward pulled a face. He wasn't proud of his self-indulgent behaviour at all. "Marcus had taken to phoning me practically every day to ask how things were going."

"But surely he must've known that would just make things worse."

"He did, but he admitted the other day that he was also hoping it would be me so pissed I'd start writing something, anything, as long as I started work again."

"Well he's either a very brave man, or incredibly stupid."

Edward gave her a droll look, "What makes you say that?"

"I don't think I'd like to see you in a bad mood, the whole tortured artist routine," Bella gave a dramatic shudder.

"I'm not that bad," he protested in a mild tone, and then gave it some more thought. "Actually, I'm not sure. Other than getting pissed at Marcus I don't think much has ever made me that angry."

"You're too-even tempered?"

"Nope, I just wasn't getting out and seeing many people," Edward replied.

"So what changed?" Bella watched him as he spoke, the way his eyebrows drew together in a slight frown when he was choosing his words carefully, and how his eyes crinkled with humour.

"Well here's the thing," Edward replied, "I had to escape Marcus one day so I went out for a walk and didn't pay any attention to where I was going. Then I looked up and realised that I'd ended up at this little bakery cafe."

"Really? There are a few of those around," Bella said, playing along.

"Yeah there are," Edward agreed, "but there's something different about this one. They make great cupcakes, plus the chick that runs it is totally hot." He gave a mock growl and tried to nip at her throat, grabbing her as she laughed and tried to dodge away, forgetting that she had hooked her hand on the back of his jeans.

"So then what happened?" Bella said when they had stopped tussling and resumed their walk.

"I guess there was something so disarming about the bakery that it gave me an overdue wake-up call. I suddenly realised I had to get my head out of my ass and get back to work."

"Really?" Bella gave him a pleased smile. "Who would've thought a cupcake could do that?"

"That and the chalkboard," Edward added. "I wasn't sure if I wanted to go in or not, but the quote outside gave me a laugh and," he waved his arm, "here we are." He came to a dead stop, which made Bella stumble forward a pace.

"You meant that literally," Bella laughed as she straightened up and looked at the doorway. "I love the feel of this place," she commented as Edward took her by the hand and led her down the stairs. "It's like a basement for grown-ups."

Edward grinned at her over his shoulder. "I like the way you see things. You've got a great filter on life."

"Works for me," Bella replied.

They paused at the bar to get a table, and Edward put his hand on the small of her back to guide her through the bar towards a small table in a corner, and then held out her chair for her to sit down.

Bella set down her bag and shrugged out of her denim jacket. She was wearing a simple leaf-green t-shirt with a v-neck that gathered between her breasts. She wore no jewellery save for a simple pair of hammered silver disks that swung at her ears.

"May I?" Edward asked, leaning forward and gesturing towards the ear-rings.

"Sure," Bella leaned forward obligingly, and Edward captured one between his fingers to look at the intricate pattern of irises that had been engraved onto the disks. He released it, and ran his fingers down the side of her neck, smiling as she gave a small shiver. "Was that just an excuse for you to cop a feel?"

"A bit," he admitted, "did it work?"

"Like a charm," she replied, "well done."

"Thanks, I'll have to remember that one," he replied, watching as she gave him a quick wink and then picked up the small menu that sat on the table. After a moment, she set it down flat, and then continuing to read, reached up behind her to loosen her hair from its customary ponytail, and shook it loose. Edward watched as the strands of chocolate flowed around and over her shoulders, and the way her arms and breasts moved as she quickly ran her fingers through her hair to smooth it.

He looked up and saw that she was watching him with a slight smile.

"So, was that an excuse for you to make me watch you?"

"Maybe," she conceded, "did it work?"

"Like a charm," he replied. He shifted his weight and scooted his chair closer to hers, and then reached out to drape his arm around her shoulders, "now how about that drink?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Emmett pulled on a clean t-shirt and left it untucked over his cargo shorts, and then slung his backpack over his shoulder. He made his way out of the park office, calling out farewells for the day and exchanging jovial insults with a few of his co-workers as he went. He followed the path towards the nearest exit, breaking into a light jog. Glancing at his watch, he decided he had time to drop in at the gym for a workout before he made his way home. He didn't have any plans for the evening, but felt like a diversion.

He took a few deep breaths as he walked, enjoying the weather. The leaves were starting to change colour, and it had been a beautiful day. The word 'beautiful' floated through his mind again as he saw a flash of blonde hair ahead of him in the crowd. Squinting, he cocked his head and moved to the side, peering through the crowds. He kept walking, and then decided to take a chance and broke into a light jog to close the distance.

"Hey, Rose!" he called, knowing when he saw her head turn that his suspicions had been correct. He called out her name again, waving as she gave stopped and gave him a blank look at first, and then offered a genuine smile of recognition.

She stood waiting as he jogged up to her.

"Hey," he greeted as he reached her, "sorry to shout at you like that, but I thought it was you and I wanted to say hello."

"Mission accomplished," she smiled, "it's good to see you again."

Emmett shifted his backpack on his shoulder and gestured down the street. "Are you on your way somewhere?"

"Home, I guess," Rosalie said as they began walking. "I was just dropping off a commission in the area, how about you?"

"Just leaving work," Emmett jerked his head back towards the park entrance.

"Very nice," Rosalie gave a nod of approval.

He turned and gazed back at the park vista, and then gave Rosalie a proud grin. "Yeah, it's pretty easy on the eyes."

"It sure is," Rosalie said with a lazy smile.

Emmett gazed back at her, his face splitting into a slow grin. "Are you talking about the park, or me?"

"Take your pick," Rosalie said a challenging smile of her own, watching as Emmett's grin took on a distinct tomcat gleam.

"Since you put it that way, how about joining me for a drink?" Emmett asked, immediately cancelling his plans for a workout now that a much more attractive diversion had presented itself.

"I think I can be persuaded," Rosalie agreed as they fell into step with each other.

"Good to hear," Emmett praised, "I can be very persuasive when the situation calls for it."

Emmett watched Rosalie's smile as their conversation continued, and realised that he wanted to be very persuasive indeed. Since meeting her over drinks at Bella's store, and then taking her for a casual meal afterwards, Rosalie had been on his mind of late. She had an easy confidence about her, and was comfortable in her own skin. He got the impression that she enjoyed male attention, but didn't *need* it to feel secure, which made her all the more attractive as far as he was concerned. He grinned, remembering that his friends had often made the same comments about his sister, despite the fact that she continually rebuffed them or had no idea that they were trying to pick her up. In any case, he made a mental note to thank Bella for the set-up as he followed Rosalie through the crowds.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice made her way home, mouthing the words to the song playing on her ipod as she wove her way in and out of the crowds on the sidewalk. She made a few strategic stops at various boutiques, studying what was on offer in the windows, but nothing caught her eye today, so she kept going. She had been pleased at the success of the aprons in the store, which had been getting so much interest that Bella had suggested she made some pared-down variations to sell.

Although excited by the idea, Alice was going to have to give the matter some more thought. She liked the idea of the aprons being 'their thing' at the bakery, but Bella had a point, it was another way for Alice to get her creations out there. The originals would always be the best, but a flattering variation here and there couldn't hurt.

She rummaged in her bag and then realised that she had run out of her usual supply of gum. She altered her course and crossed the street at the next set of lights, checking her watch and then breaking into a jog. If she was lucky she'd be able to catch Betty. She jogged on for another half a block and then realised she was being foolish. All that fuss over some gum? She slowed to a walk, and then stopped, trying to decide what she wanted to do.

What *did* she want to do?

She started to walk again, slower this time, chewing her lower lip as she thought. She always kept herself busy, darting from one project to the next, helping everyone else out, but when it came to sudden moments like this when she had nothing planned that she found herself at a bit of a loss. Her mind darted from one possible time-filler to the next, but nothing appealed. She frowned, not liking this train of thought that she was on. She scrolled through her ipod list and made her selection. Soon she was walking in time to Radiohead's *15 Step*, wishing it didn't remind her of Jasper so much.

She walked another block before she cursed under her breath and changed direction again. She was going to take herself out for a drink, and *then* she'd go home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jasper shut down the article on his screen and flicked the manila folder closed. He picked it up and dropped it with a soft thump into the archive box that sat on the floor beside his desk chair. That was another one down, only a few more to go. He sighed and glanced at his watch, looking up in surprise when he saw that it was after 6 o'clock. A few of the later working employees were still there, but to a large extent the office had emptied out over the course of the afternoon and he had been so focussed he hadn't even noticed.

He had set himself the task of tying up as many loose ends as possible in his last week at the paper, and had been making good progress. Glancing at his phone, he suddenly realised why. He'd knocked the 'Do Not Disturb' button on the phone, probably after he'd hung up from his last phone call. He gave a sigh of resignation and opened up his email folder, wincing when he saw the number of messages waiting for him. He'd have to stay back a bit longer.

Waving acknowledgement to another worker who was heading home for the day Jasper leaned over to go through his satchel and pulled out his ipod. Putting in the ear-buds, he scrolled through and powered up his



Radiohead playlist, smiling as the familiar strains of *Karma Police* began. He thought of Alice more often now, particularly when he listened to Radiohead, and it always made him smile.

He liked her company, and the more time they had spent together last Friday, the more he realised she intrigued him. Although he had never wanted for female company, he realised it had been a long time since a woman had sparked his interest the way Alice had. She was even more interesting when she forgot herself and dropped her social facade, arguing a point of interest over an album or squabbling to protect her ice-cream.

He'd have to catch up with her again soon. He thought for a moment and then sent Edward a quick email suggesting lunch. He knew that Edward would know the desired location, not that it would be a struggle to get him there in the first place. It seemed the two old friends had found something else they had in common. Jasper looked at the list of emails and sighed. He was going to take himself out for a drink after this.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella took another sip of her wine and leaned back in her chair, smiling as Edward ran his hand up and down her arm absently as they spoke. Without realising it, the two of them seemed to be in physical contact all the time in one form or another: lightly touching the others arm to make a point, leaning against each other, and frequently stopping to exchange a gentle kiss.

"So tell me, Edward," Bella ventured at last, "what is it that you're writing?"

Edward had been about to take a sip of his wine, and now he stilled. He held his glass suspended for a moment, and then took a deliberate sip before carefully sitting the glass back down on its coaster.

"I don't normally make a habit of talking about it while it's still a work in progress."

"I can understand that," Bella said in what she hoped was an encouraging tone, "but can you give me a hint?"

"It's about," Edward licked his lips, he could taste the Shiraz he had just sipped, "relationships, interconnectivity, the gulf stream-" he paused and sipped his wine again, "and argon."

"Argon?" Bella cocked her head towards him, "it sounds like something from Jason and the Argonauts."

Edward laughed. He always felt uncomfortable and exposed when he talked about his writing before the finished product had been released, but Bella had a way of coaxing words out of him. He gave her shoulders a squeeze, and she shifted closer to rest her warm hand on his thigh as he continued to speak.

"Each breath we take into our bodies contains maybe 1% of an element called argon. It doesn't react with anything, and our bodies can't break it down, so we breathe it in, and then breathe it back out."

"And then what happens?" Bella shifted a little in her seat, sipping at her wine, watching Edward's face. He was frowning a little, thinking before he spoke in low, measured tones. Bella leaned forward, keen not to miss a word.

"To the argon?" Edward shrugged, "Nothing. It keeps circulating around the world, everyone breathing it in and out, over and over"

"It just keeps going forever?"

"Mm-hmm," Edward said, setting down his glass, "each breath we take contains, I don't know, maybe millions of argon atoms. Right now," he reached up and gently traced the tip of his finger along Bella's lower lip, "we could be breathing the same atoms that were inhaled by Leonardo da Vinci while he painted the Mona Lisa, or by Christ and his Disciples at the Last Supper, or even the dinosaurs." He brushed his lips against hers in a soft kiss.

"And it's all interconnected," Bella replied, gazing at Edward.

"Mm-hmm," he nuzzled at her temple as he kept speaking, "the debates of philosophers, the battle cries of Waterloo, the sighs of ancient lovers, and now," he brushed a kiss against her cheek, "the two of us."

Bella sat there for a moment absorbing his words and then her eyes fluttered closed as he kissed her again. Her hand floated up to rest against his cheek to keep Edward's lips against hers as they gently explored each others' mouths.

Edward broke away and rested his cheek against hers for a moment, his eyes closed as he breathed in her scent, the familiar bouquet of cake and sunshine. He imagined the argon swirling from his body into hers, wondering if the element had somehow led him to her. He wondered if it had led him to the wellspring of words that his life had suddenly become.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice put her magazine down and reached for her glass, glancing over at the door of the Cub Room and then did a double-take.

"I don't believe it," she muttered to herself, sipping her scotch and watching as Jasper made his way towards the bar, "out of all the bars in this town, he walks into mine."

She leaned back in her seat, enjoying the opportunity to watch him as he ordered his drink and exchanged a few words and a laugh with the barman. He looked a bit tired today, but still moved with the easy self assurance that she always noticed about him. Alice watched as he accepted his drink and stuffed his change into his hip pocket, and turn turned to survey the room with his back against the bar.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So how's your wine?" Edward asked, watching Bella as she sipped at her glass. They'd had a couple of drinks now, and had ordered some small dishes to 'nibble' as Bella had put it.

"Nice, want a taste?" She held out her glass.

"Don't mind if I do," Edward leaned past and kissed her again. Bella's mouth opened like a flower beneath his as she leaned into him. He had rested his hand on her thigh, and now slid it up over her waist to pull her against him. When he broke off the kiss, Bella drew in a shaking breath and licked her lips. "Penny for your thoughts?" he prompted.

Bella looked at Edward, feeling the familiar warmth begin as it spiralled down low into her abdomen, and then lower still where it began to stoke the embers. Edward's touch on her arm added fuel to the fire.

"I'm thinking that maybe I don't want you to go home tonight," Bella said, before sliding her hand around the nape of his neck and pulling his face back to hers. This time when they broke apart Bella was smiling. "How is it that we always end up necking like a pair of teenagers?"

"I have no idea," Edward murmured as he kissed her neck, "but you won't hear me complaining." He hooked a finger in the neckline of her t-shirt and tugged at it so that he could drop a kiss on her collarbone. Looking up, he saw a warm flush begin at Bella's throat and sweep up into her face.

"Just so you know," Bella declared as she trailed a finger across Edward's stubble, "I don't make a habit of this."

"Nor do I," Edward said, watching Bella's face as she smiled at his answer. Her eyes were heavy as she gazed at him, and he could see the effects her arousal was having on her. Her lips were full and pink, matching the high colour in her cheeks, and her breathing was shallow. He could smell the sweetness of the wine on her breath, knowing it was interlaced with the invisible, eternal argon that was swirling into his own body as he inhaled.

They were distracted from each other when their food arrived: a platter of olives, dips and crusty bread to be torn apart and eaten with their fingers. It was a tactile meal, and Edward watched the way Bella licked her fingers clean after some olive oil had dribbled down her hand, feeling a dull ache begin in his belly and spiral down.

Bella chewed slowly, enjoying the saltiness of the olives, then tore off a piece of bread to dip in some olive oil. It had been a busy day, and she ate with relish. A warm dribble of olive oil ran down her thumb, and as she licked it off she looked across at Edward. He had been about to sip his wine, but instead he sat watching her, his eyes dark as he watched her tongue flicker over her skin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jasper's face went blank with surprise as he saw Alice sitting at a small table against the wall, and she raised her glass to him in a silent toast across the room. Smiling, he picked up his glass and made his way towards her.

"May I?" he asked, indicating the empty chair, pulling it out and taking a seat when she nodded. "So, you've had that kinda day too, huh?" He nodded at her glass.

"It wasn't so bad," Alice shrugged, sipping at her scotch. "I just couldn't decide what I wanted to do tonight, so I figured I'd come have a drink first." She set her glass down and waved a hand towards the drink Jasper was still holding, "You too?"

"Something like that," he agreed. "Busy day at work, and I wasn't quite ready to go home and be a couch potato."

The two of them looked at each other, and then both sighed at the same time, which made them laugh.

"I guess if neither of us feel like doing much, we might as well do it together," Jasper ventured, and caught the eye of a waiter to wave them over. "Join me for dinner?"

"Sure," Alice said, surprised at her easy acceptance. Once again, her evening had taken an unexpected turn, and it involved Jasper. "They've got a decent tapas menu unless you want to go through to the dining room."

Jasper got a copy of the menu and scanned it briefly, then looked up at her with an inquiring smile. He had left the office with no clear plans for the evening other than having a drink on his way home, but now things were looking up.

"That sounds good, let's make ourselves comfortable."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Make yourself at home," Bella called over her shoulder as she dropped her bag by the door and headed for the kitchen.

Edward paused in the living room, gazing at the profusion of colour and warmth in the room. It reminded him of the bakery. Artworks, prints and postcards jostled for space, making the walls glow with colour. He smiled as he saw the bookshelves, and made his way towards them, curious to see what sort of reader Bella was.

Running his fingers over the book spines, he saw that she seemed to be as eclectic in her reading tastes as she was with everything else. Tudor history, science fiction, autobiographies, the whole range was there. His eyes flickered quickly over the shelves and he noted that he didn't see any of his books there. He wasn't sure if he felt relieved or disappointed, and he turned when he heard Bella's footsteps approach.

"I should've known that you'd hone in on the books," Bella smiled as she towards him, a bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses in the other.

"Force of habit," Edward smiled. "You've certainly got a good collection going here."

"But none of yours," Bella added, "I'll have to change that. I think I'd like to see what you've come up with in the past." She cocked her head as she looked at him, "Come to think of it, I haven't looked up any of your books yet."

"No rush," Edward replied, taking the glasses off her and dropping a kiss on the tip of her nose, "you'll probably find something on Google."

"Hell, I can probably find *myself* on Google," Bella laughed.

While Edward poured the wine, Bella kicked off her shoes and socks, sinking down onto the sofa beside him and stretched out her legs, crossing them at the ankles. She leaned forward and fumbled for the ipod dock remote, and soon one of her 'chill' playlists was filtering through the apartment. Edward passed her a glass of wine, and she accepted it with a smile of thanks, chinking her glass against his before taking a sip.

Edward rested his arm around Bella's shoulder, and she snuggled in against him, rubbing one of her feet up her calf as she gave a mild stretch of contentment.

"What's that?" Edward gestured with his hand that held his glass of wine, towards Bella's feet.

"What's what?" Bella didn't understand what he was looking at, and moved her feet to look at the coffee table.

"Not the table, *you*," Edward laughed, putting his glass of wine down so that he could grasp Bella's calf, pulling her leg across his lap. Curious, he traced his forefinger across the flowing script that ran around her inner ankle.

"There's one on the other ankle too, see?" Bella lifted her other leg slightly to show him.

Enchanted, Edward manoeuvred Bella so that she sat perpendicular to him, her thighs across his lap so that he could look at both ankles. It took him a moment to realise that the words he was reading weren't in English.

"Latin?" he guessed, and got a nod of acknowledgement. He mouthed the words to himself and then turned to her, curious to find out more. "I can't even guess, you'll have to tell me."

Bella leaned forward, "This one," she said, tracing her finger across her left ankle, "says *Receive Joy*, and the other says *Give Joy*." She leaned her shoulder against the couch, her breasts pressing against Edward's arm as he rubbed his hand up and down her thigh, his other hand gently cupping an ankle.

"There's a story behind them," he said in a quiet voice, gently tracing a finger over the inked pattern, staring at the contrast of the ink against her pale skin, the way the letters flowed in a fluid wave as she flexed her foot.

"It's something I read about when I was in college," Bella began, "the Egyptians believed that when you reached the afterlife, your heart was weighed by the god Horus and you were asked two questions: did you find joy in your life, and did you bring joy to the lives of others." She glanced down at the tattoos and gave a small smile. "I figured that was as good a template for a happy life as any."

Edward nodded, his gaze not moving from Bella's face as she spoke, "And the Latin?"

"I was a Literature major, so Latin made a kind of sense, and anyway," she smiled and wrinkled her nose at Edward, "it's like having a special secret, and I can choose who I let in on it."

Edward reached over to pull her up and onto his lap and wrapped his arms around her waist as she dipped her head to kiss him. His arms tightened around her as she hesitantly touched the tip of her tongue to his lips, and he opened his mouth to draw her in. Within moments the kiss had become urgent, more heated. Bella began squirming and then to Edward's shock she wriggled out of his arms and off his lap completely.

"I'm sorry," he said, lifting a hand out of reflex to run it through hair he realised was no longer there, "have I done something wrong?"

"Quite the opposite," Bella murmured, and rose up on her knees so that she could throw a leg over his hips to straddle him where he sat on the sofa. She draped her arms around his shoulders, her fingers curling against the nap of his neck, and Edward closed his eyes as she lowered her mouth towards his.

Edward's hands floated up from her hips to clutch convulsively at the hem of her t-shirt, and he bunched the soft fabric in his hands before breaking off the kiss to gaze at her. Bella leaned her weight back, creating a delightful friction that had him biting his lip as she looked at him.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Edward dropped his head to rest his forehead against her throat, breathing in her familiar scent.

"I want," he stopped and licked his lips, trying to gather his thoughts. "I want to touch you, so very much," he looked into her eyes, "can I have you?"

Bella smiled, "only if I can have you."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was, Edward reflected later, the smile outside the bar that had sealed his fate. The way she had bitten her lip in an instant of vulnerability before she had given herself over to the evening ahead.

Edward trailed kisses across Bella's collarbone, as he gently pushed Bella's t-shirt up, watching with hooded eyes as she reached down to assist, taking it off and dropping it onto the floor before reaching to remove his. He had leaned forward as she had tugged at his collar, the sight of her disappearing for a moment as the shirt was pulled over his head. And then they were touching and tasting, their hands restless as they explored the topography of each other's bodies.

Bella began to move her hips against his, making him groan into her mouth, and she shivered as he ran his fingertips and down her back, cupping her backside to pull her harder against him.

He reached up to trace the swell of her breast with a finger, following the edge of the lace cups, sliding the strap off her shoulder until she reached behind to unfasten the clasp, clutching his head to her chest.

"Bella," he muttered between kisses, "I need, can we-," he was stuttering, trying to find the words.

"Yes," she answered, knowing that he was trying to say. She climbed off his lap and pulled him to his feet and took him to her bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jasper finished his drink and set the glass down with a flourish, and gestured at the almost empty glass Alice was nursing. "Can I get you another?"

Alice glanced at her drink and finished off the mouthful that was left. "Sure, why not?"

Jasper excused himself from the table, returning a while later with two more glasses of red wine. He raised his glass to hers in a brief toast as he sat down, and then leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. The evening had taken an unexpected, but by no means unwelcome, turn.

He looked up as he heard Alice give a quiet snort of amusement, and then followed her gaze to see a couple in a nearby booth indulging in an overt display of affection. Jasper raised an eyebrow at Alice and looked at the couple again, glancing away quickly as the woman's hand disappeared beneath the table. He couldn't see what she had done, but winced in sympathy as the man gave a sudden jerk. Enthusiasm was one thing, but style went a long way as well as far as he was concerned.

"Do you think it's love?" he asked in a dry tone.

"Please," Alice scoffed, "she's practically eating that guy. I'm almost tempted to send her some cutlery so she can make a better job of it."

"Oh I don't know," Jasper mused as he looked at the enthusiastic couple, "there certainly seems to be a level of fondness there."

"For the next couple of hours at least," Alice agreed, "I don't think that's Hallmark love you're looking at there."

Jasper took a sip of wine and glanced at Alice again. "You don't sound like a believer."

Alice considered this for a moment. "Did you know that the word 'love' has more definitions than any other word in the dictionary? Just one little word, four letters, but it's one of the most difficult things in the world to define. It's like they invented a word for the condition and have been struggling to define it ever since," Alice mused, holding her glass of wine up to admire the way the light shone through the red hue. She was pretty sure she had some silk at home that colour.

"Condition? You make it sound like a sickness," Jasper replied in an amused tone.

"Well it is," Alice paused. "It's viral. One person falls in love, and then it gets transmitted. You can't eat, you can't sleep, and the only thing that can cure you is someone else that's suffering from it as well."

There was a thoughtful silence between the two.

"All that fuss over just four letters," Alice mused.

"True, but it's just four out of twenty six," Jasper pointed out.

"Interesting," Alice said in a thoughtful tone as she leaned her elbows on the table and propped her chin in her hands, "I hadn't thought of it like that."

"Sure. You're freaking out over four letters, but just think about the Roman alphabet: twenty six letters, supporting our entire culture." Jasper picked up his folded newspaper and gave it an idle glance. "Twenty six fragile little squiggles that underpin everything we do."

"Who said I was freaking out?" Alice said, frowning a little.

"Hey," Jasper shrugged, "you can get your freak on all you want. At least you're prepared to talk about the subject without getting starry eyed and grabbing the nearest bridal magazine."

Alice made the mistake of snorting with laughter just as she was about to sip her drink, and was sent into a spasm of coughing as the alcohol hit her windpipe. Within seconds she was bent over in her chair coughing and sobbing for air as she tried to clear her throat. By the time she had gotten herself under control, Jasper was helpless with laughter himself. Alice accepted a napkin and a glass of water from a passing waitress with a watery smile, and mopped at her streaming eyes, still giving the occasional cough as she settled back down.

"You made me snort my drink," Alice accused, still taking deep breaths to recover her equilibrium, "the last time that happened I was in grade school."

"Oh god, I'm so sorry," Jasper wheezed, "are you okay?"

"I think I'll live," Alice replied, "I can't believe that just happened though." She picked up her glass of water and took several small careful sips. "I suppose I should be used to expecting the unexpected whenever you're around."

"Whatever gets you through the night," Jasper agreed.

And so what had been just another day became something else entirely.

\* \* \* \* \*

A sound woke Edward up, and he blinked into the darkness of the room, for a moment, unsure of where he was. The sound came again, and he realised that it had come from Bella, her head tucked against his shoulder. He hadn't understood what she had said, and so he lay there in silence wondering if she was going to repeat herself.

She shifted her head a little, a small frown appearing on her forehead, and he gently reached over to brush a strand of hair off her face. Bella gave a soft sigh and repositioned herself against him in her sleep, her hand creeping up to rest on his chest. It was a small gesture, but to Edward it felt like a significant moment.

He knew he was falling in love with her.

## **Ch14 Afterglow and Google**

*She was lying outdoors enjoying up the sun's warmth that was soaking through her skin and into her bones. A butterfly hovered over the inked words on her ankle, fluttering against the skin before moving over to her other foot. Bella shifted her legs, sighing as the butterfly skimmed up and over her calf.*

*The sun seemed to be getting warmer. She shifted again as heat began to build deep down in her belly. The light brushing fluttered against the underside of her breasts, and she arced her back as heat prickled over her chest.*



Bella blinked and opened her eyes to discover Edward dropping a trail of kisses between the valley of her breasts, working his way up towards her throat. Edward's green eyes crinkled as he gave her a sleepy smile. "Good morning," he rumbled, before leaning in to nuzzle the side of her neck, nibbling and sucking on her delicate skin. Bella closed her eyes again, putting her arms around him to hold him closer, revelling in the feel of his body on top of hers, turning her head for his kiss.

"Bella," Edward said as he raised himself onto his elbows.

"I know," Bella arched up to kiss his throat, "I want you, too." She twisted in his arms to reach for the bedside table. There were the sounds of a foil packet tearing, breathless fumbling and laughter, and then silence as his mouth was on hers again. He put his hands on her hips to hold her steady as he slid into her, and they held their breath for a long moment, revelling in the heat and pressure where their bodies met.

Edward began to move, rocking further inside her as Bella made a soft growling noise and sank her teeth into his neck. Bella hooked her ankles around his hips, wrapping him up in joy as she urged him closer, rubbing herself against the hardness of his body as she felt an itch begin to tingle underneath her skin.

Bella's world shrank to nothing but the feel of Edward's body on and in hers. She screwed her eyes shut as she urged him deeper, shivering as she tried to get closer still. The itch was getting stronger now, and was maddeningly just out of reach. Edward slid a hand under her shoulder, pulling her towards him.

"Let go," he urged, "I've got you."

Bella was feeling drunk with pressure, which was growing stronger as it moved through her, following the path that Edward's hand was taking, down between the two of them.

"Oh-," she tried to move away, the feeling was too much, but Edward held onto her and sank his teeth into her shoulder. The shock of it sent the pressure inside her flaring up and out, making her skin want to scream as her muscles contracted around Edward, and he followed her into pleasure with a hoarse groan.

Afterwards, Edward held onto her so tightly that it almost hurt, but she clung to him anyway.

"I want to spend the day in bed with you," Edward said at last, brushing a kiss against her temple, pushing the sweaty hair off her forehead.

"Sounds good," Bella replied, "but-," she turned to look at the bedside clock and gave him a regretful smile.

"I know," he sighed. For the first time he found himself wishing that he had an office job, somewhere to go that would fill up his day instead of sitting at home and thinking about Bella as the hours ticked on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice popped another piece of gum into her mouth and checked her watch, breaking into a light jog when she saw the time. She was determined to beat Bella work as was the tradition, but she was cutting it fine.

Jasper had seen her home again after dinner, and after nothing more than a brief kiss on the cheek had turned and left. Alice had stood at the top of the stairs, jingling her keys from palm to palm, wondering why he hadn't kissed her properly, and why she wanted him to. The man was infuriatingly hard to categorise, which made it even harder for her to read the game play, if he was even playing a game in the first place. She could not for the life of her, work out what it was what Jasper wanted, and much to her surprise, she realised she wanted to know very much.

She reached the bakery and noted with satisfaction that she was exactly on time.

Fifteen minutes later, she was still waiting when Angela arrived.

"What's going on?" Angela said as she drew near.

"Not sure," Alice frowned, "but it's not like the Boss to be late. I think I'll give her a call." She dug in her bag for her cell phone, and had started to dial when Angela tapped her on the arm and pointed. Alice turned to see Bella hurrying down the street towards them, giving a grimace and throwing her hands up in the air as she saw them looking at her.

"I know, I'm late," Bella said as she reached the door and began to unlock it, "Sorry guys."

"No problem, Boss," Alice said as she and Angela followed her inside. "Just as long as you're okay."

"Oh, I'm good," Bella said in a breezy tone, flicking on the coffee machine and dropping her bag in the kitchen. She returned to the front of the store and powered up the stereo system, selecting a Kylie Minogue album to get the day started.

Alice raised her eyebrows as the synthesised pop music began to pulse through the store, and she exchanged a surprised look with Angela. "Someone's in a good mood this morning," she commented.

"Well she did see Edward again last night," Angela replied as she tied on her apron, brushing it down to smooth out a slight crease. "We'll find out soon enough anyway, let's get the day started."

Alice followed Angela out into the store and waited as Bella finished making their morning coffees, accepted hers with a smile of thanks.

"So, Boss," Alice ventured, "you're looking pretty happy this morning."

"Thanks, Alice," Bella replied. "I'm feeling pretty damn good this morning, so it's nice to see it shows."

Alice took a step closer. "Oh, it shows alright," she said, flicking Bella's hair aside to examine the pink rash that marked the side of her neck. "So how's Edward this morning?"

Bella clapped a hand to her neck in a bid to cover up the stubble rash and gave Alice a horrified look. "Is it that obvious?"

"Not if you wear your hair down," Alice reassured her.

"I can't do that when I'm baking," Bella remonstrated, ducking down to peer at her distorted reflection in the chrome side of the coffee machine. "Damn," she swore softly.

"Maybe you can just put your hair up while you're in the kitchen and take it down when you're out here," Angela suggested.

"Maybe some concealer," Bella muttered.

"Wait a minute, hang on here," Alice waved a hand, "what's with the big cover up? Sure," she shrugged at Bella, "you got laid, are you ashamed of it?"

Bella thought back over the morning and couldn't stop the slow smile that spread across her face, "Hell no."

"Well then, just put your hair up and be done with it," Alice nodded. "Chances are most of the people that notice the rash will be jealous anyways."

"Good point," Angela noted, "I know I am," she added on a sigh.

Bella hesitated, and then reached for the hair elastic she wore around her wrist, and pulled her hair up into a ponytail. She ran her fingertips over the spot on her neck where Alice had pointed out the stubble rash, and could feel the warmth of the irritated skin.

"Don't worry about it," Alice advised, "you'll be so busy soon you'll forget it's even there. Anyway," she went on, sipping her coffee, "we've got more important business to attend to."

"Right, what's today's quote Alice?" Angela said, stirring sugar into her coffee and taking an appreciative sip, "and by the way, I love your shirt."

Alice glanced down at her chest and then looked back at Angela with a grin. "Isn't it great? It's a 1970s men's tuxedo shirt. I had to make a few modifications, but I think it looks pretty damn good."

Bella agreed as they fell to admiring Alice's handiwork. She'd teamed the shirt with jeans and a pair of two-tone brogues, creating a very eclectic look, but one that was entirely Alice. Bella glanced at her own attire with a mild pang. Edward had delayed her considerably that morning, not that she was going to complain. She had managed to wriggle into her jeans and a deep violet shirt before having to make a dash for the door. Edward had insisted on escorting her to work, and they had spent a long time standing at the corner kissing each other goodbye for the day before she literally had to run.

"You know, Alice, one of these days I might just unleash you on my wardrobe," Bella ventured, laughing at the look of amazed delight on Alice's face. "What? Come on, it's not that big a deal."

"Not that big a deal," Alice said to Angela, "You know how long I've been waiting for this? *Years*." She turned back to face Bella and pointed a stern finger. "I won't be forgetting that offer."

"Yes ma'am," Bella laughed, "but before you start giving me an overhaul, how about you give us a quote for the day?"

Alice put her cup down and reached for the chalk, squinting at Bella before breaking into a smug grin and walking over to pick up the chalkboard. She propped it on a table and wrote quickly, then showed it to the girls. Bella rolled her eyes and Angela applauded at the words: *Love is friendship on fire*.

"All right, all right, let's get to work," Bella said, waving the girls on as she headed back into the kitchen. She was going to have to think hard to come up with something to match that one.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward walked back to his apartment, grinning to himself as he thought about Bella. He had woken up to the feel of her legs tangled with his, and her hair on his chest. Unable to resist, he had kissed and caressed her into wakefulness, and they had delighted in each other all over again.

Letting himself in, he dumped his keys on the bench and wandered into the living room, stretching his arms up over his head as he yawned. He wandered around the vast room, looking at the tasteful decor and vast collection of books. The place seemed empty and cold compared to Bella's, and he wanted to get out. He began to strip off his shirt as he made his way to the bedroom. He'd go for a run and then see what he felt like doing after that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angela was making up the bagels for the day and Alice was checking the condiment supplies on the tables when Bella appeared with the first tray of cupcakes.

"Okay guys, here they are," Bella announced as she slid the tray into the display case.

"Alright, Boss, what have you come up with today?" Alice wandered up to the counter with her tub of sugar sachets and napkins, setting it down as she waited for Bella to reveal the daily special.

Bella flicked her ponytail and gave Alice a smug smile. "I think I'll call these ones *Lemon Afterglow*, lemon meringue cupcakes."

Angela laughed as Alice and Bella exchanged a nod, equals acknowledging each other in the ongoing competition.

Alice gave the golden meringue tips a considering gaze, and then arched an eyebrow at Bella. "Afterglow, huh?"

Bella felt her cheeks redden.

"Definitely afterglow," Alice said with satisfaction. "Nice one, Boss," she added as she carried the tub out into the kitchen.

"That's a really great shirt she's got on," Angela commented.

"Sure is, she's a talented little monkey," Bella replied, reaching over to snag a slice of cold turkey meat for a quick snack.

"So why is she waiting tables?" Angela asked, swatting Bella's hand with the spatula as Bella swiped another slice.

"Beats me. I love her to bits, but those talents of hers are wasted here, I know that much."

"Hmmm," Angela slathered a bagel with cranberry sauce and kept working, "I guess as long as she's happy. Life's too short to have an average day at work."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jasper walked out of the elevator and headed past the reception area towards his cubicle, calling out greetings as he went. It was his last week on the job at the newspaper, and it was a good feeling.

He stopped in at the kitchen long enough to grab himself a coffee, and then settled down at his desk. He was drumming his fingers on his desk, waiting for his computer network login to finish, when someone leaned over his shoulder to deposit a cupcake in front of him. Twisting in his chair, he looked up to see one of the Food and Wine Editor grinning at him.

"What's this for?"

"A bakery sent some over this morning chasing a review, but I don't need the carbs so I'm sharing the wealth. Send me an email later letting me know what you think of it."

"Sounds like a fair trade, thanks darlin'," Jasper replied with a grin.

"You're welcome, you'll be helping me with the article, so just make sure you get back to me this afternoon."

"Will do," Jasper touched two fingers to his forehead and flicked them out in a quick salute, turning back to his computer as Karen headed over to the next desk, cupcake box in hand.

He sipped his coffee and peeled off the cupcake wrapper, taking a healthy bite. He chewed as he scanned his emails for the morning. The cupcake seemed nice enough, but he knew where Karen could get better. He set the cupcake down beside his coffee, and started to type. Every so often he took another bite, and each time he did, he thought about Alice.

They'd run into each other twice now, and each time they did, he realised that he wanted to see her more. The next time he saw her, he was going to get her number, and as he realised he didn't know it, her surname.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Bella," Angela ventured, "What did you say Edward's surname was?"

"Cullen, why?" Bella answered, looking up from the mixer to see Angela mouthing the name, deep in thought.

"Huh? Oh, Ben and I were talking the other night, and I couldn't remember what you said his surname was. Ben had a few guesses, but I'm not sure if we're talking about the same guy." Angela cocked her head. "Have you looked him up?"

"No, but I haven't had the chance to yet. He told me I'd probably find something if I looked on Google though," Bella replied. She switched off the mixer and considered her options. "How's stock looking out the front?"

Angela stuck her head back into the shop front and had a quick look at the display cabinets. "We'll hold for an hour or so yet."

Bella leaned against the counter, playing with her ponytail while she thought. Decision made, she collected her laptop from her satchel and powered it up.

"You're going to look him up now?" Angela said, surprised.

"It's as good a time as any," Bella answered, plugging in the power cord after she'd glanced at the battery status. It only took a couple of minutes for the laptop to be ready, and she clicked on the Google page and typed in her search.

"You guys are quiet, what's going on?" Alice popped her head into the kitchen.

"Bella's looking up Edward on the net," Angela answered, glancing up at Alice briefly and then looking back at the screen.

"Oh, I'll be in on that, lemme see," Alice said, stepping up to the counter to gaze at the screen.

Bella tapped her fingers on the counter as she waited for the page to load. When it was complete, her eyes widened.

The three women stood silent, staring at the search results, which numbered in the tens of thousands: reviews, publishers, distributors, articles, book club groups, fan societies, online book sellers and media interviews.

"Huh," Alice ventured, reaching over to scroll through some of the search results, "Well he's an author alright," she looked at Bella who was still staring at the screen, "and you didn't know he was *this* Edward Cullen?"

"Can't say that I did," Bella replied.

"C'mon," Alice scoffed, "a book hound like you didn't join the dots? Didn't the name even ring a bell?"

"It did," Bella replied, "of course it did, but I thought he was someone much older, not-," Bella waved a hand as she searched for the right word.

"A total hottie?" Angela supplied.

"Yeah," Bella admitted with a sheepish grin.

"Didn't he mention anything about this?" Angela asked.

"Not really, but then again I guess I never really asked," Bella replied, "I asked him what he did, he said he was a writer and that he'd been published, and we left things at that."

"He didn't offer any other information? Not even a clue?" Alice said, raising an eyebrow. She reached forward and opened a link to Amazon, scrolling through the bibliography of Edward's work that was available. "Holy shit, I think I've read a couple of these."

Angela leaned closer to read over Alice's shoulder, and then reached out to point at the screen, "I've read that one, it was really good." She looked at Bella. "Have you read any?"

"I don't think I have," Bella admitted. "I mean, I've been aware of them but just haven't gotten around to any of them yet."

"What are the odds," Alice sighed, "you've even got a degree in Literature. Guess this means we can't call you a groupie."

"Guess so," Bella admitted with an uncomfortable laugh.

Angela touched her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," Bella was still distracted by the screen. Why hadn't he said anything? She suddenly felt as if the information Edward had given her would fit on the head of a pin. It made her feel unsettled.

"You don't look okay," Angela commented. "What's got you freaked out, that he's famous, or that he didn't tell you?"

"I'm not sure," Bella admitted. "Either way I feel pretty weird." Bella stood chewing her thumbnail as she stared at the screen, and then shook herself out of her daze. "Anyway, we've got customers now so we'd better get back to work." She snapped the laptop shut and shoved it back into her satchel, moving back to the mixer and getting back to work. Alice and Angela exchanged a quick glance before heading back out into the shop front to take orders.

When there was a lull in orders, Angela turned to Alice. "Do you think she's going to be okay?"

"Can't tell," Alice muttered, cleaning the milk froth off the steam spigot. "I don't think so. Let's hope the boy turns up soon because I think he's going to have some explaining to do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward pulled on a clean pair of jeans and then went back into the bathroom to grab a towel. He gave his hair a brisk rub, and then hung up the towel again before heading out to the kitchen. Barefoot and shirtless, he stood in front of the refrigerator as he considered his options, and then grabbed the milk. He uncapped it and gave it a cautious sniff before getting out a box of cereal and a bowl.

Padding into the living room with his breakfast, he switched on the tv and settled back on the sofa. He glanced at his watch and sighed, there were hours to kill until he could see Bella again.

Starting at the morning news shows, he finished his cereal and set the bowl aside, yawning and scratching his bare chest. He kicked his legs up onto the sofa and pulled the cushions into a more comfortable position. He didn't feel like doing any writing just yet, he'd watch some tv for a while instead. Five minutes later he got up from the sofa with a growl and switched on his laptop, the words bubbling in his mind. He knew they would pester him until he got them out of his head and onto the screen. He pulled out the chair from his desk and sat down, stared out of the window for a moment, and then took a deep breath and began to write.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella slid another tray of cupcakes into the display cabinet, and then headed back into the kitchen. She paused to wash her hands and push her hair off her face before getting out her laptop. The laptop had been put into sleep mode, so she tapped the spacebar to wake it up. The search results page was still on the screen, and she clicked on the Amazon page to read Edward's biography. It was a short synopsis, but it gave her a snapshot of his career. Published in his early twenties, Edward had since gone on to be nominated for the National Book Award three times. Bella looked at the books available, and swallowed hard. In the last ten years Edward had written and published nine books, all of which had received positive critical acclaim. She shook her head. She couldn't believe it was the same Edward she knew, and more still, that she hadn't read any of his books.

Scrubbing her face with her hands, Bella sighed. Why hadn't he told her? Had she even asked? She knew they'd discussed his writing, but he seemed to shy away from talking about himself too much. Perhaps he was just a reticent person by nature. Or perhaps there was more to it than that. There was one way to find out.

Her cell phone chimed. A new text message had arrived. Picking up the phone from where it had been resting on the bench, she looked at the screen.

*I miss you. Can I see you tonight? E*

Bella looked from the laptop to her phone and gave a wry smile. The timing was impeccable. She hit reply and composed a message.

*I miss you too. See you at closing? B*

She hit send, and snapped the phone shut, moving back out to the store to get a coffee. Business had been going at a steady pace today, so she could take a break for a while. Wiping her palms on her jeans, she reached for the milk jug, only to have her hand slapped away by Alice.

"Uh-uh, let me. You go take a seat and occupy yourself with lustful thoughts for a while, Boss," Alice admonished, flapping her hands to shoo Bella out from behind the counter.

"If you call me Boss, does that mean I can call you Bossy?"

"I've been called worse," Alice shrugged as she set to work making a coffee.



Angela appeared at Bella's table with a turkey bagel, and one of Alice's glossy fashion magazines. "She means well," Angela winked.

"I know, can you imagine what things would be like if she used her powers for evil?" Bella replied as she started to flip through the magazine. "I don't know why I look through these things, I'll never wear anything like *that*," Bella commented, pointing at an extravagant couture creation for emphasis.

"Tell me about it," Angela replied, gesturing towards her cargo pants and t-shirt, "I think this," she patted her apron, "is the closest to couture I'll ever get."

Alice arrived with the coffee which she set down with all due ceremony. Bella groaned at the artful 'B & E' that had been written in the coffee foam.

"I should turn this into a working lunch," Bella commented as she made a move to get up.

"Stop right there, what are you going to do?" Alice said in a commanding tone.

"Uh, well I need to order some more supplies. The checklist has been done, I just need to submit it online."

"And how long does that take?"

"Five minutes maybe ten, tops," Bella said in a meek voice.

Alice considered this, and then nodded once. "I'll go get your laptop, you're not to go behind the counter until you've finished your lunch."

"Yes ma'am," Bella replied. Angela smothered a laugh and went back to work.

Alice delivered the laptop and the handful of papers Bella had left on the bench, and Bella set to work. True to her word, the order was submitted minutes later, and Alice approached the table again ready to whisk the computer away. She paused when she saw Bella staring at the Amazon page again.

"You really didn't know," Alice said in a quiet tone, watching as Bella shook her head.

"I had no idea," Bella replied. "He never even so much as hinted."

Alice took a seat at the table, and Bella wordlessly turned the laptop so that Alice could see the screen.

"Well it figures," Alice said after a while, and then went on as Bella looked at her in puzzlement. "You were never going to end up with some bonehead. The man's obviously talented, you've got a literature degree," she shrugged, "it's a perfect match."

"Maybe," Bella was looking pensive again.

Alice leaned against Bella, nudging her with her shoulder. "So come on, how was last night?" she watched as a flush of colour rose up Bella's neck and filled her cheeks. "That good, huh?"

"Oh it was more than good," Bella said in a strangled tone.

"So what's the problem?" Alice questioned.

"I don't know," Bella replied, "maybe there isn't one. It's just-," she waved a hand in a vague gesture, "I just don't like secrets."

"They're okay if they're *good* secrets," Alice said after a thoughtful pause.

"True, but you know, the last guy I was with that kept a big secret was Jake," Bella said, "and we all know how that turned out."

"Ouch," Alice winced, "okay, point taken," she reached over and patted Bella's hand, "just give the guy a chance, can you do that?"

"I'll try," Bella said.

"C'mon, everyone else seems to be singing his praises, so there's nothing wrong with seeing what all the fuss is about."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jasper paused outside the bakery and read the blackboard with bemusement. Entering the store, he made his way over to the counter. Just as he'd hoped, Alice was working, although for the moment she had her back to the store.

"It looks like you're singing a different tune," he called out.

Alice jumped and turned around at the sound of his voice. "Hey," she greeted, rubbing her suddenly damp hands on her backside. "What are you doing here?"

"It's good to see you, too," Jasper said with an amused smile.

"Sorry," Alice grimaced, "that came out wrong. It's nice to see you, too," she ventured, "I just wasn't expecting to see you today."

"As opposed to the other times we've bumped into each other?"

"I guess," she acknowledged, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

Jasper rested his elbows on the counter and leaned towards her. "So, have you changed your mind about love?"

"Huh?" Alice stared at him.

Jasper nodded over his shoulder towards the entrance. "Your quote of the day, it sounds pretty optimistic for someone that was calling love a virus last night."

"The-," Alice's mind went blank as she tried to remember what she'd written, and then her memory caught up with her. "Oh! Right, no, that one was for Bella."

"Ah," Jasper nodded, "she's the boss, right?"

"Right, that's her over there," Alice pointed to where Bella sat hunched over a magazine.

"Gotcha," Jasper replied, and after a quick glance at Bella stepped forward to inspect the cupcake of the day. His eyebrows went up when he saw the cupcake name. "Nice," he approved, "so I take it things are going well?"

"They could be," Alice said after a careful pause. She liked Jasper, but she wasn't about to discuss Bella's love life with Edward's friend.

Jasper looked up from inspecting the display cabinet at Alice's cautious reply. "For what it's worth, Edward's pretty happy these days," he said.

"Mm-hmm," Alice said, tight-lipped on the subject.

"Hey," Jasper spread his hands in a placatory gesture, "I'm not here fishing for details. I actually came to talk to you about getting some cakes."

"Okay," Alice nodded.

"And your name and number," Jasper added.

The two of them exchanged a long look.

"Smooth," Alice said at last.

"I thought so," Jasper replied, swallowing his grin as Alice went to get a piece of paper and a pen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward looked at the word count and gave a huff of surprise. Over the last few weeks he'd churned out over a hundred thousand words. That would keep Marcus quiet for a while. He tapped a few more keys and finished off the paragraph he'd been writing, and then closed the document.

He rested his chin in his hands and stared out the window, wondering what Bella was going. He glanced at his wrist and then realised he didn't have his watch on, or a shirt for that matter. He looked at the top right corner of his Macbook to check the time, and gave a start of surprise. It was already mid-afternoon, he'd been writing

for over 6 hours. No wonder he'd managed to produce so much. No wonder he was hungry, he realised, rubbing his bare stomach.

Getting up, he headed towards his bedroom to grab a shirt. He didn't feel like being cooped up for the rest of the day. He'd get outside for a walk and grab something to eat before he saw Bella. He still had a few hours to kill, but for the time being the words in his head had gone quiet. He'd make the most of it and get some fresh air. He opened his wardrobe and glanced at his button up shirts, but reached for a soft old t-shirt instead, and grabbed his sneakers.

Jogging down the stairs, he let himself out of the building and paused on the sidewalk, weighing up his options, then set off. Lunch first, then some exploring, then Bella.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella watched as the girls finished their chores for the afternoon. Angela was humming to herself, and Alice seemed distracted. Bella held off on asking what was going on however, as she had enough distractions of her own for the time being.

The girls finished up and departed, and they exchanged a chorus of goodbyes before Bella was left alone in the shop. She wandered back into the kitchen and picked up her bag, looking at her laptop again and deciding to leave it in the store for another night. She looked up at a quick tattoo of knocking on the front window, and saw Edward. She couldn't help but smile at the grin that split his face.

Alice had locked the door after her, so Bella went over to let him in. The door was barely open when Edward had her in his arms.

"Missed you," he said, before giving her a kiss that started the itch beneath her skin all over again as he ran his hands up her arms to cup her face. Bella's lips parted as she leaned into his kiss, and he licked the tip of his tongue into her mouth.

The discoveries she had made earlier in the day could wait, because all she wanted to think about was right now. She fisted a hand in the fabric of his t-shirt as she tried to pull him closer, and then closer still, putting a hand on his bicep to give herself better traction.

Edward was the first to break the kiss, resting his forehead against hers. Bella ran her hand up the nape of his neck, but there was no longer any hair for her to twine her fingers in, so she settled for running her nails over his scalp in a lazy caress. "I'll give you forever to stop that," Edward muttered as he pulled Bella's t-shirt up and ran his hands over her bare back, pulling her hips soft against his.

The itch was getting more insistent now, and Bella closed her eyes as she felt his hardness against her, shivering as his warm hand rested on the small of her back. Somehow she mustered enough willpower to open her eyes and take a small step back.

"We should get out of here," she said, taking a step further as Edward took her hands and followed her.

"Where to?" Edward asked, his eyes not leaving her as she led them out of the store.

"How about a drink and then we take it from there," she suggested. She was going to have to tell him about her discovery sooner or later, and a glass of liquid courage might help.

"Deal," Edward replied, releasing her hand so that she could lock up the store. When she straightened up, he draped his arm around her shoulders and they began to walk. "So how was your day?"

"Busy, but not quick enough," Bella admitted as she leaned into Edward's side, "this is much better."

Edward tightened his arm around her waist and smiled. "You want to go back to the basement again, or shall we try somewhere else?"

"Basement is good," she agreed, putting her arm around his waist as they walked.

It didn't take them long to make their way to the bar, and soon they were settling at a table for two with a bottle of wine being set down before them. The wine was poured, and they made themselves comfortable, moving their chairs closer together.

"So," Edward said, toasting Bella's glass before taking a sip, "how was your day?"

Bella gave him an amused glance, thinking about the daily routine of running a store which didn't seem to vary that much from one day to the next. "You really wanna know?"

"I really wanna know," Edward said, repeating Bella's words. "You're talking to a guy that has been staring at a blank computer screen these past few months, tell me news of the outside world," he said, giving the words an extra relish that made Bella smile.

"Well let me think," Bella sipped her wine, giving herself time to think, then set her glass down and reached over to steeple her fingers against Edward's, "customers came in and bought stuff," she began.

"Always a good sign," Edward encouraged.

"Alice sassed me," Bella continued, "but that's nothing new."

"Routine can be good," Edward said, slipping his fingers through hers, rubbing his thumb over her hand.

"Mm-hmm," Bella replied, shooting him a cautious look, "and I ah, looked you up on the internet."

There was a telling pause.

"Uh-huh," Edward said at last. "So, the secret's out then."

"Kinda," Bella agreed, "what with Alice and Angela seeing it too."

"Right," Edward said, releasing her hand to pick up his wine glass, which he gulped at this time. "So, what did you think?"

Bella chose her words with care. "I think I'm impressed," she began, "and surprised."

Edward swirled the wine in his glass peering into the liquid depths, and then looked up at Bella.

"I mean," she went on, "I know you'd told me you were published, I just didn't expect to discover you had fan sites, or talk about movie options."

Edward grimaced. "Bella, you know that stuff isn't real, right?"

Bella blinked at him, "How can you say that?"

Edward reached up to run his hand through his hair in an entirely unconscious gesture, and had to settle for rubbing the back of his neck. "Well, of course it's real but, you know-," he trailed off, not knowing what to say.

"I don't know, but," Bella twisted in her seat a little, resting a hand on his thigh, the warmth of his body helping to reassure her, "maybe you can tell me about it."

Edward sighed, and gazed at Bella for a long moment. She said nothing in return, but sat waiting for him to speak.

"My writing," he stopped and cleared his throat, looking up as a waiter approached the table with menus, "can you give us a minute?" the waiter nodded and withdrew. "My writing," he began again, "is something that just ... happened. It wasn't something I sought out. When my folks got interested, I kind of went along for the ride. Then I got published and it seemed that everyone was getting excited about something I'd only ever done as a hobby, or a way to kill the time."

"That's how my cupcakes started," Bella smiled, "and look where it got us, huh?"

"So you do understand," Edward said, feeling a rush of relief.

"I'm not sure I'd go that far," Bella cautioned, "but it seems we both fell upon our current paths."

"For sure," Edward agreed. "For me, it was like everyone started taking my musings far more seriously than I ever had. The next thing I knew, I was meeting with editors, going to book signings, giving interviews," he sighed again and gazed at Bella. "I felt like a fraud. It was like it was all some kind of fantasy, but I was the only one getting the joke. I still feel like that sometimes."

Bella sipped at her wine while she considered what Edward had told her. He sat quiet now, his heart in his mouth as he waited for her reaction.

"So, you know this makes you kinda weird, right?" Bella said at last, wrinkling her nose at him.

"What?"

"What are you, some kind of reclusive author with a cupcake fetish?"

"Something like that," he admitted, "I guess it's something you don't hear Stephen King talking about."

"Definitely not," Bella said in a solemn voice, and then gave a dramatic sigh. "Trust me to always attract the weirdos." Now that they had laid their cards on the table, she was feeling like she had gotten a weight off her chest. It had been easier than she had expected.

"I suppose," Edward leaned forward to nuzzle the side of her neck, making her squirm against him, "that's what you get for being so attractive."

Sensing the drop in tension, the waiter approached the table. "Are you ready to order?"

Edward looked up with a smile as he reached for the menu while Bella topped up their glasses. "Thanks."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice let herself into her apartment and headed straight over to her bed, throwing herself onto it with a sigh of relief. She rolled over onto her back and stared at the ceiling, and then glanced over at her laptop, sitting at the small table in front of the window. She considered her options for a moment, and then hauled herself into a sitting position, and then got up and walked towards the desk.

She switched on the laptop, and then went to get herself a glass of juice while it powered up. Taking a seat at the desk, she clicked to open her email, and sat drumming her fingers while she waited for her email messages to download. Minutes later, she was surprised to see an email from an email address she didn't recognise.

*How about we bump into each again soon? In the meantime, I thought you might be interested in this. Jasper.*

She clicked on the attachment and read the contents. She had to give credit where it was due, the man was good: it was an article about an upcoming exhibit at the Fashion Institute of Technology. She read the article and shook her head in quiet amusement while she chugged her juice, her eyes never leaving the screen. An exhibition about fashion and politics: he'd remembered her conversation about Chanel.

He was definitely good.

And she was definitely in trouble.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So how's your writing going," Bella said as she scooped up some more risotto, "your words still giving you trouble?"

"Quite the opposite," Edward said, reaching for another slice of bread, "they won't give me much of a break," he paused and chewed with obvious enjoyment before he continued. "When I got back from your place this morning I went for a run, and thought I'd catch up on some sleep," he paused to leer at Bella who coughed into her glass of wine, "but then I got busy brain."

"Busy brain?" Bella looked up from her meal, licking her lips.

Edward shrugged as he kept eating. "The characters kept talking to me, so all I could do was keep writing. I even managed to lose track of time, so I haven't eaten much today." He looked up to see Bella regarding him with a quizzical expression. "What?"

"Your characters talk to you?"

"Uh," now he felt foolish. "Well, yeah, sometimes." Bella waved her fork for him to continue, so he went on. "I guess, when the story is flowing well, it all unravels in my head visually," he stumbled for a moment, realising that he was talking about his writing process with Bella more than he ever had with anyone else. "When I'm truly involved with it, it's more like I'm transcribing what's going on, rather than creating it myself."

Bella gazed at him, and took another mouthful of risotto while she considered what he'd said. Edward glanced at her, and then occupied himself with his meal, feeling foolish at what he'd revealed.

"Well, I guess that means you're a strange man, Edward Cullen," she said at last, and then leaned over to give him a quick kiss, "but I like you anyway."

"That's good to know," Edward said with some relief.

"Oh I don't know," Bella replied, "I have my moments where Alice is sure I'm not going to appear on the cover of *Sanity Fair* anytime soon, so perhaps like attracts like."

They finished their meal, the conversation bantering back and forth as they revealed and teased information out of each other, each taking a quiet delight as successive details were revealed. Edward discovered Bella had a love of classic literature, which helped reveal why she hadn't read any of his books to date; and Bella discovered Edward had started reading books from his childhood, having been re-introduced to the Bearenstein Bears, courtesy of the bakery.

The evening wound on, and Bella ended up pink-cheeked and giggling perhaps more than the conversation merited, leaning against Edward more and more. After a while Edward slid his hand under the curve of her knee, and hitched her leg over his thigh, pulling her closer to him. Bella leaned in towards him.

"Why Mr Cullen, it appears that you have an ulterior motive this evening."

"It would appear so," he agreed, "what do you propose we do about it?" he smiled into her eyes.

"One or two things spring to mind," Bella replied after what she hoped was a thoughtful, rather than a tipsy, pause.

Edward ran his hand along her thigh. "Such as?" he said in a quiet tone, "I'm going to need a demonstration to be able to follow your point, you understand."

"You writer types, always so literal," Bella answered with a shake of her head. She leaned forward, and brushed a soft kiss against his mouth, then gently ran the tip of her tongue along his lower lip before he parted them and let her in.



The waiter reappeared and removed the plates with as little noise as possible, carrying them back towards the kitchen with a small smile.

"Watch out for table twelve," he advised a waitress on her way out with a drink order, "you might go into sugar shock."

She glanced over to the table and smiled. "Those two were in here the other day," she replied, watching the couple as they talked with their heads close together so that they were practically kissing each other as they spoke. "It looks like things are going well."

"Any better and we'd have to toss a mattress on the floor," the waiter shot back, thinking of his own sex life which was sadly lacking.

Edward ran his hand up Bella's side in a bid to pull her closer still, and nearly succeeded in pulling her off her chair and into his lap.

"You want to take this somewhere else?" Bella said in a breathless tone.

"Hell yeah," Edward replied.

## **Ch15 Serenity and Sleepovers**

"Morning, Boss."

"Alice, don't call me Boss."

"Sorry, Boss," Alice popped her gum with satisfaction as she followed Bella into the store.

"Another day, another dollar," Alice sang as she hung her bag up on the hook and closed the cupboard, waving a greeting to Angela who had just arrived.

"Is that today's quote?" Angela asked as she dropped her bag to shrug out of her coat and carefully tie on her apron.

"Uh-uh, I can do much better than that," Alice said as she walked out to the coffee machine where Bella had already started to make their morning coffees. Alice stood a few paces away, hands on hips as she assessed Bella's wardrobe choice for the day. Bella looked up to see Alice watching her.

"Do I meet with your approval?" she asked, pouring some milk into a stainless steel jug and starting to froth it.

"It's a start," Alice commented with a business-like nod. After repeated begging, Bella had given Alice a few pairs of her jeans to be jazzed up, and today she was feeling particularly pleased with her creative vision. Bella's jeans featured a strip of carefully frayed gold ribbon that had been stitched to the leg seams. After Alice waved an imperious hand, Bella obediently gave a slow turn, revealing the gold dragonfly that Alice had silkscreened onto the back upper thigh of one of the legs.

Bella set the coffee cups on the counter, and then tied on her apron. Alice made her twirl again, so that she could make sure the dragonfly would still be visible. Angela picked up one of the cups and took an appreciative sip before cooing over Bella's refreshed wardrobe.

"Alice, do you think you could do the same for me?" she said with a hopeful smile.

"Nope, sorry," Alice said and took a sip, then continued just as Angela's smile faltered, "I'll do something different for you. No duplications or knock-offs for my girls."

"Really?" Angela's face lit up with excitement.

"Absolutely," Alice replied, taking another sip and reaching for her stub of chalk, "I'm happy to do it for you, Ange, we'll set up a time for me to raid your wardrobe, and then Ben won't know what's hit him. Speaking of which," she turned to Bella, "What does Edward think of the new style?"

"I don't think he's noticed," Bella commented, flicking some coffee into the filter and setting the coffee to start, nodding her thanks as Angela handed her the milk.

"You're kidding, right?" Alice asked in disbelief.

"C'mon, I'm usually in a t-shirt and something," Bella answered, frothing the milk.

"Yeah, Alice, it's not like he's Jasper," Angela teased, nudging Alice as she passed.

"Well," Alice spluttered, "yeah, but-,"

"I can't see Edward taking me to a fashion exhibition," Bella said, flicking a wink at Angela as she poured the milk over the fresh coffee, and then spooned on the milk froth, "how about you, Ange?"

"Nope, Ben looks like he has a migraine coming on when I want to go see a chick flick," Angela supplied, "although he goes along with it anyway."

"And yet here's Alice dating a guy she admits drives her nuts, but he takes her to see stuff she's interested in all the time," Bella said, raising an eyebrow at Alice.

"Dating?" Alice protested, "Wait a minute, have I ever said we were dating?"

Bella gave Angela an amused look as she handed the girls their coffees. "I wouldn't say you've come out and *admitted* it, but I'd have to say that all signs point to yes."

Alice took her coffee and leaned against the counter.

"C'mon, Alice," Angela chided, "what would *you* call it?"

Alice shrugged. "I don't know. *He* seems to think that we're dating, but I'm not so sure."

"Okay," Bella set down her cup and put a companionable arm around Alice's shoulders. "Let's examine the facts shall we? How often do you guys see each other?" Alice mumbled something into her cup as she sipped at her coffee. Bella cocked her head and raised an eyebrow at Angela, who had started to get the ingredients ready for the sandwiches and bagels to be made for the day. "Sorry, I didn't quite catch that."

Alice sighed, "once or twice a week."

"Hmm," Bella sipped at her coffee and nodded thoughtfully, "and how about on the weekends?"

"Sometimes," Alice allowed again.

"How often over the last month have you seen him on a Saturday night?" Angela piped up from her place at the counter. She paused at her task as she and Bella waited for Alice to answer.

"I guess," Alice said, the words coming slowly, "we've caught up three Saturdays in the last month."

"Ah," Bella said, raising an eyebrow to Angela, who nodded.

"What?" Alice looked up, and then looked from Bella to Angela and back again. "*What?*"

"Alice," Bella hugged her again, "try not to take this too hard, but it sounds like you've got yourself a boyfriend."

Alice moaned and put her head in her hands. "No I haven't, you can't say that."

"Sorry hon," Angela chimed in, "but she just did."

"This has disaster written all over it," Alice said, chugging her coffee back and gathering up the other two now-empty cups to put them in the dishwasher before picking up her apron that had been left on the bench.

"What makes you say that?" Angela paused, bagel in hand.

Alice huffed at Angela as she tied on her apron, "Because," she replied, "I'm meant to be the one grilling you two about *your* love lives, not the other way round." She picked up the chalkboard with a flourish and reached for the chalk. "Now if you'll excuse me, *some* of us have work to do."

Bella and Angela watched her go.

"That was a pretty smooth change of subject," Angela commented.

"Oh yeah, she's good," Bella replied, and then turned to Angela. "She has a point though, how are things going with you and Bookstore Ben?"

Angela gave a quiet smile of satisfaction. "All good, Boss," she allowed with a smile as she looked up, "how about you and writer boy?"

"Great," Bella said with an answering smile. "He's cooking me dinner tonight and I'm having my first sleepover."

Angela's eyebrows went up at that. "Finally," she said, slathering some avocado onto a bagel, "I was starting to wonder if you were ever going to spend a night at his place."

"Hey," Bella objected, "I've been to his place before."

"Uh-huh," Angela answered, "but this is the first time you've stayed the night." She paused and wagged her spatula for emphasis, "this means things are getting serious."

"Right," Bella was amused now, glancing over at Alice who was making her way back inside, tossing her stub of chalk from hand to hand. "Okay girl, so what is it today?"

Alice reached the counter and leaned over with a broad smile. "Today's is: *Seek serenity, and if you can't find it, seek cupcakes.*" She dropped the piece of chalk into its glass with a 'plink', and dusted her hands with satisfaction as she gave Bella a superior look. "Top *that*, Boss."

"Damn," Bella put her hands on her hips and turned, walking slowly into the kitchen. "That's a good one, I'll give you that." She stood in front of the oven, hands on hips, thinking hard, and then pulled out one of her recipe notebooks. Thinking back to Alice's daily quote, a random word association began to flicker through her mind, and then she began to smile as she snapped the notebook shut with a decisive snap. She knew what she was going to make.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're cooking?" Jasper asked, shooting Edward a quizzical look.

"Yup," Edward answered.

The two of them had met up for a morning jog, and were making their way around the park for a second time. Edward's fitness had been increasing by the day and he was at last starting to push Jasper's endurance, albeit only slightly so far.

"So what are you going to make?"

"I haven't quite worked that bit out yet," Edward admitted, making Jasper give a huff of laughter, "I'll figure that out when I back home."

"Just so we're clear," Jasper said, "are you actually able to cook?"

"C'mon," Edward protested, "you've eaten my cooking before."

"If you can call it that, dude, but that was years ago. Have you progressed much past bachelor fare?"

"Oh yeah," he grunted, although he had to admit that Jasper had a point. For a while there he had subsisted on a small repertoire of tried and true recipes like lasagne and spaghetti bolognese before his mother had taken him in hand and proceeded to give him a thorough kitchen education. The subsequent years of self-sufficiency and an assortment of girlfriends to impress had led to a level of culinary finesse that would have made Jasper very surprised indeed.

"There's a ringing endorsement," Jasper commented, "but you know there's no shame in chickening out and ordering Chinese."

"Give me a break," Edward protested, cuffing Jasper on the shoulder as they jogged towards the park gates, laughing.

"How's it going with you and Alice?" Edward asked, groaning as he leaned forward over his hips into a cool-down stretch, reaching his hands towards the ground.

"Going good," Jasper allowed, his lips curving into a slight grin.

Edward straightened up from his stretch and looked at Jasper. "It must be good for you to be grinning like that," he commented.

"Huh?" Jasper looked surprised.

Edward waved a hand to indicate Jasper's face. "Mom said I had a goofy grin like that when I was starting to get to know Bella, so it looks like you're not too far behind."

"Right," Jasper gave an amused snort as they went through the rest of their stretches, and then looked uncertainly at Edward a few minutes later, "Is it that obvious?"

"Yup," Edward replied, "but if you want to be absolutely certain I can take you over to see the folks so that Mom can-,"

"No," Jasper cut in hurriedly, "that's fine. God, she'd be straight on the phone to *my* Mom."

The two men began to walk out of the park, still talking.

"I don't think she'd be that bad," Edward said in a mild tone.

"Oh no? She told my folks about you and Bella weeks ago," Jasper replied with a grin.

Edward gave him a surprised look. "Really? But I only just told them her name last week."

"Apparently she was just excited that her boy had met a girl," Jasper patted Edward on the shoulder, "so imagine how happy she'll be when she finds out you're not only still happily dating, but you're cooking your girl a romantic meal."

Edward gave him a hard look. "You wouldn't."

"Why not?" Jasper waggled his eyebrows, enjoying himself immensely.

"Because then I'd tell Mom about you and Alice," Edward retorted.

They walked on while Jasper considered his options.

"Okay," he conceded with a slight sigh, "you win."

"I thought you'd see it my way," Edward said in a placid voice.

They stopped at the intersection and then crossed when the lights changed. The two men were hot and sweaty from their run and their faces were red with exertion. They still drew a number of appreciative looks from women as they passed by but neither of them paid the female attention any heed as they kept talking about the women in their lives.

"So this is what it's come to, huh?" Jasper mused. "We're two strong, independent, 31 year old men, but we're still afraid of our moms."

"Guess that means they've done their job right after all," Edward said with a laugh.

\* \* \* \*

"Still hard at work I see," Alice popped her head around the kitchen doorway, her eyes sparkling. She could almost taste victory this morning. She was sure her serenity quote would have Bella stumped.

"Nearly there," Bella said, flicking her hand at Alice in a shooing gesture, "I'll be out with the first batch in a couple of minutes."

"Did you think of a cupcake to match the quote?" Alice leaned around the doorframe a bit more, trying to peer at the box Bella was opening.

"I guess you'll have to wait and see," Bella replied. "Go on back out there, you'll see what I'm up to soon enough."

"How about a hint?" Alice wheedled.

"Nope," Bella said, smiling as she picked up the frosting bag and aimed it at the last cupcake. She'd dip into the box's contents once Alice was out the way.

"How about I do my puppy eyes?"

"Uh-uh, scat," Bella said. "Go on," she said in a warning tone, "don't make me come over there."

"Going now," Alice squeaked and headed back out into the store.

Angela looked up with a laugh as she saw Alice re-appear. "No luck?"

"None," Alice admitted, "but I still think I've got her on the ropes this time." She swiped a slice of tomato off the chopping board and popped it into her mouth before Angela could protest.

"You've said that before," Angela replied, making up another salad sandwich, "but she gets you every time." She slid the finished sandwich onto a plate and added a small garnish before putting it into the display counter.

Alice watched her work, admiring her deftness of touch. "What did we ever do without you? My sandwiches were never~~that~~ good."

"They always taste better when someone else makes them," Angela replied with a shrug, "I prefer the ones you make." She looked up as a thought occurred to her. "Does Bella ever eat cupcakes?"

"Uh," Alice thought, "actually now that you mention it, probably not as many as you'd think. She seems to have one every other day and I know she has a soft spot for frosting."

"Oh, who doesn't?" Angela grinned, and then glanced over Alice's shoulder, "heads up, moment of truth at four o'clock."

"What?" Alice spun around to see Bella appear with the first tray of cupcakes.

"Here you go," Bella announced as she slid the tray into the display cabinet and then straightened with a flourish as she faced Alice. "You ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Alice replied, having darted around the counter to pick up her chalk.

"*Peace Out*, vanilla cupcake with chocolate frosting topped with *Reese's Pieces*. Get it? Serenity ... peace ... pieces," Bella gave Alice an expectant look.

Alice scribbled furiously on the mini chalkboard and held it out in front of her for critical inspection with a sigh.

"Well I'll be damned," she sighed, "you've done it again, Boss."

"Only just," Bella said, giving Alice a quick hug. "You really had me on the run this time."

"I still didn't win though," Alice said, managing a wry grin. Damn. She really thought she had her this morning too. She was just going to have to try harder.

"One day," Bella chuckled her under the chin and then headed back to the kitchen. "You'll get me one day."

"Mmph," Alice said, crossing her arms and giving Bella a mock pout. "Well you know I'll be waiting."

"You know you love it," Bella called over her shoulder.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward frowned with indecision at the laptop screen, unsure if he loved or hated what he had written that morning. There were a lot of words on the screen, but their tone had become less assured as he had begun to tire. He re-read the pages and shook his head. It felt like a half-hearted attempt at best. Experience had taught him to remove but not delete, so he cut and pasted the bulk of the day's efforts into a separate document. Perhaps it could be recycled into something more pleasing later. He got up from his seat and stretched, then checked the time. He still hadn't decided what he was going to cook for Bella, and he stood at his desk, staring out the window and let his mind wander. After a while, he shook himself out of his daze and picked up his wallet and keys, hesitating as he looked at the laptop again. No more words came, so he turned and left with a clear conscience.

Heading through SoHo Edward glanced at his surroundings and the people around him as he made his way towards his usual grocery store. Strolling past a small gift shop, he pulled up short and then backtracked to the display window, peering in at a small reclining Buddha figurine. It reminded him of Bella and made him smile. Words began to whisper at the back of his mind. He walked on, and the words followed.

A few stops later, Edward had purchased everything he needed, and the words had accumulated to become a dull roar. Shifting the carry bags handles to a more comfortable grip, he walked on, stopping in at a liquor store to pick up a bottle of wine which he added to his load, hoping the plastic would hold out. Pausing on the sidewalk, he considered his purchases and the trip home, and then thought better of it and hailed a cab. Shoving the bags of shopping across the backseat, he got in and after giving his address, rummaged around for one of the receipts, and then realised he didn't have a pen. The words kept coming, but he'd be home soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Is it time to go home yet?" Alice gave the clock a mournful look, "surely it's home time somewhere."

"Not yet," Angela replied as she finished stacking the dishwasher, "but we're getting there."

"Not soon enough," Alice groused, "I'm ready to start my weekend."

"Big plans?"

"No," Alice admitted, "but I'm looking forward to sleeping in and not having anywhere I have to be. How about you, are you going to be seeing Ben?"

"Yup," Angela grinned, "we're going to catch a movie tonight and then find what Ben calls a 'cheap and cheerful' for dinner."



"Sounds good, and after that?" Alice raised an eyebrow meaningfully.

"Ah, well,-" Angela hedged, "we'll see how the evening goes. How about you and Jasper, any sleepovers yet?" She was stacking plates for a moment before she realised there had been no reply. "Alice?" She turned. Alice was wiping down the coffee machine with a look of fierce concentration. "Alice?"

"I'm not saying," Alice replied at last.

"Why not?" Angela was curious now. It wasn't like Alice to keep quiet on the subject, and was surprised when Alice turned and gave her a hesitant look.

"Because I'm not entirely sure what's going on, but whatever it is, I don't want to jinx it," she said at last. "Jasper's ... different."

"And it's making you different too," Angela added.

"Different good, or different bad?" Alice said after an anxious pause.

"There was nothing wrong with you to begin with, and it's nothing bad. You're just ... different. Whatever he's doing babe, he's doing it right."

Alice considered this. "If you thought it was something bad, you'd tell me, right?"

"If you promise never to shoot the messenger." Angela clarified. "I've seen too many friendships go down in flames because friends have said that they thought."

"Pinky swear," Alice replied, offering a hand. The girls shook on the deal with solemn faces, and then began to laugh.

"Seriously though," Angela said as they subsided, "Jasper's got you in a good place, so I really hope things work out."

"We'll see," Alice nodded.

"Speaking of good places, Bella and Edward seem to be happy," Angela ventured as they both got back to work.

"For sure," Alice agreed, "she handed the whole 'famous author' thing a lot better than I thought."

Angela looked up from wiping down the counter, "what, you thought she'd freak out?"

"Not as such," Alice shrugged, "but she's a person that likes to keep things honest. You know Emmett and you've heard stories about her parents, so you know she's from a family of straight shooters."

"Straight, yeah, so Jacob must've rocked her world a bit," Angela quipped, getting a wry smile from Alice.

"You think?" Alice agreed, "Just a bit. She told me that she and Jacob had a *lot* of talks about that once she got over the shock. She's also saw a therapist for a while too."

"Really?" Angela looked amazed. Bella seemed to be one of the most grounded people she knew.

"I know she comes across as 'Little Miss Confident', but think about it, she loses her father in a car accident and can't remember a thing, then her first *serious* boyfriend reveals that he's gay. She still has a lot of self esteem issues at times, but she's working on it."

"Wow," Angela went back to wiping the counter down, slower this time as she processed what Alice had said. "I guess that'd be pretty hard."

"For sure. She lost the man that was the cornerstone of her life in the blink of an eye, and then a year later the guy that she'd totally bared herself to in every sense of the word totally rejects her. It's a lot for a young woman to take."

"She's told you all this?"

"Not in so many words," Alice rinsed out the steel milk jug and began to wipe it dry. "She's said a few things here and there, and Emmett has made the odd comment. Jacob was the one that has told me the most, so I've pieced it all together over time."

"Jacob?" Angela looked up in disbelief. "He told you?"

"Granted we were both drunk at the time," Alice shrugged, "but yeah. He told me all about it. He loves Bella dearly, just not in *that* way, which is why he's still around. For all that he's hurt her, he's still very protective."

"Isn't that a double standard?" Angela rinsed out her washcloth and hung it over the sink to dry.

"Might be to some, could be his way of atoning. Either way, he's not going anywhere until Bella tells him to."

"I wonder what he'll make of Edward," Angela mused.

"I think as long as Bella's happy I think he'll be okay, but if he hurts her, I wouldn't want a bitch queen like Jacob against me. But speaking of which-," she nodded towards the door, and Angela turned to see Edward walking towards the counter, pushing his sunglasses up onto his head.

"Hey Alice, Angela," Edward nodded at each of them in turn with a smile. "How's your day been?"

"Busy as usual, but we're winding down for the day now," Angela replied, running an appreciative eye over his jeans and t-shirt. *Ben. Remember Ben.* She gave a quiet sigh. Just because she was on a diet didn't mean she couldn't appreciate the buffet. Angela watched, amused as Alice turned the full force of her charm on Edward and it had no effect.

"Edward," Alice rested her elbows on the counter and leaned forward to give him a leisurely inspection, "you're looking good," she gave him a cheeky wink. Her grin broadened as he gave a slight cough to cover his embarrassment. "Are you here for your girl?"

Angela delighted in the slight tinge of pink that coloured Edward's cheeks at the mention of Bella.

"I am," he replied with a smile, "is she here?"

"She's out running an errand," Alice answered, "but she's due back any minute. You want a coffee while you wait?"

"If it's no trouble," Edward began, reaching for his wallet.

"Sorry, Edward, your money's no good here," Alice said, rebuffing his offer with a smile. "Take a seat and we'll bring it over."

Edward flashed a smile of thanks and strolled towards a table against the wall. Angela smiled too as she realised he had chosen a spot where he could keep an eye on the door while he flicked through a copy of an old National Geographic that he had snagged off the bookshelf. Angela cast her gaze around the store, and seeing nothing urgent that needed doing, strolled over and leaned against the counter next to the cash register to chat to Alice while she made Edward's coffee.

"They make a cute pair," Angela commented.

"Sure do, and his style is loosening up too," Alice replied as she waited for the espresso to filter through into the cup.

"Well, yeah, I guess he's looking pretty relaxed," Angela said in a doubtful tone, wondering what she was missing as she looked over at Edward again. He was leaning back in his chair with his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles as he flicked through the magazine, smiling here and there.

"No, I meant his style," Alice clarified as she reached for a saucer, "remember how he always used to wear button-down shirts and leather shoes? Look at him now."

Angela hadn't paid much attention to what Edward usually wore, but she had to admit on closer inspection that Alice had a point. Edward was wearing an old pair of jeans and a t-shirt that featured the iconic image of Che Guevara. A pair of grey Chucks completed the outfit, and Angela smiled when she noticed them, wondering if he knew that they were also Bella's usual footwear of choice.

"How about," Alice began, spooning the milk froth into the cup and placing on the saucer, "you take this over to Edward, and then we can start cashing up and closing for the day. It's getting on, and I think Bella's going to want to close on time when she gets back. We might as well get a head start on things for her."

"Sounds good, you want to put some more music on?" Angela said as she picked up the cup and saucer.

"On it," Alice said as she headed over to the stereo and started to flick through the CD case that sat on top of it.

Angela rounded the counter and collected the coffee to take over to Edward. Now that she had a better look at him, which in itself was never a hardship, she saw that Alice had been right. Both the jeans and the t-shirt looked old and soft, and he hadn't shaved for a couple of days which made him look all the more relaxed. He looked like a man taking his ease, rather than the distracted and polite man they had initially called 'the Lion King'. Bella had told them about his writers' block a few weeks ago, and that he was now writing again.

Angela had told Ben about Edward's identity, and on their next date he had given her a copy of Edward's last book. It had taken her a week to read it, as she had found herself in the unusual situation of constantly putting it down and walking away from it the closer she got to the finish because she hadn't wanted the story to end. There was no doubt that Edward was a very talented wordsmith. When she had discovered just how famous Edward was in the literary world, she had felt shy around him when he had appeared in the bakery days later. It felt strangely intimidating, to know someone who was so obviously talented and highly regarded, which made her feel quite ordinary by comparison. Alice had soon helped her put things into perspective, pointing out that Edward had to make a living just like anyone else. Angela had watched him on subsequent visits, delighting in his natural reticence and his obvious deep affection for Bella.

Alice in the meantime, hadn't read any of Edward's books as she gave all of her devotion to Vogue and Harpers Bazaar. Her seeming lack of knowledge about Edward's literary achievements meant that she treated him in her usual disarming manner: harmless flirting and teasing whenever he came in, which he responded to with an endearing mixture of warmth and embarrassment. His lack of ego had him fumbling for words whenever Alice called him out on his striking good looks, which amused and amazed them both.

"She should be back soon," Angela said in a gentle tone, setting the cup down and turning the saucer so that the cup handle was pointing the right way for Edward to pick it up, "she's just running a couple of errands."

"Thanks, Angela, I'm in no rush," he nodded his thanks.

She returned to the counter and popped open the cash register drawer, to start counting and bundling the bills as Alice began unstacking the dishwasher and drying cups to stack back onto the shelf. Soon the pair of them had fallen into an easy pattern of talking and singing along to the music.

\* \* \* \*

Bella strolled through the Village humming to herself as she walked, enjoying the afternoon sunshine. There had been a lull in the afternoon trade, so she had taken the opportunity to walk the previous day's takings to the bank. Now the day was winding to a close and people's thoughts were moving on from coffee and cupcakes to food, which Bella thought, was exactly the way it should be.

She was looking forward to dinner with Edward this evening, partly because she was curious to see what sort of a cook he was, but mostly because it meant they had a whole evening and the following day to spend together. She remembered her surprise the first time she had seen Edward's home. It had been one thing to discover he was a successful author, another thing to walk into the luxurious surroundings that his success had afforded him. Even more surprising however, was Edward's admission that he preferred spending time in her home, rather than his.

"Your place is warmer," he had admitted.

"I won't argue with that, the air conditioner doesn't work very well," she had laughed, trailing her fingers along one of the bookshelves as she tried to take it all in.

"No," he had gone on to explain, "your place feels like a home, this is-," he waved a hand to indicate the apartment, "just space, you know?"

Bella had gazed at him in wonder. "Then who decorated it?" She looked at the tasteful floor rugs, the carefully placed lamps and pictures.

Edward had shoved his hands into his pockets, shoulders hunched forward. "Mom," he admitted. "When I bought the place she offered to help out because she didn't want it to look too much like a bachelor pad."

"Have you added anything of yours?" she walked towards him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"The books," he answered, indicating the wall of bookshelves with a quirk of his brow, "just one or two."

"Just one or two," she agreed, and then bit her lip.

Edward had reached up to tilt her chin so she was looking at him. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

"Well," she began, "do you like spending time here?"

"I didn't used to," Edward said, leading her over to a sofa and pulling her down beside him, "but now that you're here it's different."

"Maybe the trick is to make it an environment that you want to be in," she had suggested before he had silenced her with a kiss. They were somewhat distracted after that.

Since that conversation however, Edward had been peppering her with questions; wanting details about the bakery and her apartment. He had inspected the fox print and drink coasters hanging in their frames side by side, the large oriental urn at the back of the store containing a mix of umbrellas that had been painted by Alice and were available on a 'take one, leave one' basis for customers during winter. Even the Buddha hand ornaments that stood on her bookshelf at home had been studied and discussed after dinner. Nothing escaped his notice.

She crossed the street at the lights and glanced down the street to see the red canvas canopy fluttering in the mild breeze. Even after all this time, she sometimes still wanted to hug herself at the thought of owning her own business. It was a never-ending slog, but she liked being independent and being able to do with the store what she wished. Not that ownership or lack thereof had ever stopped Alice from putting her own stamp on things. Between the two of them, they had given the bakery a style that was entirely unique. The charm seemed to beguile the customers as well, as after five years they had acquired a loyal clientele.

As she reached the door, she stood aside to let a couple of customers exit with a smile and then went inside. Out of habit, she glanced over at the counter first to see Alice and Angela laughing between them as they worked, and then she saw Edward relaxing at a table. When he saw that she had seen him, his smile matched hers as she walked over.

"Hey," she greeted as she bent down to give him a soft kiss.

"Hey, yourself," he replied, running his hands over her hips and cupping the back of her thighs to pull her closer. Bella leaned against his side; her warm body flush against his, and slid her hand around the back of his neck. "How's my girl?"

"Getting better all the time," she replied, feeling herself relax under his touch as his thumbs rubbed lazy circles over her denim thighs. She nodded towards the National Geographic on the table. "Checking out the boobs?"

"I am now," he said, nuzzling his face into her side and making her laugh.

"I meant in the magazine," she said.

"Ah, my mistake," he gave her a lazy smile, "No boobs there, I've been reading an article about wool while I was waiting for you, but not that you mention it," he pulled her closer and kissed her again, longer this time.

"Hey you two, get a room," Alice called from the counter.

"Like you can talk," Bella shot back, laughing as Alice ducked out of sight. "I caught her and Jasper necking in the kitchen last week," she said in response to Edward's curious expression.

"Ah," he said with a grin, "it sounds like the two of them are going well."

"Very," Bella answered, "although Alice still can't quite work out what's going on. She's used to bad boys, so Jasper is a bit of a shock to the system." She smiled at the small woman who was working with her back to them now. "He's keeping her on her toes, and I think that's good for the little dynamo."

"Jasper seems happy," Edward observed, thinking of his friend's smile whenever he mentioned Alice.

"It's all good," Bella replied, trying to ignore the little voice in her head wondering how long it was going to last. "Are you okay to wait while we finish up?"

"Sure, is there anything I can do to help?" Edward asked, still holding her close.

"It looks like the girls have everything under control," Bella said, "but I'd better pitch in and do my bit, and then we can head off." She smiled and walked behind the counter to join in.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward waved off Alice and Angela as Bella tugged the door closed, and then pulled on the roll down security door, which she locked. Bella added her voice to the chorus of farewells before checking the lock again, and then straightened up to take Edward's hand. They set off towards Edward's, and had gone half a block before Edward shook off her hand and snaked his arm around her waist.

"Do you want to stop off for a drink on the way back to mine?"

"Not unless you want to," Bella replied, "I'm just looking forward to kicking back on your sofa and taking my shoes off."

"Hmm," Edward kissed the top of her head, "high maintenance, huh?"

"That's me," Bella sighed, which turned into a small yawn. "Sorry."

Edward looked at her in surprise. He was still feeling energised from his afternoon of writing. The words had been bubbling in his head all the way home, and he had been distracted enough to give the cab driver an unexpectedly generous tip as he had snatched up his bags and made his way inside. The cold food items had been quickly stashed in the refrigerator before he had made his way to his desk and pulled up his chair. For a brief moment he had stared out the window again, before the words rose up in volume and pulled him back to the page. By the time the words had slowed to a trickle, he had discovered that it was almost time to go and meet Bella. He had snatched up his keys again, cursing that he hadn't allowed himself to start the dinner prep, and reassured himself with the thought that the evening held no time constraints.

"Are you okay?" he asked, noticing for the first time that she was looking pale.

"I'm fine, just a bit tired," she replied, leaning into him a little more as they walked. "I'm looking forward to dinner though, what are you cooking?"

"You'll find out soon," he said, "although to be honest I haven't started cooking anything yet. I got some ideas while I was out shopping earlier, so I've been working all afternoon." He gave her an apologetic look. "Sorry."

"For what?" she looked up at him in surprise, "You're sorry you were writing? Edward, it's what you do. It's a part of who you are."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here you are," Jasper said, sliding into the stool beside Alice where she sat at the bar and giving her a quick kiss. "How was your day?"

"Good," Alice smiled, hoping her face hadn't lit up like a Christmas tree as soon as he had appeared. *Play it cool.* "Better now that my weekend has officially started."

"Well I think we'd better celebrate that with something nice," Jasper said, "How about I take us somewhere for dinner?"

Alice glanced around the bar. "What's wrong with here?"

"I thought we were celebrating," Jasper said, "we can do better than a bar somewhere."

"It's okay," Alice shrugged, "I don't need special."

"Well I think you do, and I'm paying so let's go," Jasper said in a quiet but firm tone. He put his hand over hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Come on Alice, let me spoil you a little." Alice opened her mouth to protest. "No strings," he said.

She nodded, and sipped at the last of her wine. Setting the glass down, she turned to Jasper.

"Ready?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be," she replied, and slid off the stool. He held the door for her as they exited the bar, and then offered her his arm. "Are you always this much of a gentleman?"

"It's how I was raised, to give women respect," he replied, drawing her hand through the crook of his arm and holding it close.

"Oh yeah," Alice said, feeling out of her depth. "So the whole act was drilled into you, huh?"

Jasper looked at her in mild surprise, "Not at all, Mom and Dad set the standards and showed me by example," he shrugged.

"It must've been nice," Alice said, not noticing how wistful she sounded, "growing up like that."

"It worked for me," Jasper smiled. "Now, what do you feel like for dinner?"

"What do you feel like?" Alice countered.

"I'm the one spoiling you, remember? If you could eat anything you wanted, what would it be?" Jasper glanced away from their path and looked at Alice, who was deep in thought.

"You know," she said slowly, "I think right now I want a martini, and anything beyond that I'm putting myself in your hands."

Jasper smiled and rubbed her hand as they walked on. "I'll remember that."

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Bella gave a groan of contentment as she sank down onto the sofa. "I'd almost forgotten how good it is to sit down."

"I didn't think your day had been that bad," Edward said, reappearing from the kitchen with a bottle of wine and two glasses. Bella shifted her feet enough for him to sit down on the sofa beside her, and then set out pouring their drinks. "Here's to Saturday night," he said, offering her a glass. Bella accepted it, and they chinked their glasses together in a toast to the weekend.

"Oh that's so good," Bella sighed, taking another sip and then leaning back on a cushion.



Edward rubbed her calf with his hand. "How about you relax, and I'll go get dinner started."

"I love it when you talk dirty," Bella yawned. Edward gave a short chuckle and brushed a kiss on her forehead as he got up. Bella reached up to trail her hand down his thigh, letting her arm drop back to her side as he moved away. She curled up on her side and pulled the cushion into a comfortable place behind her head. Her position gave her a partial view of the kitchen, and she caught glimpses of Edward as he moved around, selecting pots and starting the oven. She yawned again, her eyes fluttering closed, and then she saw nothing at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice looked around her in amazement as she draped her napkin across her lap. "I can't believe I haven't seen this place before."

"You like it?" Jasper smiled at her reaction. He'd ushered her into a cab for a trip to the Red Cat Martini Bar. "I know it doesn't look that fancy, but when you said you wanted a martini this place was the first one I thought of."

"It's all good," Alice murmured, having found the drinks menu. "Oh my god," she said, "you weren't kidding, Martini ahoy."

Jasper laughed and caught the eye of a waiter. "I think we're going to need drinks to start," he said. Alice looked up and smiled at him, her eyes shining.

He was very pleased with his choice.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward stood at the foot of the sofa, smiling down at the sleeping Bella. He had a choice: to wake her up, or let her sleep. He considered the options, and then moved to bend over and kiss her cheek.

"Bella, honey-," he whispered, and reached out to trail a finger across her cheek, smiling as she sighed and shifted a little before blinking her eyes open.

"Did I fall asleep?" she asked, her voice groggy.

"Something like that," he replied, amused at her dazed expression.

"I'm sorry," she said, and struggled into a sitting position, "that was rude."

"Not at all," he assured her, sitting on the coffee table across from her and rubbing her knees. "It's nice that you feel comfortable enough here to relax like that, and besides," he went on, "dinner's ready."

Bella's eyes widened at that. "How long was I asleep?"

"Over an hour," Edward said, grinning at her dismay, "like I said, don't worry about it, if you're still hungry I can serve it up."

"Oh I'm hungry," Bella said, taking him by the hands and standing up, "let's eat. What's on the menu?"

"You'll find out in a minute." Edward picked up her wine glass and led her to the marble kitchen bench, which he had cleared and set for two. Gesturing for her to take a seat at one of the leather stools, he handed Bella her wine glass and set about serving. Bella sipped at her wine, enjoying the pepper of the Shiraz, and twisted a little in her seat to peer at what Edward was doing.

"Is that," she paused, not quite believing what she had glimpsed, "rack of lamb?"

"It is," Edward flashed a grin over his shoulder as he slid the lamb onto a platter. A moment later he set the plate down on the counter with a flourish. "Rack of lamb, hasselback potatoes and a green herbed salad."

Bella stared at the platter and then back at Edward. "Where did you grow up, Stepford?"

Edward choked back a laugh as he began to serve. "Thank my Mom. She was determined that I wasn't going to end up as another woman's problem, so she made sure I learned how to cook properly," he slid a portion of lamb onto Bella's plate and indicated that she help herself to the vegetables. "Then I had a few years of trial and error cooking myself."

"And it seems to have worked," Bella said, scooping up some salad. "Your Mom sounds wonderful and terrifying all at once. My Mom's idea of home cooking was macaroni and cheese made from scratch, Charlie ended up doing most of the cooking."

"Is that why you're a good cook yourself?"

"Pretty much," Bella replied, "I started helping Charlie out when I was old enough, and then Emmett and I became self sufficient early on. It was a big help later when-" her expression flickered before she shook off the mood and continued, "when we moved here."

The mood in the kitchen dimmed for a moment before Bella shook her head and lifted her glass with a smile. "Here's to a wonderful meal," she said.

Edward picked up his glass and chinked it against hers, "Here's to us," he replied, his eyes never leaving hers as he sipped.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jasper watched as Alice set her glass down with a sigh. "Good?"

"Oh, so good," Alice said, smiling at Jasper. "My first blueberry Martini, and it's wonderful."

Jasper propped his elbow on table, and rested his chin in his hand, gazing at Alice as she relaxed further. They had enjoyed a simple meal, talking about their week. Alice had told him about some of the customers she'd had, the quotes and cupcakes, and Jasper had entertained her with student excuses and questions. He watched as Alice's polite reserve that had flickered to life when he had met her after work, began to dim, and then fall

away to ashes. Her face became animated and her laughter came freely. She had engaged in a spirited debate over the latest Radiohead album, and had worked her way three Martinis in the process.

"We'd better get you something to eat soon, otherwise you're not going to be able to walk out of here," Jasper observed, noting that the hand holding his own drink wasn't too steady either.

"You know," Alice said suddenly, "I'm having a really good time."

Jasper's eyebrows went up at the unexpected statement. "Well that's good to know."

"I mean really. I'm having a really good time. With you." Alice said, cocking her head, "why is that?"

"Uh, I'm not too sure what you mean."

"You're a strange one, Jasper Whitlock," she said, wagging her finger at him. "You're this quiet guy that really gets on my nerves, and yet other times it's like this," she fished out the blueberries on a toothpick skewer and ate them with relish, narrowing her eyes at him as she chewed, "so what's the deal?"

"No deal," Jasper shrugged.

"Bull."

"No bull either," Jasper fixed her with a steady gaze. "I like you."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You like?" Edward said, kissing her as he picked up her dinner plate.

"Would licking my plate clean be going too far?" Bella replied as she topped up their wine.

"It'd be one way of complimenting the chef," Edward said as he stacked their plates in the dishwasher drawer and slid it shut, "but I'm sure you'll think of something."

"I can't believe I fell asleep and missed the floor show of you getting that incredible meal ready," Bella commented, "I would've loved to see you in action." Edward raised an eyebrow at that and she giggled into her glass, "You know what I mean."

"Actually there wasn't that much to see," he said, picking up his glass and leading her back to the sofa, "Once I got it all ready I did some more writing while you slept."

Bella sat down on the couch, curling her legs up and leaning into Edward's side. "I'm sorry I was such poor company," she said.

"Quite the contrary," Edward said, putting his arm around her shoulders and pulling her closer still so that she ended up half reclined across his lap.

He had called out a question to her from the kitchen and when he got no answer, had walked into the living room to see her curled up and asleep on the sofa. He had simply stood there for a long moment watching her sleep, taking in her deep and even breaths, looking at the way her hair spilled across the cushion. He had gone about the dinner preparations as quietly as possible, and then took his seat at his desk and worked for an hour before waking her. He had given the words free rein, and now they had subsided for the evening, content.

"So, any other plans for this evening?" Bella asked, shifting more comfortably against him.

"I took the liberty of getting a movie for the evening, in honour of our first accidental date," he replied, "pass me the remote?"

Bella leaned forward and plucked it off the coffee table, and handed it to him with a questioning look.

"You've probably seen this one, but I'm really hoping you don't mind a re-run."

Bella watched the screen as the opening credits began. "The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie," she turned to Edward with a smile, "I love this movie, it's one of my absolute favourites."

"Are you sure you're okay with this? I can change it," he began, and was waved to silence.

"Don't you dare," Bella curled herself up against him, resting her head on his shoulder. Edward tipped his head to rest against the top of hers, taking a deep breath and inhaling her scent.

"By the way," he asked after a moment, "what perfume do you wear?"

"Mmm?" Bella was distracted in part by the movie, but Edward proved to be a headier distraction; the warmth of his body, the rise and fall of his chest, the way his fingers traced absent-minded patterns against her arm.

"You always smell so beautiful, what is it that you wear?"

"Allure, by Chanel," Bella replied, "although I'm surprised I don't smell like the shop most of the time."

Edward nudged at her neck with his nose, and she obligingly tilted her head so that he could leave a trail of kisses. She shivered as he inhaled with obvious pleasure.

"You always smell like cake and sunshine to me," he whispered, "it's beautiful, just like you."

"Careful there, Mister, them's kissin' words," Bella smiled.

"Let me know what else I have to say then," Edward said, nipping at her earlobe and making her jump.

"I'll keep you posted," Bella replied with a drowsy smile.

They went back to watching the movie, entwined in each other's arms.

Saturday night ticked on, and neither of them had to go or be anywhere other than with each other. Bella was glad she wasn't going home tonight.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So I guess I'll see you again soon?" Jasper smiled down at her. They had lingered over dinner and a few more drinks before deciding to call it a night. Having caught a cab, Alice had insisted they get out and walk the final block because she wanted some fresh air, and had giggled up the steps to the front door of her building aided by an amused Jasper.

"How someone as small as you can drink so much I'll never know," he had muttered.

"Years of practice," she quipped.

"You didn't answer my question though, can I see you again soon?" Jasper gently trailed a finger through Alice's fringe, getting her hair out of her eyes.

"Sure," Alice said, offering him a dazzling smile that had been amplified by a few martinis.

"Okay then, I'll call you tomorrow," Jasper kissed her forehead, his lips lingering for a moment, before turning and heading down the steps.

Alice watched him go, twisting her keys in her hand. "Hey, Jasper," Alice called, making him stop and turn around with a smile.

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?" she stood, uncertain at the top of the stairs. Jasper climbed back up the stairs to stand in front of her.

"Sure,"

Alice reached up to trace a finger around one of his shirt buttons, staring fixedly at his chest. "How come you haven't made a move on me yet?"

"I thought I had been," Jasper replied, "we're dating after all."

"Yeah but," Alice tipped her head to look up at him, "don't you want more?"

Jasper looked at her and swallowed hard. "Oh I want," he said, reaching up to cup her shoulders with his hands.

"Then why,-" her voice faltered, "I'm no angel, but I thought-,"

"Alice," Jasper interrupted, "I'm an all or nothing kinda guy. When I kiss you and mean it, I'm going to keep on wanting to kiss you; I'm going to want you in my life all the time, and I want to know that before I do that, you feel the same way too."

Alice stared up at him, confused.

"I've been giving you space, Alice, because I don't know what you want," Jasper said, his thumbs rubbing her arms where he held her. "Do you?"

"I'm not sure," Alice admitted at last, "but I'm getting a better idea all the time," she said, and then after taking a deep breath, went up on tiptoe and pressed her lips against his.

She liked him. She wanted him. She wondered if that meant she loved him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The music swelled, the credits rolled.

"I love that movie," Bella gave a contented yawn.

"It's a keeper," Edward agreed, "that Director really does some trippy stuff, I can see why you like him now."

Bella yawned again. "Sorry, I'm not much of a date tonight."

"You've been working all day, I think you're entitled to feel tired," Edward smoothed back her hair and kissed her temple.

"So have you," Bella said in a drowsy tone, and was jolted by his snort of laughter.

"Yeah right, sitting on my butt at a computer isn't quite the same."

"It's still work," Bella said, "but in the meantime how about we take this conversation elsewhere?" She uncoiled herself from Edward's side and sat waiting. Edward took her hand and together they walked to the bedroom.

"You know," Edward began as he flicked on the bedside light, "this feels kinda weird."

"Why's that?" Bella said, taking off her watch and putting it on the bedside table.

"Well, I guess I've always tended to stay at your place. Don't get me wrong," he went on hastily, "I love having you here, it just feels different to be settling in for the night at my place instead of yours."

"Only because you haven't finished making this place a home yet," Bella replied, "but you're getting there." Bella had explored the apartment after dinner, exclaiming over the comic book collection that Edward had set out on one of the bookshelves, the Spiderman action figure, and a few framed photos here and there.

"True," Edward hesitated, watching as Bella kicked off her shoes, and then unzipped her jeans and stepped out of them, standing there utterly unselfconscious in her boyshort underwear and t-shirt before she pulled back the blankets and got into bed. "Uh," he said.

"Edward, it's okay," she smiled to reassure him. For what it's worth, it feels a tiny bit weird to me too, but that's only because we're not used to it." "So tell me Edward, what's your normal bedtime routine?"

He thought for a moment before he spoke. "I brush my teeth, get changed into something to sleep in and then get into bed." It sounded so simple, so dull. And yet now there was Bella, and that made everything different.

She nodded. "Well I'll tell you what. You go ahead and do that, and I'll be right here when you get back."

He gave her a crooked grin before moving off into the bathroom. He brushed his teeth and pulled off his jeans, leaving them in a pile on the floor. His sleep pants were hanging on a hook on the back of the bathroom door, and he pulled them on. He never bothered with a shirt. When he got into bed, his heart was in his throat and turned to face Bella.

"Hi," she said with a quiet smile.

"Hey," he replied, reaching out with one hand to pull her flush against him, with his other hand he framed her face as he dipped his head and kissed her. What began as a languid exploration of each other's mouths became something more urgent.

"So," Bella breathed when they separated, "still feeling weird?"

"Hell no," Edward replied, kissing her neck, trailing a path of kisses down her chest between her breasts, "feeling pretty good actually."

"So I see," Bella replied, throwing her arm over her eyes as she moved against him. His hands caught her by the hips to hold her still as he moved lower.

"Edward," she groaned.

But he was incapable of speech.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice woke up, wondering what she was going to say and rolled over to stare wordlessly at the empty space in the bed beside her. She bit her lip, and hugged her pillow tightly. She wondered if he'd left a note, and tried to ignore the burning in her eyes. She sniffed and rolled onto her back, scrubbing at her eyes with the heels of her hands.

It didn't matter. She'd be fine. She was always fine.

Her head jerked as she heard the toilet flush, and looked on in amazement as Jasper appeared, scratching his stomach above the waistband of his grey boxer briefs.

"Hey," he said, his voice husky with sleep. He padded across to the bed and crawled over the mattress onto his side. Settling his head on his pillow, he reached out and hauled Alice over to him. Rolling onto his side, he pulled her into his chest and slung a muscled leg over her thighs, pinning her against him. He snuffled a little into her hair, making her giggle, before she felt his lips ghost against her skin. Alice gave an experimental wriggle of her hips against his, and felt his immediate reaction. Jasper's fingers tickled her sides, making her give a breathless laugh.

"Need more sleep," he whispered, "and then we'll take up from where we finished off last night."

Alice closed her eyes and went back to sleep, feeling content.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward woke up and glanced at the bedside clock, they'd both slept late. Rolling onto his side, he looked at Bella who was curled up beside him. She shifted slightly as he stirred beside her and shifted her hips slightly, her eyelashes fluttering.

Edward moved closer, running his hand up her thigh, caressing her, enjoying the feel of her skin beneath his hand. Bella's eyes fluttered again as his hand slid higher, dipping and exploring. She wondered if he knew she was awake; but he knew for certain when he shifted away to prepare, and then returned to move her thigh higher and slid into her. She sucked in a breath and arched her back against his chest, her head back, eyes closed as she savoured the feeling of having him inside her again. For a moment they lay joined together, neither saying a word, and then Bella very gently rocked back against him.

He slid his palm, fingers splayed, over her stomach, holding her against him. Bella moved to place her hand over his, catching her breath as he moved into her deeper still. The familiar heat began to build between them, and they went with it. There was no sense of urgency, just unhurried loving that neither of them wanted to rush. Edward propped himself on one elbow behind her, leaning close so that he could nuzzle the curve of her throat. Bella reached up blindly behind her, threading her fingers through his hair to hold his face close. He picked up their rhythm and held her tight, her back against his chest as her body clenched tightly around him, pulling him along with her release.

Afterwards, Bella lay enjoying the feeling of Edward's body against hers, and then shifted a little as Edward made a reluctant groan and began to move away. The bed felt cold the moment he moved away from her and walked towards the bathroom to clean up. She must have fallen into a light doze, because she jolted awake again when Edward climbed back into bed beside her.

"Hey," his breath tickled her ear, "want some breakfast?"

"Well I guess you've worked up an appetite," Bella agreed, turning her head for a kiss.

Edward chuffed with laughter and kissed her thoroughly, cupping a breast that he stroked into responsiveness until she broke away with a laugh.

"You know, now that you've said it, I'm getting hungry."

"Me and my big mouth," Edward groaned.



"Mmm," Bella kissed him, nibbling on his lower lip, "and all those lovely things you can do with it." She returned his kiss with interest, and then broke away to regard him with a smile. "Pancakes?"

"We'll have to go out, I didn't get much beyond the fixings for dinner," Edward said in an apologetic tone.

"Fine by me, I need coffee too," Bella agreed. "You get the shower going."

"You don't want to come with?"

"Oh I do, but then I'd miss the view of watching you walk butt nekkid into the bathroom."

"Ah," Edward nodded, "I see your point." He got out of bed and stretched, his bed hair spiked every which way. He looked glorious. Bella stretched back in bed and admired.

"I'll be there in a minute," she yawned.

Edward headed into the bathroom and turned on the shower taps. He had just stepped under the spray when he heard his phone ring. "Son of a-," he cursed, and heard Bella laugh.

"You want me to get it?" she called out as she glanced at the call display. "It's someone called Marcus."

Edward hesitated. "He's my Editor, but he's usually smart enough not to call me on the weekend. Tell him I'll give him a call back," he called back. "Are you going to join me in here sometime soon?"

"Give me a second," Bella called, and then clicked to answer the call. "Hello?"

There was a startled pause. "Uh, is this Edward's phone?"

"Sorry, yes it is. He can't get to the phone at the moment but he said for me to tell you that he'd call you back," Bella supplied rolling onto her back and giving a full body stretch.

"Who have I got here?"

"Bella," she replied, sitting up. She could hear a lot of splashing from the shower, and wanted to get in there.

"Bella," Marcus said, his voice brightening as he made the connection. "You're cupcake Bella?"

"That's me," she replied, plucking at the bed sheet, "and you're Edward's Editor, right?"

"Right. I must say it's nice to talk to the person I've been reading so much about," Marcus went on. "Has Edward shown you what he's been working on? I think we're going to have another hit on our hands."

Bella stilled, "Excuse me?"

"The book he's working on. He's not sure about it, but between you and me, it's his best work yet."

"Really?" Bella said in a faint voice, "and what's it about?"

Marcus paused, aware that the conversation seemed to be stalling. "Uh, well maybe Edward should be the one to-,"

"Marcus," Bella interrupted him in a calm voice, "I'm not angry, just give me a snapshot of what it's about."

"Bella," Marcus tried to regroup, "I'm the one that's shot my mouth off here. I think we both know that Edward doesn't like to talk about his work very much, so he's not going to be very impressed with me if I'm the one who tells you that he's writing about-,"

"Me," Bella answered.

## **Ch16 Confessions & Revelations**

Bella finished the conversation with an apologetic Marcus and then disconnected the call. Moving with deliberate slowness, she set the phone back down on the bedside table and drew her knees up to her chest, sitting quietly in thought. The splashing from the shower paused and Edward's voice floated out to her.

"Bella? Are you joining me?"

"In a minute," she called back, wondering whom the voice belonged to: it didn't sound like her. She worried her bottom lip with her teeth, before taking a deep breath and climbing off the bed, talking towards the bathroom and peeling off her t-shirt. Pausing beside the shower, she shimmied out of her underwear and shot a quick look at the mirror, relieved to see that she looked calmer than she felt.

A muffled thud drew her attention to the shower screen, and she smiled to see that Edward had wiped a panel to peer through at her, the flash of his smile making her heart give an unsteady thump. She opened the shower door and stepped into Edward's embrace. Looking over his shoulder, she saw that the panel he had cleared was beginning to fog up again, but she could still see through to the other side. Reaching around behind his shoulder she wiped the patch clear again.

"What are you doing?" Edward said, nuzzling against her neck as he lathered the soap before rubbing his frothy hands up and down her sides.

"Seeing clearly," Bella replied simply, and then turned her face towards his for a kiss.

After love, they towelled each other dry stopping for kisses often. Edward paused while patting the water off Bella's legs to look up at her.

"You're very quiet," he observed, and then went back to his ministrations.

"What would you like me to say?" Bella replied.

"Dunno," he shrugged, and then stopped as a thought struck him. "What did Marcus want?"

Bella stilled.

"He wants you to call him later," she said at last. "He sounds happy with what you're working on."

"Mmph," Edward snorted, more interested in the progress he was making up Bella's thighs. He paused at planted a soft kiss at the apex of her legs before continuing with the towel up the soft, flat plane of her belly. "Right now I don't much care what he thinks. He's in trouble, I know that much. He never calls on the weekend, so I don't know what's prompted him to start now."

"I guess he was just excited," Bella said in a soft voice, reaching down to comb his wet hair with her fingers, "he said he'd been reading."

"Ah," Edward said, getting up from his knees to stand in front of her, dropping a kiss on each breast as he continued.

"He thinks it's your best work yet," Bella continued, watching his reflection in the mirror. Edward nodded, reaching out to brush the strands of her wet hair off her shoulders, moving the towel across her back in gentle arcs. "Edward, can I ask you something?" Bella said in a quiet voice.

"Mmm?" he said, brushing the towel down her back.

"Well you tell me more about your story?"

"I've already told you a bit about it," he said, discarding the towel now that she was dry and wrapping his arms around her, pulling her against him. He rested his chin on her shoulder and looked at their reflection. "What did you want to know?"

"I don't know," Bella admitted, and then hesitated. The phone call had left her feeling exposed enough already without her having to revisit it standing there naked. "Nothing that can't wait, but right now how about we chase up some breakfast?"

"Pancakes coming up, I know just the place," Edward said, giving her a tight hug and then steering her towards the bedroom where she had left her bag of clothes. He grinned at her as she reached for her bag and pulled on some clean underwear while he got a pair of boxer briefs from his cupboard and pulled them on. "There's a great diner not far from here."

"Sounds good," Bella replied as she tugged up her jeans and reached for her bra. As she fumbled with the clasp, she looked up to see Edward watching her as he tugged on his t-shirt. "What?"

"Nothing," Edward replied, "I just like watching you."

Bella looked at him with a faint smile. "It's a boob thing isn't it," she said after a pause. "You like watching my boobs while I get dressed."

"Maybe," Edward conceded after a diplomatic pause.

"You're such a guy," Bella said reaching for her t-shirt, "Jake's just as bad."

"Jake?" Edward stopped in the act of reaching for his shoes, "who's Jake?"

"He's an old friend," Bella replied, glancing at him as she gathered her damp hair into a ponytail before giving up and leaving it loose.

"An old friend who has a thing for your boobs?" Edward took a step closer and put his hands on her hips, "this sounds interesting."

"Jake's my-," Bella reached up and gave Edward a quick kiss, "well let's just say it's complicated."

"More please," Edward said, smiling as Bella gave him another kiss, "so," he ventured when they came up for air, "how complicated?"

"Not *that* complicated," Bella said, putting her arms around Edward's waist and hugging him. "It's in the past, but he's still in my life."

"Uh-huh," Edward said looking puzzled, "well I have to say this sounds like new territory."

"No big," Bella shrugged, "I'll tell you later."

"I'll make a note of that," Edward joked, watching as Bella's face clouded before she took a breath and gave him a bright smile.

"I'm sure you will," was all she said, stepping back from him and looking around for her shoes.

When she was dressed, Bella got to her feet and smiled. "Come on, Cullen, I need coffee or I won't be held responsible for my actions."

"Better not keep my girl waiting," Edward said, grabbing his keys and taking Bella by the hand.

The two of them had walked for a block before Edward realised he was the one carrying the conversation while Bella contributed here and there. He tightened his arm to draw her closer to his side, and she glanced up at him with a quick smile as they kept walking.

"Bella, is everything okay?"

"Mmm?" she pulled her gaze away from the buildings they were passing and looked at Edward, "I'm okay, why?"

"You just seem a little quiet," Edward pressed. Something was wrong; she wasn't behaving like his Bella.

"Sometimes I wake up ready to seize the day, and sometimes it takes me a bit longer to get going," Bella said. The conversation with Marcus was starting to eat away at her, she was going to have to raise the subject with Edward soon, but she didn't know how. She had been about to ask him back at his apartment, but knew that the conversation was one that had to be held on neutral ground. She feared having to ask him questions, worried about what the answers might be. She sighed, feeling sad that what had promised to be a relaxing Sunday now had the potential to become something else entirely. She didn't like confrontation, but it was something that was going to have to happen sooner or later.

Edward kissed her temple as they kept walking. "You've had a hard week so I'm not surprised you're still feeling tired."

Bella nodded. Perhaps that was it; she was just tired and over-reacting. Still, Marcus's slip on the phone before he had realised Bella was unaware of the direction of Edward's latest work was still cause for concern. She had nothing to hide, and yet the thought of her life being laid bare on the page was disconcerting to say the least. And then there was the fact that Edward had chosen her as the subject. It made her wonder about the nature of their relationship, and it raised even more questions that led her back to her only frame of reference: Jacob.

She yawned, covering her mouth with her hand and resting her head against Edward's shoulder as he rubbed her shoulder.

"Poor baby," he said, "we're nearly there so you'll have a coffee soon."

"I'm going to need it," she said with feeling.

They reached the diner and were lucky enough to find a small booth available. Bella poured over the menu with perhaps more attention than it warranted, grateful for the diversion as she tried to collect her thoughts. Their order was placed and much to her relief, promptly delivered. Bella wrapped her hands around the cup and took a slow sip.

"Good?" Edward said when she put the cup down and began on her pancake stack.

"Not bad," Bella said carelessly, "they use a different coffee blend here, but at this time of day I'm beyond caring. It's all about the caffeine as far as I'm concerned."

Edward smiled, his eyes crinkling as he watched her pour a generous drizzle of maple syrup over her short stack. He forked some of his own pancakes and glanced out the diner window as he chewed. It looked like it was going to be a nice day, the weather was mild, and the streets were filling with people out to make the most of their Sunday. And here he was with his girl, having breakfast. He felt happier than he had in a long time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marcus had lost his appetite. He flicked the latest manuscript from his reading pile aside and stared at the cordless phone sitting on the coffee table. After his conversation with Bella he had hung up and spend the next few minutes cursing a blue streak. He'd made such good progress in his working relationship with Edward, and one slip of the tongue had jeopardised the whole thing. He rubbed a finger over his top lip stroking his well-

groomed moustache as he considered the phone again. Perhaps a call to apologise could be in order. He grimaced at the thought. Whatever the outcome he knew either way he would end up eating humble pie.

The woman, Bella, he reminded himself, had sounded remarkably calm given the circumstances. If she shared even a fraction of common ground with the female character in Edward's novel, there was a chance she'd see sense. There had been no feminine squeals of excitement or an irritating barrage of breathless questions. Instead he had been met with a measured silence and a calm voice. She had been neither excited nor angry at the revelation she had startled out of him.

Reaching for the phone, Marcus checked himself and reached for another manuscript instead. Calling Edward had gotten him into enough trouble for today. He'd wait until Edward called him, which he was sure, would only be a matter of time. He sighed and adjusted his Gucci reading glasses to a more comfortable position on his nose, and then flicked the next manuscript open and began to read. No doubt Edward was going to tell him what he thought soon enough.

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"Edward, I've got to ask you something and I don't know what you're going to think," Bella said, putting down her cup and leaning forward over her elbows.

Edward nodded and scooped up another mouthful of pancakes, "I'm listening."

Bella traced a finger along the handle of the small jug that held the maple syrup. "Are you writing about me?"

Edward's chewing slowed down and he swallowed with effort before putting down his knife and fork. He looked up to meet Bella's eyes and saw that she was looking at the jug. He reached over and gently took her hand, watching as she met his gaze with some trepidation.

"What makes you ask that?"

"Marcus," she gave him a steady look, "he was talking about your story and then let slip something about feeling like he knew me already."

Edward nodded slowly.

"So it's true then?" Bella said after a brief silence.

"In part," Edward admitted, "although I wish you hadn't found out like this." He rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand, and looked at Bella with concern.

"Edward," Bella began in a gentle voice, "I'm not mad, I'm just-," she broke off and stared around the diner before looking back at him, "I don't really know what I feel right now. I haven't been in this kind of situation before."

That got Edward's attention. He moved his plate to the side and reached over to enfold Bella's hand in both of his. "What sort of situation do you think this is?" His mouth was going dry. Of all the reactions he thought he

might get when Bella eventually found out about the book, he never dreamed she would be this uncomfortable.

Bella squirmed under the intensity of Edward's gaze. "Edward, I don't talk myself up, and for the most part I like to think that I make my way through life pretty much invisible."

"Bella, you've never been invisible to me-," Edward began, but Bella opened her mouth to speak again and he subsided.

"I don't know what it is exactly that you're working on, but if it's as good as Marcus thinks it is then I'm really pleased for you, truly," she went on, "but I'm just thinking that maybe you could've said something to me before now." Bella's gaze dropped back to the tabletop as she considered her own words, and then looked back up at him with an apologetic shrug.

"I-," Edward began and then stopped, clearing his throat before continuing, "I'm sorry, I-," he grimaced, "God this is awkward."

"You think?" Bella offered a wry grin.

"I don't quite know how to explain myself," Edward said, rubbing his thumb over Bella's hand, although he wasn't sure whom the gesture was meant to reassure. "As a writer, I'm used to writing from life, so everything around me becomes inspiration, that is-," he paused, "when I'm able to write in any case."

"I can understand that," Bella replied.

"I'm not sure you do. Before I met you, I hadn't written anything for months," Edward went on slowly, his forehead creasing as he thought before speaking; he wanted no room for any misinterpretation. "And then you somehow triggered the words inside me, I don't know how, I don't know if I even want to know, but when you appeared in my life all of the sudden it was easy." He began speaking faster now, words bubbling at the back of his throat.

"You're saying I did that?" Bella gazed at him in disbelief.

"I'd like to think so," Edward replied with feeling, "so when you say you feel invisible, to me nothing could be further from the truth."

Bella's face warmed under the spotlight of his gaze as the pair of them sat silent.

"Do you want to read it?" Edward said suddenly, "If you want to it's yours."

"You know," Bella said at last, "I don't think I do." Now it was Edward's turn to be surprised. "It's not that I'm worried, I've got nothing to hide," she went on, "but I don't think I'm ready to read it yet."

"If you're sure," Edward said, cautious now.

"Maybe later," Bella added, "just not right now is all," she said in a gentle voice.

"And you're really okay?" Edward lifted her wrist to his lips to brush a kiss over it.

"I think so," she conceded, "but it was a bit of a shock this morning."

"I'll bet," Edward agreed, "which reminds me that Marcus and I are going to have to have a conversation about that."

"Is he in trouble?" a smile tugged at Bella's lips, a real one this time.

"Just a bit," Edward said in a soft growl, nibbling at Bella's wrist, making her jump.

"I'm sure it was an honest mistake, he sounded very sorry."

"Oh I'll make him sorry," Edward replied, angling his hand so that he could kiss the soft pad of her thumb. "He upset my girl."

"Hmm, well don't be too hard on him; it was going to come out sooner or later," Bella remonstrated, "and let's not forget your part in all this."

"True," Edward broke away from kissing her hand to consider this. "Bella, would it help if I said I was sorry?"

"Are you?" Bella raised an eyebrow.

"Of course," he said, stung by her doubt. He met her gaze measure for measure and sighed. "Well, maybe in part. How does that make me sound?"

"It depends on how you back it up," Bella replied, nodding for him to keep talking.

"Am I sorry that I'm writing about you? No, I'm not," Edward said, "you gave me words again, and for that I'm grateful. Am I sorry I didn't tell you about more about my work? Yes," he dipped his head, looking up at her through his lashes in contrition, "for that I'm very sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

"You know," Bella said slowly, "sometimes that can hurt most of all."

"What can?" Edward was confused now, thinking he may have done far more damage than he'd been led to believe.

"Hurting someone by omission can be just as bad," Bella replied, her eyes distant.

"Bella," Edward's chest felt hollow with anxiety, "you know I never consciously set out to hurt you."

"I know," Bella shook their joined hands for emphasis, "It's okay, Edward, the look on your face when I raised the subject was enough to tell me that." Bella rolled her shoulders, trying to shake off the mood. "I guess some of this conversation has reminded me of something else."



"Anything you want to talk about?"

"Not here," Bella replied, pulling a face. "Maybe later, but I'm going to need some fresh air after this."

"Sounds good," Edward said, signalling for the check. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"A little bit fragile maybe," Bella answered, "but I'll be okay."

They settled the check and stepped outside into the sunlight, Edward keeping Bella close to his side as they walked along the pavement. Bella tilted her face towards the sun, closing her eyes as she took a deep breath, hoping Edward wouldn't let her stumble.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emmett cursed as he tripped over the piping that was stacked in his hallway, and limped a couple of paces before shaking his head and searching for his cell phone. Flipping it open he scrolled through his stored numbers and dialled.

"Babycake," he said by way of greeting, grinning as he heard the delight in his sister's voice which was almost enough to make him forget the pain in his big toe. "Listen, I've still got that copper piping here, is today a good day for me to install those magazine racks we talked about?" He paused, waiting for Bella to consider the spontaneous offer. "Cool, I've still got keys to the store, so I'll go in this afternoon and get it done. If I need any help I'll give Jake a call."

They spoke a little longer before Emmett got off the phone and limped into his bedroom to sit down on the bed and examine his foot. His toe still hurt, but it didn't look serious. If nothing else, the injury had given him the motivation to get the job finished. He yawned and stretch, feeling the tendons in his shoulders stretch and pop, then fell back onto the mattress as he took a moment to relax before galvanising into action. Turning his head, he snuffled at one of the pillows and grinned. She'd left early, but he could make out a trace of her perfume.

Still lying on his back, he lifted his leg and pulled his foot towards his chest to inspect his toe again. Thinking about the pipes in the corridor, he wondered how he was going to get them to the store without too much fuss. He considered his options, and then reached for his phone again, hoping he had enough charm for a Sunday morning request.

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"I love my brother," Bella said with a smile as she snapped her phone shut and slipped it back into her bag.

"What's he doing?" Edward said, happy for whatever reason had put a smile on her face.

Bella put her arm through his again once her phone was safely stowed and kept walking. "He got some old copper piping off a retired plumber, and he's going to use them to make some magazine racks on the wall in the shop," Bella explained, pulling them to a stop as she inspected some shoes on display before walking on. "The bookcase we've got in there is filled to capacity, so Emmett came up with the idea of the racks."

"Does he need help?" Edward asked before he could think about what he was saying.

"You know how to do that stuff?" Bella said, looking at him in surprise.

"Some," Edward said, "but I don't think I'd be at Emmett's standard, whatever that is, but I could help with the heavy lifting. Is he going to be doing it by himself?"

"He said if he needed a hand he'd give Jake a call," Bella said carelessly.

"There's that name again," Edward pounced, his curiosity growing now.

"Huh?" Bella was distracted from the shop windows, "what name?"

"Jake, you know, Boob Guy," Edward explained, cupping a hand towards his chest for emphasis, which made her laugh. "Where does he fit in?"

Bella gave him a sidelong look and saw nothing but open curiosity on his face. She should have known that sooner or later it would come to this. It seemed to be a morning for confrontations and revelations, and to think that she had been so excited when Emmett suggested she start giving herself weekends off work.

"Jake's-," she waved a hand in a vague motion, "he's complicated," she sighed.

"You said that," Edward prompted, "have you two got a lot of history?"

"I guess you could call it that," Bella conceded, thinking that the word 'baggage' would fit just as well. She gave him an uncertain look. "How much do you want to know?"

"Whatever you want to tell me," Edward said, "does it impact on us?"

Bella thought about this for a few more paces before shaking her head. "I don't think so. That is, I mean-," she stumbled over her words, shaking her head in frustration as she searched for the right thing to say, "I guess I don't think it will."

Edward gave her a soft smile, "Is that a definitely maybe?"

"That's a good way of putting it," she agreed. "The thing with Jake is complicated."

"Yeah, you said," Edward replied, keeping his tone mild. His mind was racing, wondering what kind of history could be a possible hindrance between himself and Bella. He arranged his expression into one of calm curiosity, hoping it would encourage her to keep talking. His ability to be a quiet listener had worked well for him in the past, and he hoped it wouldn't let him down now. Bella sighed and pushed her hair away from her face, a gesture he noticed she did when she was thinking about something difficult. He uncoupled his arm from Bella's and slid it around her waist, pulling her warm against his side, providing as much silent encouragement as he could.

"Jake is from my home town of Forks," Bella began, keeping her gaze on the pavement ahead of them, "we didn't go to school together, he's from the Quileute tribe so he was schooled on the Reservation. Charlie and I were like extended family." Bella gave him a wry grin, "so I guess that's where the history started. Jake and I met over mud pies on the reservation and we grew up together. He dated, I dated, and then we ended up together after graduation."

"Childhood sweethearts, huh?" Edward commented.

"Kind of," Bella nodded. "After Charlie-," she checked herself and then continued, "after the accident, Emmett and I got through college and for one reason or another we both gravitated to New York."

"Who came here first?"

"Emmett did, he finished college two years before me, so by the time I got to town I had somewhere to stay for a year before I found my feet, and things went from there."

"It must have been hard, going it alone like that," Edward mused, and was surprised when Bella gave him a surprised look.

"It never occurred to me," Bella commented, "I guess I was so used to being in a small family in a small town, and doing things for myself that it just felt like I was doing the same thing, just with a few more people around me."

"A few more than Forks," Edward commented.

"Just a few," she agreed with a wistful smile.

Edward noticed it. "Do you ever go back there?"

"To Forks? No, we haven't gone back since we left. With Charlie and Renee gone, there was nothing to keep us there."

"Not even Jake?"

"Not even. About two years after I got here, Jake hit town and we hooked up," Bella said. "I don't know if it was two homesick and lonely hearts finding each other, or if we were just acting on something that had always been there. Being with Jake was just-," she waved her hand as she searched for the right word, "easy."

"And convenient?" Edward suggested with caution.

Bella shot him a measured look. "That too," she allowed, "but there was a lot of feeling there."

"I don't doubt it," Edward said, "you're not someone a guy takes for granted."

Bella wrinkled her nose at him in amusement. "You'd be surprised."

"Don't sell yourself short," Edward argued, "So go on, what happened with you two?"

"Well here's the thing," Bella said, and was silent for a few more paces while she gathered her thoughts. She pushed her hair off her face and puffed out a sigh before continuing. "Jake and I were pretty serious for a couple of years, and then-," She worried at her lip again before giving a nervous laugh, "this is ridiculous, I don't know why I'm nervous about this."

"Don't be," Edward urged in a gentle voice, "you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"It's okay," Bella ran her fingers through her hair and then grimaced when she realised she was giving into a nervous habit and stuffed her hand into her pocket. "So Jake and I were together, and then one day he told me that we, uh, weren't compatible anymore."

"That sounds pretty harsh," Edward commented.

"Oh it gets better," Bella agreed, "it turns out we were incompatible because I wasn't a gay man."

"You weren't-," Edward began and stopped as he processed what she had said. "Oh."

"Exactly," Bella sighed. They reached an intersection and stopped at the kerb, waiting for the lights to change. "So there you have it, the history of Jake and Bella."

"Hang on, back up a minute," Edward said, "had Jake always known he was gay?"

"He says with the benefit of hindsight that he had his suspicions. Getting away from Forks and the Reservation gave him an opportunity to reinvent himself, but being with me for the first couple of years was like a security blanket," Bella replied. The lights changed, and they crossed the street. There was a cool breeze blowing into their faces, and Bella closed her eyes as she took a deep breath, consciously releasing the tension in her shoulders. She could feel the comforting weight of Edward's arm around her waist and their denim clad thighs rubbing against each other as they walked.

"Right," Edward considered this, "and how were things once he came out?"

"Well, I guess I was in shock at first. When I finally told Emmett he wanted to find Jake and beat six types of shit out of him, but once things calmed down we were okay."

"Emmett was-," Edward raised an eyebrow.

"Protective of me, not homophobic," Bella confirmed as Edward nodded, "he didn't like seeing me hurt." She squinted down the street, "not to change the subject, but where are we going?"

"The park," Edward said simply, "after that conversation I think you need some unconditional love from the dogs as well as me."

Bella looked up at Edward. "Thank you."

"You're worth it," Edward said in reply, pulling her close to kiss her forehead.

## **Ch17 The Evil Twin and the Angry Jogger**

By the time they left the park an hour later, Bella's eyes were peaceful. Edward had watched the way her face had lit up as various dogs had bounded over to investigate them where they stood by the fence at the dog run; the way she had laughed at the smaller dogs whose enthusiastic tail wagging threatened to knock them off balance. They had stood there for a long time, happy to watch, Bella leaning her head against Edward's shoulder as their conversation meandered and lapsed into companionable silences.

"I didn't realise how much I needed that until we got there," Bella commented, snuggling into Edward's chest as they stood at the lights.

"I remembered you saying that you went there when you wanted to feel better," Edward explained, rubbing his hand over her lower back. "Is there anything else you feel like doing today?"

"Why do I feel like I'm getting spoilt?" Bella said, smiling up at him as they crossed the street.

"You're the one with the harder work schedule, I'm just trying to make your free time really count," Edward said.

"Well," Bella thought, "would you mind awfully if we call in at the store? I'd really like to see what sort of progress Emmett's making in there."

"You're the boss," Edward replied as they set off towards the village.

"That's what people keep telling me," Bella said, and then in response to Edward's look added, "private joke, I'll explain later."

As they neared the store they could hear the steady thumping of rhythmic base through cheap speakers that were clearly being pushed beyond their limits.

"That has to be Emmett, he likes his music loud," Bella explained with a grin. She hadn't seen Emmett for three weeks now, and was looking forward to catching up.

She opened the door and stopped in surprise. Emmett was there, with Jacob in tow, and they were in the midst of lifting a row of piping up to the wall, singing along to Emmett's Rolling Stones CD with lusty voices. Both men were shirtless, and were an impressive display of muscle in motion. Emmett looked over Jacob's shoulder and gave a loud whoop when he saw his sister standing in the doorway. He dropped the pipe and headed towards her, ignoring Jacob's shout of protest as he tried to stop the copper length from hitting the floor.

"Babycake," he greeted, gathering Bella into a sweaty hug despite her attempt to cringe out of the way. He looked past her to see Edward hesitating at the threshold and extended a calloused hand, "and you must be the Edward I keep hearing about, I'm-,"

"Emmett," Edward supplied, shaking the proffered hand with a broad grin, "otherwise known as Brother Bear, right?"

Emmett's eyebrows went up at that, and he looked down at the still squirming Bella, "you've brought him up to speed on the basics I see." He released Bella, giving her a gentle shove back towards Edward, a grin nearly splitting his face in two as she wiped her face with both hands.

"Oh god," she declared in a disgusted voice, "Bear, that was too gross for a Sunday morning." She plucked at her t-shirt and fluffed at her hair, feeling as if she had been doused in sweat. Emmett chuckled in response.

"Ah c'mon, just having fun," he said, reaching out to ruffle her hair as she ducked out of the way.

"Hey, Bells," Jake called, having put down the pipe and wiped himself down with a towel, "c'mere and give me some sugar." He held out his arms, and frowned when Bella hesitated before stepping forward for a quick hug. He stared at Edward, and made a move to hold on to Bella for longer, but she wriggled out of his arms and stepped back towards the door where Edward was standing.

"Jake," she said, "I'd like you to meet Edward," she met Edward's eyes, silently pleading for understanding. Cursing inwardly, she realised that although she had told Edward about Jake, she hadn't told him that Jake was still very much a fixture in her life.

After a brief pause, Edward stepped forward to shake Jake's hand. "Jake, Bella's told me about you, it's a pleasure."

"I'm sure," Jake murmured, blatantly assessing and then dropping Edward's hand and turning back towards the pipes as if he had lost all interest in the exchange. "Come on, Em, I don't have all day to get this done."

"It's looking really good," Bella said after an awkward pause, stepping forward to have a closer look. The wall Emmett had chosen had a wooden lintel that ran the length of the wall about three feet off the floor. It would make a perfect 'rest' for the magazines, once the pipes were bolted in to hold them flat against the wall. "You're doing a great job guys."

"You know what would really help us get this done quicker though, right?" Emmett shot his sister a pleading look. Bella sighed and looked at her watch, and then at Edward.

"Is that all you ever think with, your stomach?"

"I'm sure he makes the occasional exception," Jake replied in a dry tone, earning a snort from Emmett.

"If I'm going to do any baking it's going to have to be something quick," Bella warned, and then turned to Edward with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, I-,"

"No need for that," Edward broke in smoothly, "look at the work these guys are doing, they're going to need rewarding." He took her by the hands to gently tug her towards him and gave her a soft kiss. "I can see that you've got some catching up to do, how about I leave you guys to it, and I'll see you later."

"Are you sure?" Bella shot a sidelong look at Jake who was making a show of ignoring them.

"I'm sure," Edward repeated, kissing her again. "Call me, okay?" He smiled at her, and then waved to Emmett. "Great to meet you guys, we'll catch up again soon."

"You know it," Emmett called. "Jake? Edward's heading off," he said.

Jake turned his head slightly and grunted, making Emmett sigh loudly as Edward looked taken aback. "Ignore the bitch Edward, it was nice meeting you."

"Likewise," Edward said, looking uncertain as he glanced at Jake's back. He turned to Bella and offered her a genuine smile, "I'll see you later."

"Will do," she smiled. Following him to the door, she stopped him for another kiss before watching him walk away. Turning back into the store, she pointed a stern finger at Jake. "Mind telling me what all that was about?"

"What?" Jake didn't meet her eyes, choosing instead to focus his unnecessary attention on the work Emmett was going.

"Don't give me that," Bella replied. She could hear the waspish tone in her voice but was unable to stop it.

"I'll second that," Emmett commented, picking up his hammer drill, "you were a complete prick."

"What is this, pick on me day?" Jake said, shrugging off Emmett's criticism.

"Only when you deserve it," Emmett replied, lining up the drill carefully with the mark he'd made on the wall and getting back to work.

Jake muttered to himself as he angrily snatched up a gym towel from Emmett's bag and wiped himself down before pulling on his shirt. Emmett stopped drilling and turned around with a resigned look on his face.

"Listen, if you're going to be like that, why don't you take your attitude elsewhere," he suggested, "and you," he pointed at Bella, "should go with him. You guys need to have a talk." Bella and Jake looked at each other and then back at Emmett. "Go on," Emmett said, shooing them despite the fact he was still holding the drill, "get out of here and be nice."

"But what about-," Bella began.

"It's cool, I can finish up here myself," Emmett said, "you guys have got some talking to do."

"Emmett, man, listen," Jake began awkwardly, stopping when Emmett waved him off.

"Tell your story walkin'," Emmett said in an even tone as he turned back to the job at hand.

Jake looked at Bella who shrugged, "Guess we've been told." She offered him a wry smile, "So how about it Jake, shall we go get a coffee?"

He looked at his watch. "Screw that, it's after midday, I'm up for something stronger."

Emmett watched them go. "About time," he muttered. He didn't envy the conversation they had ahead of them, but these things had to be done. He turned back to the wall and began to drill. The sooner he finished this, the sooner he could arrange a date.

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Edward closed the door behind him and tossed his keys onto the kitchen counter. He was home sooner than he'd planned, and quite alone. After only just discovering the history between Jake and Bella, he hadn't expected to meet the man in question on the same day. Even more of a surprise had been the naked hostility Jake had shown when he had realised who Edward was.

Bella had looked uncomfortable, and Emmett seemed decidedly unimpressed by Jake's behaviour, going so far as to call him out on it when Edward was leaving. Edward hadn't liked the look of concern on Bella's face when he had decided to leave them to it, but he could tell from Jake's behaviour that there was a whole subtext to that relationship which needed to be addressed. He had spoken to Bella as much reassurance in his voice as he could muster, and although he had been sorry to go he had caught an eye flicker from Emmett that indicated the big man understood his actions. He hoped so. It was good to know he had Emmett in his corner. He stopped by his desk, frowning as the thought occurred to him. Was there going to be a battle for Bella's affections? He hoped not.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella was aware of the war between her head and her heart as she walked along the street with Jake, who was now trying to make light of the situation. He whispered outrageous fashion police comments in her ear as they passed people who met with his disapproval, and he draped his arm around her shoulders with the ease of long familiarity. She shrugged it off, and then sighed when he gave her a hurt look and let him take her hand instead. She knew this conversation with Jake had been brewing for some time now, but all she wanted to do was run in the other direction. The direction that she knew Edward had taken.

Jake led her across town to one of his favourite bars. It was very hip and stylish, and at this time of day the music was kept to a tolerable level. Bella looked at the gleaming chrome fittings and polished surfaces, nodding and mouthing platitudes as Jake beamed and saw that they were ushered to a secluded table. Bella took a seat feeling frumpy and underdressed in her old jeans and comfortable fitted tee, looking at some more of the more fashionably dressed clientele. She didn't realise how refreshing she looked, her cheeks flushed from the outdoor air, and her hair held back from her face with her sunglasses, which she had rammed up onto the top of her head. Compared to some of the more conscientious consumers in the bar, Bella looked completely and unselfconsciously natural.

Bella may not have noticed the attention she was getting, but Jake did. He slid his chair closer to hers to denote a subtle ownership, but not so close that any welcome male attention towards himself would be deterred.



Once they were settled at their table and their drink orders had been taken and delivered, Jake leaned back in his chair and gave Bella a long stare.

"So, what's the problem, Bells?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Bella answered, "what was all that back there?"

"What was what?"

"You know what I'm talking about. That was the first time you met Edward and you totally froze him out."

Jake took a long sip of his wine, and made a show of setting his glass back on the table, taking his time before answering. "I don't like him."

"You just met him," Bella protested.

Jake shrugged. "It was enough to get a general impression."

"Well tough, you're going to have to get used to him because he's going to be around for a while," Bella said, taking too big a mouthful of her own wine and choking slightly. She wasn't used to trying to be forceful, but the false courage provided by the wine seemed to be working. It also gave her something to do with her hands.

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Edward flickered his fingers over the computer keyboard, and then sighed and deleted the sentence. He gave the laptop a light shove and kicked back in his chair, staring at the screen. He didn't know what he was writing. He wasn't even in the mood to write, he was just trying to occupy himself as a way to kill time until he heard from Bella again. He needed to find something to do. Getting up from his chair, he wandered over to his bookshelf, selecting books at random and then putting them back when they didn't appeal.

He huffed out a sigh and stood with hands on hips, starting dejectedly around the apartment. Used to his own company for so long, he now found himself missing Bella's company. He had no idea what he was going to do with the afternoon that stretched interminably ahead of him.

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"Jake," Bella put her glass down once she had recovered from her coughing fit and put her head in her hands, "what the hell are we doing?"

"About what?"

Bella gave him a hard look, unable to tell if he was being deliberately obtuse, or had no idea what sort of an impact he was having.

"We started out as one thing, and now we're something completely different."

"Not so different," Jake pointed out, "we've always been friends after all."

"True," Bella agreed, "but sex wasn't always part of the equation."

"It isn't now either," he argued.

"This is also true," Bella said, "and look where it's gotten us." She took a sip of wine and tried to think. "I bet our families never saw this coming." She remembered Charlie and Renee laughing with Jake's father over pictures of the two of them throughout childhood.

"Are we really in that much of a mess?" Jake rested his folded arms on the table and leaned across to Bella. "Be honest."

"Sometimes I think no," Bella said slowly, "but today, I'd have to say a definite yes." She gave him a wry smile to try to soften the blow. "It's hard enough staying friends with someone you've got a sexual past with, let alone having the goalposts moved so comprehensively."

"I guess," Jake said, staring at the tabletop as he mulled over Bella's words.

"C'mon, Jake," Bella said in a coaxing tone, "you've got to admit that coming out was a bombshell for everyone involved."

"I know it was a bombshell," Jacob reached out to take one of her hands, "but what could I do? I had to follow my heart."

"I know," Bella scrubbed her face with her free hand, "It was a bombshell alright, I think I'm still carrying some of the shrapnel." Jacob's worried expression deepened, and Bella sighed. "God, none of this is coming out right."

"Coming out seems to be a recurring issue with us," Jacob deadpanned, getting a weak laugh from Bella.

"I just-," Bella tried to speak again and stopped. "Jake, you know I love you, but things are different now. *We're* different now."

He stared unhappily into his glass. "I know."

Bella reached over and covered his hand with hers. "And Edward's different, surely you can see that."

"I guess," he replied, then looked up with a challenging stare. "Do you love him?"

"I, ah-," Bella was taken aback by his interrogatory tone, "I think I do."

"And have you told him?"

"Not yet," Bella temporised, sipping at her wine. Maybe they needed to get something to eat; she could feel the wine going straight to her head.

"So you can say it to me, but not to him," Jake said with just a hint of satisfaction.

"I wasn't aware that it was a competition between the two of you," Bella chided.

"Well I was here first," Jacob added.

"And now you're suddenly twelve years old," Bella said, exasperation creeping into her voice now. "You've got to cut this out, you do it every time."

"Do what?" Jake was all innocence now.

"Every time a new guy arrives on my horizon, and I'm not saying that's a regular occurrence," Bella added, holding up an admonishing hand as Jake opened his mouth to interrupt, "you check him out, announce that he's no good and start crowing as soon as they're gone."

"Well they're not, I've known you long enough to what's good for you, Bella, we all do," Jake said, finishing his wine and signalling for another.

"No, I don't think you do," Bella said, her fingers whitening on her glass stem. The conversation was heading in a direction she didn't like, and she felt her stomach twist with anxiety.

"Excuse me?"

"Jake, we've got a long history and it's seen some pretty big changes over the years, but enough's enough. You've got to let me move on."

"What do you mean?" Jake replied. Now it was his turn to look worried.

Bella set her glass aside and ran her fingers through her hair, lifting it off the back of her neck before rubbing her face. She felt terrible. Now that it was finally happening, she was becoming aware that this was a conversation that had been building up for years.

"Jake," Bella began in what she hoped was a gentle voice, "what I'm trying to say is that it feels like you've had me all to yourself for a few years now. That might work for you, but it doesn't work for me." She looked up at Jake to see his eyes tightening. "It's like you get the best of both worlds, you're dating and having a great time, plus there's our friendship. Why can't I have that too?"

"You do, you've dated other guys," Jake protested.

"And have I had your support every step of the way?" Bella sipped her wine again, watching him carefully. Jake was silent. "You see?" Bella said at last, "Jake you know you're in my heart, but you just can't have all of it anymore."

Jake mumbled something unintelligible into his wine glass.

"Sorry, what was that? I don't speak Merlot," Bella prompted, earning a sheepish look from Jake.

"I said I don't see why we can't share."

"Oh I think Edward can share, it's you I have my doubts about after this afternoon's effort," Bella said.

The pair of them sat staring at each other before Jake broke the silence with a loud sigh.

"Fine," he said, "if that's what it takes."

"I can't make you do what you don't want to, but if you're going to cause problems Jake then I think it's time you let me go."

"Oh you did *not* just say that," Jake said, his face flushing with a combination of anger and shock.

"I did," Bella said, feeling the struggle of the conversation take its toll as her cheeks began to flush.

"Is this because I hurt you when I came out?" Jake said, his eyes narrowing, "it's taken you a while, Bells, but if this is payback then-,"

"God, no," Bella protested. "C'mon, give me some credit. I'm trying to say that if you want relationships *and* our friendship then you have to extend me the same courtesy."

"But I have," Jake replied, slouching back in his chair.

"C'mon Jake, have you really?" Bella kept her tone as even as she could, but all she wanted to do at this point was curl up, go to sleep and wake up when it was all over.

Jake was silent while he considered her words. "Maybe not, but I *have* talked you out of a few bad shoe choices," Jake allowed at last, startling a laugh out of both of them.

"True, and I'll always need help in that department," Bella smiled, "at least until they come out with a pair of Converse that go with a cocktail dress," she laughed again as Jake gave a theatrical shudder and made the sign of the cross to ward off fashion evil. They looked at each other and began laughing again, although the hilarity was out of proportion to the joke.

"So," Bella ventured once their laughter had begun to subside, "are we good?"

"We'll see," Jake sighed. "I guess so, it's just going to be hard, you know?" Jake stared unhappily into his wine, "I've gotten so used to having you all to myself, I figured that whatever happened it'd always be you and me."

"You know I'll always be here for you Jake," Bella said, reaching over to pat his hand, and was surprised with Jake took her hand in a fierce grip.

"I'll share, but I'm not happy about it, Bella," he said, "but if he can prove that he's good enough then I'll go along with it." Jake delivered this pronouncement with an air of martyrdom, giving Bella an arch look as she smiled into her glass. "Going by the look on your face, you seem to think he's worth it."

"He is," Bella nodded, the knot in her stomach loosening now that the conversation was taking a friendly turn.

"Hmm, well, prejudice aside given he's taking you away from me," Jake mused, "I have to say that he's gorgeous; that hair, those eyes," Jake eyes took on a wicked glint as he continued, "high and tight in the back too."

"Jake," Bella laughed at this, and Jake grinned at the look of embarrassment and delight on her face.

"Speaking of taking away though," Jake mused, "how come he bailed earlier?"

"You were a total bitch queen for a start," Bella said bluntly, "who'd want to stick around for that?"

"True," Jake said with a reminiscent smile, "I was in fine form."

"I don't know that I'd be patting yourself on the back for that little display, Emmett was looking pretty pissed at you too."

Jake blanched. If there was one friend he treasured as much as Bella, it was her big brother. Emmett was after all, perhaps the only person in New York City other than Bella who could rouse Jake out of bed to help with some manual labour on a Sunday.

"Point taken," he said, looking chagrined. "I'll buy him a beer later."

"He'll like that," Bella assured him.

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Edward slouched lower on the sofa, staring at the television trying to work out what the movie was about, and then realised he didn't particularly even like it. Reaching for the remote he scrolled through some more cable channels before giving up in disgust. There was nothing he wanted to watch so he switched the TV off and got up, scuffling into the kitchen. A minute later he slammed the refrigerator shut. He didn't want anything to eat either.

He stood in the living room, hands on hips as he stared at the floor.

What he really wanted was Bella, and she wasn't here because she was back at the store with another man. Not just another man, but an ex-boyfriend with whom she'd had a committed relationship.

So what if the guy was gay now, it wasn't helping him feel any better about the situation. And what had he done? Reaching up to rub the back of his neck with one hand, Edward ran his fingers through his hair and growled under his breath. The first sign of any conflict and he'd turned tail and fled, which was playing right into the other guys hands. And what if Bella had wanted him to stay? Edward groaned this time, rubbing his face

with his hands in frustration. She hadn't begged him to stay. If anything, she had looked just as uncomfortable as he had felt. Should he have asked if she wanted to leave with him? No, she'd stayed. Emmett seemed to be the emotional stabiliser in the store, so perhaps he'd keep things on an even keel.

Or not.

Edward didn't know Emmett's history with Jake which in itself was no surprise given he'd only just heard about the man today. He grimaced at the turn the day had taken. They had woken up in each other's arms and were delighting in the thought of a whole day together stretching before them. That feeling had lasted as long as it had taken for Marcus to call. Bella had dealt with the surprise far better than he had expected. When it came to his previous relationships, Edward was used to the opposite: pouting and endless questions about why the current woman in his life *wasn't* featured in his work.

He shook his head as he thought of some of the women in his past. They had all been beautiful and intelligent to be sure; and yet strangely insecure and hungry for some kind of immortality in the reflection of Edward's words. He had never delivered, and they had inevitably moved on. Their disenchantment at their inability to inspire had been combined with Edward's less than stellar social skills and impossible working hours. He knew it was foolish to blame that sole factor on the breakups, but there were at least two ex-girlfriends who had longed to be considered his literary muse.

He'd never needed a muse, until he met Bella.

Her appearance in his work had been quite unexpected, but once she was on the page it became impossible for him to write anything else, and so he had continued. By the time he was beginning to wonder if he should tell Bella what he was working on, they seemed to have passed the point of no return. Bella had asked him a few questions about his work before he had been ready to discuss it, and then the subject had been dropped. He had entertained the brief fantasy of presenting Bella with a finished copy of the book, watching the surprise and delight dance across her face as she realised what the story contained.

All it had taken to ruin all of that was for Edward to be out of reaching distance when Marcus called.

Punching the wall with frustration, Edward stalked towards the bedroom and stripped off his t-shirt. He might as well go for a run. He shoved down his jeans and kicked them aside as he walked into the bathroom to grab his shorts off a hook on the back of the bathroom door. He changed with quick, angry movements, slamming the apartment door after him with unnecessary force.

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Emmett gave the pipe a final swipe before flicking the dust cloth onto a nearby table with a decisive snap.

"Damn, I'm good," he muttered. He'd taken Angela's advice and picked up some copper polish and soft cloths, and had spent the better part of an hour rubbing and polishing the piping until it shone. Renee would have been proud. The copper gleamed against the warm tones of the wooden floor and wall panelling, and he had to admit that the finished effect worked well with the existing decor of the shop. He considered racking the magazines to give the full effect, and then deciding against it, realising that it was a job that Alice would enjoy. He grinned as he thought of the pocket rocket, and decided to call into the store during open hours soon to give his girls hell.

Speaking of which...

He dug around in his gym bag and pulled out his cell phone, squinting at the small screen as he scrolled through for the familiar number. He'd done his good deed for the day, now he wanted to see his girl.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So when do you think you'll be seeing him again?" Jake asked, his voice only slightly muffled by the potato wedge he had just stuffed into his mouth.

"Today, I hope," Bella replied, licking some sour cream off her fingers. After two glasses of wine she had started to feel a bit wobbly, so had insisted that they get something to eat.

"Don't let me stop you," Jake urged, holding up his empty glass to signal a passing waiter, and then gave Bella a questioning look, "Glass or bottle?"

"Might as well make it a bottle," Bella said in a resigned tone. Given the rate he was drinking it would work out cheaper. She felt a pang of sympathy for Jake now. He drank like this when he was nervous, so the conversation had obviously had more of an impact on him than she'd thought. "Jake," she said suddenly, "are you seeing anyone?"

"Not right now," he admitted, reaching for another wedge.

"But what about that guy you-," she began, stopping when Jake shook his head vehemently.

"Uh-uh, Momma's boy," he said with a tone of finality.

"Right," she considered this. Jake's dating history since he had come out had certainly been a moving feast, but there hadn't been many relationships in the intervening years that had lasted more than a couple of months at best. "Anyone on the horizon?" she ventured.

"Nope," he said, "and while the hunt for Mr Right continues, I've still got you, and I'm perfectly happy if I can find Mr Right Now in the meantime."

And with that simple comment, Bella had an epiphany. Even though they had ended the sexual side of their relationship, she was still very much Jake's girlfriend. She was his go-to girl when he wasn't in a relationship of his own, which is why he preferred it when she was available. Anger roiled in her chest, at the thought of being Jake's beck and call girl to satisfy his thirst for company. She looked up and was arrested by the look of stark longing on his face: Jake was watching a couple on the other side of the bar, laughing and enjoying themselves.

Jake looked back at her, his expression shuttered once more, and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Did you hear what you just said?" Bella said.

"No, what?"

Bella repeated his words back to him. Jake stared at her for a long moment.

"Fuuuuck," he sighed at least. "Okay, point taken."

"Wow," Bella nodded.

"That's putting it lightly," Jake said. "You know, Bells, I never meant-," he said, and then paused, "I guess that-," he broke again and snorted at his fumbling. "Would it, I mean that is to say-," he began.

"Oh just say it," Bella said.

"Security blanket," he blurted.

Bella blinked. "Okay," she said at last, "I'll need a little more information than that."

"Bells, we've known each other most of our lives. Hell even when you moved to the big smoke I wasn't too far behind. All this time you've been my security blanket," Jake said. "Even when I knew I might be gay, I thought if I could make it in a relationship with you everything would be okay," he swallowed, "but I only ended up lying to the both of us."

Bella's throat felt tight, and all she could do was nod for him to continue.

"You've always been there for me, and it's something that I never wanted to end."

"It doesn't have to," Bella suggested. "You just have to stop being such a bitch."

"Look at yourself every 28 days and say that," Jake snorted, prompting a choked laugh from Bella.

"To be fair though," he went on, "I've been your fallback as well, remember all those times you wanted to go out you were dateless and didn't want to go alone?"

"True," Bella agreed, "I guess over the years we've been as bad as each other."

"Yeah," Jake nodded, "still, this is *you* that I've hurt. You're not other people to me, you're *Bella*," he reached over to take her hand, "and I'm sorry that I didn't talk about Edward with you more. I knew the last time we spoke that he was maybe something special, but I guess I wasn't ready to face up to it."

"Well you faced up to it today," Bella said, holding up her glass of wine.

"I guess you can teach an old dog new tricks after all," he replied, chinking his glass against hers. "So," he continued after they had sipped their wine, "what do you think he's doing now?"



"Well," Bella stopped and thought. "Actually I'm not sure. We had talked about going to the markets but I'm not sure he'll do that now, maybe he'll work."

"Sounds boring," Jake pulled a face. "Why don't you give him a call? Judging by the way he was looking at you earlier I'm sure he'll come a-runnin'."

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Edward had set a good pace for his jog, but the more he thought about Marcus and Jake, the angrier he got. He picked up the pace, running faster now.

Marcus had upset Bella, Jake had been an insulting prick, and here he was running laps in a damn park because he had wimped out of the equation. Furious at himself, he ran faster still, ignoring the pain as his muscles and lungs began to burn. He was so lost in thought that he didn't realise he'd gone out without his phone.

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"Voicemail," Bella announced, putting her phone down on the table, "he's either busy or he's gone out and forgotten it."

Jake put a hand over his heart. "Is such a thing even possible?"

Bella gave him an amused look. "Yes, it's true, there are people out there than can actually function without a cell phone."

"Next you'll be telling me there isn't a Santa," Jake protested.

"He'll call when he gets back to his phone," Bella said, ignoring Jake as she shot her phone another glance. She hoped he was okay. She groaned and put her head in her hands. "Crap, shit, fu-,"

"Whoa there," Jake said, "what brought that on?"

"I've just realised," Bella groaned, her head in her hands, "I only just told Edward about our history this morning."

"Yeah, and?"

"And then we show up at the store and you're there acting like-," Bella glanced at Jake who had enough self-preservation to look chastened, "the way you did. And then he leaves and I take off with you. How does that look?"

Jake considered that. "Hate to say it kiddo, but not good."

Bella gave him a solemn nod. "Not good at all."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward saw the park entrance in the distance and began to slow his pace. By the time he stopped, he was gasping for breath. He bent over double with his hands braced on his knees, gulping down air and trying not to throw up. He felt like shit. After a long time, he felt able to stand up without passing out. He limped over to a nearby bench and did some cool-down stretches. He wondered what Bella was doing, and fumbled in his pocket for his phone, which was when he realised he didn't have it. He cursed under his breath as he left the park, resolving to call her as soon as he got home.

He needed to see his girl, and then he'd feel a lot better.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, this boy of yours," Jake said, "it's serious?"

"Think so," Bella confirmed, sipping at a Coke. The wine had proved too much and she had moved onto something soft, much to Jake's disgust.

"Well that's good, so long as he treats you right, I promise to be on my best behaviour," Jake nodded. "Think he'll put a ring on your finger?"

Bella laughed, and then jumped as her phone rang. "Well my phone is ringing, does that count?" She snatched it up and smiled when she saw Edward's name on the screen.

"Hey," she greeted in a soft voice.

"How's my girl?" Edward asked, his heart in his throat. Although the walk home had cooled him down from his run, his pulse was jumping.

"All good," Bella answered, "but I miss you. What are you doing?"

"I went out for a run earlier and forgot my phone," he admitted, smiling when he heard her gurgle of laughter.

"I told Jake that's what must've happened. How are you feeling now, do you want a recovery drink?"

"That sounds good, where are you?" Edward nodded when she told him the name of the bar. "No problem, give me time to shower and change, and I'll see you soon."

"Promise?"

"I'm on my way," Edward said, "and, Bella?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you sure everything's okay?"

"I'm sure, it's all good, you'll see. Now hurry here so I can kiss you."

"I'll run," Edward promised, and was still grinning when they hung up. He loped towards the bathroom.

BeBella snapped her phone shut and beamed at Jake. "He's on his way."

"If the guy can make you smile like that, he'd be crazy not to," Jake said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward paused in the doorway, looking for Bella as his eyes adjusted to the light. He'd showered and changed in record time, sprinting down the stairs and into the first taxi he saw.

Jake saw him first and nearly choked on his next mouthful of wine. He had been so ready to dislike him at the store that he hadn't paid him any attention. Now that he and Bella had cleared the air he was feeling slightly drunk and quite at ease with the world he could look his full. And look he did.

"Holy shit," he muttered, "are you absolutely, 100% sure he's straight, because if there's any margin for error at all I'm sothere."

Bella twisted in her chair and waved when she saw Edward, and glanced back at Jake with a smug smile. "Oh I'm sure."

"Figures," Jake sighed, and sat entranced, watching as Edward's face lit up with a grin when he saw Bella and strode through the crowd towards them. It didn't escape Jake's notice that a couple of other bar patrons had noticed Edward as well. Edward was oblivious of all this as he made a beeline for where Bella was waiting, bending down to kiss her cheek as he grabbed a vacant chair and took a seat.

Edward's smile dimmed to wary courtesy as he nodded at Jake, "Hello again."

"Be nice," Bella warned Jake in an undertone as he extended a hand towards Edward.

"Edward, I believe you met my evil bitch twin earlier. Allow me to introduce myself, I'm Jake," he said with a smile that was equally cautious.

"Evil twin, huh?" Edward's lips curled into a more genuine smile this time.

"You'd be amazed how much he gets around," Jake said in a solemn nod.

Bella sniffed the air, found it was friendly, and was pleased. As Jake and Edward fell into conversation, she smiled into her wineglass. She sat back in her seat, smiling when Edward unconsciously moved his seat closer so that he could drape his arm around her shoulders. A waiter approached their table to take Edward's drink order, and while he was occupying himself with the menu, Jake caught Bella's eye and winked. Bella felt as if a weight had been taken off her shoulders. It was still early days, but the initial steps had been taken.

"So, Edward," Jake was saying, "I know Bells and I have cleared the air, but there's just one thing I have to say to you before we move on and put all this behind us."

"I'm listening," Edward nodded.

"Hurt her, and I will beat you to death with one of her industrial baking trays," Jacob said in a matter of fact tone. Edward looked at him in askance, and he shrugged. "A vague disclaimer is no-one's friend."

"It won't happen," Edward said in a firm voice, "I know what I want."

Jake gave an imperceptible flinch at the obvious barb in Edward's answer, before swallowing hard and holding up his glass in a toast. "I believe you," he said at last.

Bella looked at Edward, who simply leaned forward and kissed her.

"So do I," she answered.

## **Ch18 Procrastination and Pizza**

"Call me when you get home and we'll get some dinner together," Jasper offered.

"Mm-hmm," Alice replied, noncommittal. They had spent all of Sunday together in bed for the most part. Now she felt tired, sated, and ready to return to the real world. They had showered together and were now walking hand in hand along the streets of New York as they prepared to go their separate ways to start their working week.

"You wanna run that by me again?" Jasper slowed his pace as he looked at her to study her expression.

"You don't have to entertain me, you know," Alice said, "I can look after myself."

"Alice, I'm just talking about dinner, not babysitting."

"I know," she bridled at his words, feeling prickly.

"Maybe we can have dinner at my place sometime soon too," he ventured after a slight pause.

Alice considered this as they walked. She'd been thinking about doing some sewing again soon, there were a couple of designs that she'd been tossing around for a few days, and she wanted some quiet time to get that done. She shot Jasper a quick glance as they walked. There was no doubt the man had a certain level of appeal. His lazy smile when he gazed at her, and the way he had worshipped her body had a reluctant smile tugging at her lips.

"See you tonight?"

Alice smiled but didn't answer, instead reaching up to give him a quick kiss before turning to cross the street to head to work.

"Hey," Jasper didn't release her hand, and gave a gentle tug so that she turned around give him a quizzical stare, "are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Alice said, widening her eyes, "why wouldn't I be?"

Jasper gazed at her long enough for her to start feeling exposed before he gave her a sudden smile, "No reason," he replied. He tugged at her hand again to pull her close and wrapped his arms around her, "you have a good day, Babe, see you soon."

"Okay."

Jasper gave her a long measuring gaze and had seemed as if about to say something before he changed his mind and then shook his head as he released her.

"Seeya," Alice flipped him a quick wave and after a second's pause gave him a swift kiss before walking away. She kept her head down and focussed on her footsteps, making a game of not stepping on any cracks in the pavement. Next she amused herself by counting dogs and seeing how many businessmen were wearing colourful ties. Fishing in her bag she sighed as her hands came up empty and crossed to the other side of the street as she saw the familiar booth ahead.

"Hey, Betty," Alice greeted the elderly woman as she approached the newsstand.

"Hey yourself," Betty replied with a gimlet smile, "I suppose you're after the usual."

"You know it," Alice nodded, digging out some bills from her wallet as Betty slid a copy of *In Style* magazine and a pack of gum towards her.

"Good weekend?" Betty made conversation as she dug out some coins.

"Not bad," Alice shrugged.

"And that young man of yours, how's that going?" Betty slapped the change into Alice's outstretched hand and leaned her hip against the counter.

"Who told you?" Alice gave her a look of amazement.

"No-one had do," Betty winked, "but that's some love bite you've got on your neck there, kid."

Alice slapped a hand to her neck and moaned.

"Other side," Betty cackled, enjoying the younger woman's mortification as Alice switched her hand to the other side of her neck, and then gave it up as a lost cause. "Looks like you've been having a good time."

"I guess so," Alice replied as she stuffed the magazine into her tote bag and unwrapped the gum to pop a piece into her mouth.

"You *guess* so?" Betty shook her head, "Damn girl, youth is wasted on the young." She folded her arms and rested them on a pile of *Newsweek*. "What's he like?"

Alice thought for a moment. "Persistent."

"He'd have to be," Betty observed, "You're like a fart in a bottle."

Alice arched an eyebrow at that. She'd been called many things in the past, but this was a new one.

"You like him?" Betty asked as she served another customer.

Alice nodded, keeping her chin close to her chest. She was loitering now and feeling like a kid being called out at school but Betty's calm assessment and no-nonsense questions made her feel curiously better.

"So," Betty leaned against the stack of magazines again and squinted at her, "you've got a man who likes you, do you like him?"

"I think so," she was toeing the pavement with her shoe now, the older woman's scrutiny making her revert to childhood. "Maybe. Yeah," she sighed, "I do."

"You don't sound too certain," Betty said in a quiet tone.

Alice said nothing, and the silence stretched between the two women.

"Well?" Betty said, "Do you like him or not?"

Twisting a thread around a loose button Alice mumbled a reply.

"I didn't hear you," Betty said, and then "Not you. Four fifty," to another customer.

"Yes," Alice said in a louder voice.

"Good," Betty nodded, "then get off your bony ass and do something about it."

"I have," the younger woman protested.

"I don't mean sex," Betty waved a dismissive hand, "although Lord knows it gets the job done. Men are like linoleum, lay 'em right the first time and you can walk all over 'em for the rest of your life, *but*," she went on as

Alice laughed, "you need someone that'll treat you with respect, keep you own your toes and give you the best sex you've ever had."

"Oh well," Alice snorted, "well when you put it that way it sounds almost too easy."

"So what does he do, this young man of yours," Betty ignored Alice's easy dismissal.

"He's a teacher at NYU," Alice replied, and then "specialising in American history," at Betty's silent prompt for more information.

"Hmm, an academic."

"He was a journalist before that, mainly music," Alice wondered why she was providing more information, feeling the need to talk Jasper up.

"So he's smart," Betty said.

"Oh yeah," Alice said, remembering their latest argument about consumerism.

"And passionate," the older woman went on. Alice sighed and nodded. She was never going to live the love bite down.

"Like you're smart," Betty mused, "and I'm guessing you can more than stand your ground in the sack."

"Betty," Alice coughed back a shocked laugh.

"Relax, kid," Betty laughed, "when you've chalked up as many years as I have it gives you a certain level of free speech." She considered Alice for a long moment. "How long you been scared of this guy?"

"Who said I was scared?"

"You're not exactly standing here in the flush of new love. What is it you want?"

Alice sighed, feeling incredibly weary of the whole situation. "I wish I knew."

Betty shook her head slowly and slid another pack of gum towards Alice. "You'd better make up your mind, because guys like him don't grow on trees. If there's one thing we women are good at it's looking a gift horse in the mouth. You're being treated with respect and kindness when you're used to being used and abused, and that's got you scared. You know what my Mom used to tell me when I was dithering over my Earl?"

"What?" Alice stepped closer as the older woman beckoned, and then her eyes widened as Betty muttered to her in an undertone. Passing customers glanced up at the laughter, some of them wondering how such a small woman could laugh so loud.

Bidding her a fond farewell, Alice made her way to work with a broad grin on her face. Betty had given her the makings of a great quote, and she couldn't wait to see how Bella was going to come up with a cupcake for this one.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Morning, Alice," Bella smiled, her cheeks pink from her morning walk. The seasons were starting to turn and the air was getting cooler.

"Morning, Boss."

"Alice, don't wall me Boss."

"Sorry, Boss."

"Good weekend?" Bella asked as she pushed the front door open and went inside.

"Not bad," Alice called over her shoulder, carrying her bag in one hand as she shrugged off her coat. "Yours?" She stopped in her tracks and turned slowly to stare at the new installation. "Oh wow," she breathed, "they look fantastic."

"Don't they," Bella agreed with a pleased smile.

"When?" Alice asked as she crossed the floor to run a hand along the polished copper piping. Emmett had done a great job; his craftsmanship and attention to detail had done the store proud.

"Yesterday," Bella replied, looking pleased with Alice's reaction, and then she looked closer at Alice and gave her a knowing smile. "Good weekend?"

"Great," Alice replied, putting her coat and bag away before stopping to gather up an armful of magazines.

"And how's Jasper?" Bella said in a too-innocent tone.

"He's good," Alice said in a casual tone.

"So I see," Bella replied as she filled the jug with milk and kicked the refrigerator door closed with her foot.

"What?" Alice looked at her puzzled and then reached up to touch the love bite on her neck. "I knew I should've worn a scarf," she groused.

"Right, because that would be so subtle," Bella teased. "When did the two of you hook up?"

"Saturday," Alice allowed, dumping her armful of magazines on the counter and leaning against it as Bella went to work on the coffees.



"Morning, guys," Angela called as she walked through the store, past the counter and into the kitchen. "Alice, you've got a love bite on your neck."

"Everyone has to know?" Alice protested as Bella laughed.

"Honey," Angela reappeared tying on her apron, "it's right there where we can all see it."

"Just because you two haven't got any," Alice mumbled in mock anger at the two smirking women.

"That you can see," Bella rejoined, her eyes crinkling with amusement.

"How about you, Angela?" Alice studied her closely, "anything to report about Bookstore Ben?"

"Uh," Angela's face began to warm beneath their scrutiny, "well, that is to say-," she waved a hand, aware that her face was getting warmer by the moment.

"His place or yours?" Alice asked matter-of-factly.

"His," Angela replied promptly and then gazed at her in horror when she realised what she'd let slip.

"Ah-ha," Alice said, "I *knew* you two would get together." She looked from Bella to Angela. "So how about that, all three of us are getting laid."

The three women looked at each other for a moment, before laughing and exchanging high-fives.

"We should all get together and have a drink after work sometime," Angela suggested. "I know that Ben would love to meet Edward, but not-," she added hastily, "in a groupie kind of way."

"Edward and Jasper go way back so they'll be fine, and Jasper seems to get a kick out of meeting new people all the time," Alice speculated. "How about it, Boss?"

"Sounds like a plan," Bella nodded.

"Maybe you could give Emmett a call as well," Alice suggested, "and how about Jake? Do you think he can share you for a change?" she was taken aback when Bella pulled a face.

"Early days," Bella cautioned, "but he has agreed to play nice for now."

Alice gaped at her. "They've *met*?"

"Yup," Bella finished making the coffees and carefully moved the cups across the counter. Angela was stacking the last of the magazines onto their new rack, but Alice swooped onto her cup with all the reverence it deserved.

"Ahh," Alice nodded sagely after her first sip, "and how did that go?"

Bella concentrated on stirring some sugar into her cup. "About as well as could be expected."

"Ouch," Alice winced, "Was Jake up to his old tricks?" Alice had seen Jake give prospective beaus the cold shoulder in the past to devastating effect. She had wondered why Bella put up with it but had rationalised that she did not know the secrets of the friendship between the two. "How did Edward take it?"

"Okay, I guess, but it was a lot for him to take in," Bella commented. "Things ended up well enough."

\* \* \* \* \*

After Edward had found Bella at the bar, they had sat and had a couple of drinks with Jake as the two men took the first tentative steps of friendship towards each other. Wariness was evident on both sides but for the time being any animosity or insecurity had been put aside for the sake of the woman that sat between them. Bella had watched their smiles evolve from the baring of teeth into to more genuine efforts that reached their eyes, and was glad. The conversation flowed without too much effort, and Edward kept in contact with Bella at all times; a brush of his hand, a light kiss on her temple, cupping the back of her neck.

"All good?" Jake had asked Bella in a quite voice when Edward had gone to the bar.

She had looked up to see Jake watching her with caution, seemingly not noticing that he was shredding his cardboard coaster to shreds.

"All good."

Jake nodded once and then looked down at his hands. He pulled a face and scooped the cardboard remnants into a neat pile. "You look happy with this guy," he said after a pause, "he seems to really care about you."

"I hope so," Bella said, glancing over at the bar where Edward stood at the bar.

"As long as he treats you right, I won't interfere," Jacob offered, "but I can't say I'm not jealous as hell."

Bella had felt something in her chest relax at last. It felt as if the worst had been confronted and dealt with and now she could move on, although the future seemed both sure and uncertain. Edward's affection seemed genuine, and yet there was the matter of his writing. She felt comforted and exhausted all at once. She had cleared the first hurdle, but how many were still in store?

It was late in the afternoon when Edward and Bella arrived back at her apartment, and they had stepped inside and closed the door after them with a mutual sigh of relief. Bella slung her bag onto a chair and sprawled on the couch. After a moment's hesitation, Edward followed. Bella smiled at his approach and curled her legs up to allow him room, and then shifted around to snuggle up against him with a small sigh, fisting her hands in his shirt to bring herself closer still. Edward stretched out his legs to rest his feet on the coffee table, and put his arm around her shoulders, combing his fingers absently through Bella's hair as he tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling.

"Big day," he said at last. Bella's eyes were closed and Edward's voice was a deep rumble in his chest.

"You could say that," Bella sighed.

Back in the sanctuary of her apartment, Bella nested her head against Edward's chest and traced the pattern on the chest of his t-shirt with a lazy finger. Edward yawned and rested his cheek against the top of her head, ruffling her hair with his breath.

"Are you tired?" Bella asked in a quiet voice.

"A little," he replied, "I went for a run while you were with Jake, so I guess all the fresh air and sunshine is catching up with me."

"Fresh air, huh?" Bella twisted her head to look up at him with a knowing smile. They had after all, enjoyed a lot of wine at the bar.

"And maybe I ran a bit harder than usual," he admitted.

"How much of a bit?"

"Enough that when I stopped I wasn't sure if I wanted to pass out or throw up," he said, laughing when Bella's face contorted into a grimace.

"Eww," she said, "so that's why I never see happy joggers."

"Well, it always feels fantastic once you stop," he protested in a mild voice, "the endorphins kick in and it's-," he waved a hand in a vague gesture and realised that he was attempting a sales pitch to someone who had no intention of buying, "good," he finished lamely.

Bella regarded him with a smile. "I think I'll stick with yoga."

"You do that," he dropped a kiss onto her forehead, and then gave a sigh of contentment as he rested his head against hers. He had felt comfortable in Bella's apartment the first time he had set foot inside, and the welcoming sensation had only grown with each subsequent visit. He ran his hand in calming circles on Bella's arm and then on impulse ran his hand down her side and up under the hem of her t-shirt. Encouraged by her quiet hum of pleasure he shifted slightly and kept stroking her skin, his fingers circling, circling and becoming more insistent as her skin flushed under his touch.

Bella clutched at his shirt as she reached up to pull his head down to hers, her breathing shallow. Edward kissed her lightly once, and then returned for more. The stresses of the afternoon were behind them now, but he wanted to stake his claim. His hands shifted to her hips and he moved her along the couch so that he could rest himself between legs as he urged them open. Bella needed no prompting. She was very flushed now, very warm. Pushing up the base of her t-shirt he pressed a soft kiss against the flat plane of her belly.

"Edward, please ...,"

"I know," he bent his head to her skin again. Another unquiet minute went by. And then another. He sat up and reached out to smooth a strand of hair off her face while she watched him.

Bella hardly moved, hardly breathed. What did he see, she wondered. Did he see a character for his book, was he fantasising about someone else, did he see her? Again she found herself wondering what it was she had to offer. She had given all she had to Jacob, which turned out to be not nearly enough. The pain of that was receding as time went by, although in her lonelier moments she found that the scar was still fresh. Since then she had worked to shroud herself in her bakery, in her friendships and independence to bury her fear that she would only ever be perceived as a means to an end. She wanted to be the destination and not the journey. She wanted to be loved and adored.

"You are so beautiful," Edward muttered. His insecurities from the afternoon came flooding back. His words were gone again, not wanting to clutter the sanctuary of Bella's home. All he could do was show her how he felt about her. "Bella, tell me what you want. What can I do to make you mine?"

Her only answer was to pull him down for another kiss before struggling off the couch and leading him to the bed. When Bella put her hands on her t-shirt as if to pull it off, Edward stopped her with a quiet gesture, and then ran his hands up and under the shirt, tugging it off her as she toed off her shoes. Tossing the shirt onto the floor, he took a step back and stood waiting. After a brief hesitation, Bella stepped towards him and did the same. Gathering his shirt into a ball, she held it to her face and closed her eyes as she breathed in Edward's scent; rosemary and lime with an underlying musk that was essentially male. Delicious. Working together their shoes and clothes were stripped away. Layers were shed one by one until there was nothing left to hide.

Urging her onto the bed Edward crawled over her and rubbed his lips against hers until she lay completely relaxed. Her hands floated up to cup his face as they explored each other with taste and touch. Edward stroked her with his fingertips as she shivered against him. While there were many things they were yet to learn about each other, there were few things Edward knew better than the response of her body. He paused for a moment until her shivers subsided and then started again, his fingers ghosting over her skin while he nipped and sucked and she clasped his head to her. Finally he grasped the back of her thighs with his hands and sank into her. Bella took him in, pulling him in, her eyes and lips open, pulling them both into bliss.

By the time they had finished, there was not a patch of skin or hollow on Bella's body that had not been kissed, licked, restrained, filled and satisfied. Edward had devoured her in a way that was desperate and worshipful all at once. Bella had been loved until there was not a single whispered 'Edward' left in her throat. She had entwined herself around his body until their mouths were agape against each other as their release shook through them.

Now they were coiled around each other; their legs tangled, their arms waving like seaweed in a gentle current as they stroked, swirled and caressed each other in a wordless need to stay connected.

"I suppose we could think about dinner sometime," Bella ventured.

"Mmph," Edward replied. The two of them lay silent, neither of them willing to disengage from each other just yet. "Maybe take-out."

"I can cook," Bella replied. The offer was half-hearted at best.

"It's been a roller-coaster day, let's take it easy."

"It hasn't been *that* bad," Bella protested in a mild tone, stretching out and rubbing her instep against Edward's calves, "but I guess now that you mention it, some Indian might be nice. Chicken korma maybe."

"And some naan bread," Edward replied in a coaxing tone, giving a low chuckle when Bella nodded decisively and got up to look for the menu and telephone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Earth calling Bella ..."

Bella blinked and looked up to see Alice regarding her with her head cocked on one side.

"Are you okay, Boss?"

"Sure," Bella remembered to smile as she pulled a waiting cup towards her and poured in the milk. "I was a million miles away."

"So you were saying the evening ended well enough, but does that mean things got off to a shaky start?"

"Yup," Bella nodded.

"How about Emmett?"

Bella's face softened as she thought about her big brother. "Bear was wonderful, he took to Edward straightaway and then gave Jake and I a verbal spanking and kicked us out of the store to go have a talk."

"Hang on, I'm confused, where was Edward?"

"He took off to let Jake and I sort things out," Bella clarified.

"As in he chickened out?" Alice frowned, that didn't sound like the Lion King she knew.

"Not at all, he just wanted to give us some space, but I don't think he was too happy about it."

"You've lost me again, what was Jake doing here?" Alice sipped at her coffee, trying to process what Bella was telling her.

"Sorry, I'm all over the place. Bear wanted to get the job done quickly, so he called Jake to give him a hand. Edward and I were out having brunch and decided to stop in to see how it was all going and-," she waved a hand, ""Edward was polite, Jake was a total bitch," Bella began and then paused to sip at her coffee, winking as Angela appeared to take her cup, "and then Jake and I went to have a long talk, and Edward tried to kill himself jogging."

"I hate coming in at the tail end of a conversation," Angela commented as she strolled up to the counter, making the other two women laugh.

"The Boss was just giving me a summary of her weekend," Alice explained.

"Which included gay men and death by jogging," Angela said, still looking none the wiser.

"Bella's main men met each other on the weekend," Alice explained, "Bear was fantastic as always, Jake was the bitch queen from hell, and Edward was the shy, retiring type."

"Oh, I wouldn't say *shy*," Bella mused, thinking back to how Edward managed to put Jake in his place and stake his claim on her at the same time. "He's a man that knows what he wants."

"About time you hooked up with one like that," Alice muttered, and then looked up to see Angela and Bella regarding her with surprise. "What? Just sayin'," she continued in a defensive tone.

"Wow," Angela commented, "sounds like we all had quite a time of it then."

"What can I say?" Bella waved her cup, "life is never dull." She swigged back the last of her coffee and set the cup down as she gave Alice a speculative grin. "Speaking of which-," she said in a meaningful tone.

"This one's going to get you," Alice said, leaning across the counter to pick up her stub of chalk. She collected the chalkboard and propped it on a chair to write up the quote, and then turned it around with a flourish to reveal her words.

*Procrastination is like masturbation; in the end you're just screwing yourself.*

Angela gave a whoop of laughter, and Bella chuckled before her gaze turned inward and she walked slowly towards the kitchen. Alice watched her with satisfaction. She could almost taste victory.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward was thinking about food when he let himself into his apartment. Bella's early morning starts had meant he was home earlier than usual and so he had gone out for his morning run. Now that he had jogged off the Indian meal indulgence from the night before, he was ready for breakfast.

He had abandoned his phone on the kitchen bench when he had gone out, and now he snatched it up as it started to vibrate against the marble countertop. He inspected the call display and considered rejecting the call, but then thought better of it. Bella had dealt with her issues head on, the best he could do was follow her example.

"Marcus," he said briefly as he kicked off his running shoes, "you have some explaining to do."

"I know," came the sighed admission, "would it help if I said I was sorry?"

"It might," Edward grunted as he flicked his phone onto loudspeaker and tossed it onto the bed so that he could take off his shirt. He listened to Marcus's apologies with half an ear as he peeled off his running clothes. He wanted a shower and he didn't feel particularly well disposed towards listening to apologetic babble. The damage had been done but the damage control had been swift, no thanks to Marcus. He sniffed at his tank top

and after making a face balled it up and threw it towards the laundry hamper. It missed and fell to the floor. He'd pick it up later.

Marcus was still talking. Edward leaned over the bed and snatched up the handset.

"Marcus, can I call you back?"

Marcus stopped mid-sentence and stared at the receiver. It had been a while since Edward had offered to call him back.

"Sure," he said after a moment's pause.

"Won't be long," Edward replied, and disconnected the call.

Marcus listened to the disconnected tone. Edward wasn't one to talk on the phone very much so the fact that he had offered to call Marcus back spoke volumes. Marcus sat and rubbed his chin. He just couldn't work out if it was good or bad.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good, huh?" Alice had popped her head around the kitchen to see Bella leaning against the counter deep in thought.

"Almost too good," Bella replied, "you might have me on this one."

"Ha," Alice turned to give Angela a victory fist bump.

"Hang on," Bella held up a cautionary hand, "I haven't thrown in the towel yet."

"Maybe not, Boss," Alice taunted with a wide grin, "but the clock's a-tickin' and customers will be here soon-," she broke off as Bella snapped her fingers and turned towards the mixer. "You haven't," she breathed.

Bella looked up and gave her a conspiratorial wink and she pulled the mixer forwards on the bench and then started to measure sugar into the bowl

"No," Alice all but wailed, "I thought I really had you on this one."

"We'll see," Bella replied in a placid tone, hoping she had enough white chocolate.

Alice pushed herself away from the doorframe and headed out to finish setting up for the morning.

"Any clues?" Angela paused on her way out to stock up the sugar sachets on the tables. "I promise not to consort with the enemy," she vowed, holding up her pinkie.

"No clues yet," Bella muttered as she watched the butter and sugar mix to a creamy consistency. "I'm winging it this morning, I think she might really have me this time."

"Your secret is safe with me," Angela smiled and went about her duties.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Edward, I had no idea that Bella didn't know," Marcus began as soon as he answered Edward's call.

"It's okay," Edward sounded resigned but not angry, "it's something I should've told her myself so we're both to blame."

Marcus blinked; he had expected more fallout than this. Perhaps Edward breaking through his writers' block had been beneficial in more ways than one.

"So," he began with caution, "how's the writing going these days?"

Edward gave a dry chuckle. "Marcus, you're as tenacious as a pit-bull, I really haven't missed these conversations at all."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Marcus replied in an equally dry tone, "but no avoiding the question, Cullen, how's the writing?"

"Good," Edward allowed. "Better than good," he added after a moment's pause. "I'm averaging about four thousand words a day."

"How more time do you think you need?" Marcus asked as he moved forward in his seat and propped his elbows on the desk.

Edward told him.

"So soon? I'll let them know," Marcus said, his eyebrows raised in surprise. When the call ended he hung up his phone and leaned back in his chair, staring at the notes and doodles he'd scribbled in his diary. After his conversation with Bella the day before he had been sure the situation had been heading for disaster. Now he found himself in the position of reviewing his Gant chart and wondering what sort of marketing push they were going to come up with for Edward's latest creation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella sat the last cupcake creation on the tray and twisted it slightly so that it was in line with all the others before giving a slight nod of satisfaction.

"Alice," she called, "brace yourself."

"Hang on," Alice answered, "be there in a minute."



"That's what she said," Angela replied, earning a few laughs of appreciation from their morning customers.

Carefully scooping up the tray Bella carried it out of the kitchen and towards the display cabinet. Alice appeared to slide the door open so that Bella could set the tray down with all the reverence the cupcakes deserved.

"All right," Alice said in a weary tone, "let's be having it." She had picked up the small chalkboard and stood waiting.

"*Time Flies When You're Having Fun*," Bella dictated, "Chocolate cherry butterfly cakes with white chocolate wings."

Alice wrote quickly and then set the chalkboard onto its easel with a dejected sigh.

"One day," she vowed as she shook Bella's hand to concede defeat, "one day."

"It's good to have a goal," Bella assured her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jasper Whitlock was a man with a mission. He finished his lecture plans for the week and gave his desk a cursory glance to make sure everything was as it should be. It had been a good day. The students had seemed moderately refreshed for a Monday; and his lecture had been well received. In between classes he had based himself in his office, knowing that, as deadlines neared there would be more and more student queries about the assignments and requests for extensions. He looked at his watch and decided that it was time to call it a day. He finished up what he had been working on before flicking the book closed and tossing his pen into his desk drawer. Picking up his knapsack he stopped to lock the door after him, and set off down the corridor.

The School of Arts and Sciences was based on Fifth Avenue and WS Mews, and he slowed down as he reached the well-tended gardens near the entrance. The azaleas were in bloom and added glorious splashes of colour against the grey stone of the old buildings. He walked through the wrought iron gates and onto Fifth Avenue, turning to set off towards the Village. As he walked, he thought about Alice.

The woman was a contradiction; and yet the more he discovered he didn't know about her, the more he was enchanted. Over the course of the weekend she had in turn been vulnerable and tender, and then had undergone a mercurial change to become a tigress as she had teased and coaxed him towards their mutual release. As far as sex went he'd never been with anyone like Alice, a tiny woman who enthralled him with her willingness to give and receive. Lying in his arms afterwards, she had become kitten-like as she and curled up beside him. Their Sunday together had been more of the same, and yet when Monday morning had arrived things had been markedly different. She had to get to work, and he had to get a fresh change of clothes before heading off to the University. She had been casual, off-hand even in her easy dismissal of him, as they had parted ways.

He frowned as he remembered her non-committal answers again, remembering their conversation on her apartment steps that Saturday evening.

*"I'm an all or nothing kinda guy. When I kiss you and mean it, I'm going to keep on wanting to kiss you; I'm going to want you in my life all the time, and I want to know that before I do that, you feel the same way too."*

She hadn't answered him other than to pull him close for a kiss. It was a kiss that seemed to go on and on as they had fumbled their way upstairs to her apartment. For someone so small, he had been surprised at her ferocity, the way she had burrowed closer, almost whimpering with need as he had run his hands over her bare skin, following his fingertips that were calloused from years of guitar playing with the softness of his lips.

Something was going on in that mind of hers, and he was determined to find out what it was.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Alice blinked.

"We're both away with the fairies today," Bella gave her a gentle smile, "want to talk about it?"

"I don't know," Alice pushed her hair away from her face and then shifted her weight from one foot to the other, aware that she was fidgeting and unable to stop it.

"I told you mine," Bella prodded. She gave the store a quick glance. The day was drawing to a close now and the pace of customers was beginning to slow down. "Come on, things are quiet for the time being. Spill." Taking Alice by the elbow she steered her into the kitchen. "Angela, can you hold the fort?"

"No problem," Angela assured them. She had come a long way from the days where she had been nervous about making coffees.

"So," Bella urged Alice to sit on the solitary high stool in the kitchen, "what's up. Is it Jasper? Is something wrong?"

"No," Alice said, "I don't know," she said as she wiped her sweaty palms on the thighs of her jeans. "It's just all harder than I thought."

"What is?" Bella asked.

"Being with someone," Alice said, picking at a thread on the beaded patch that adorned one knee of her jeans. "What's it like with you and Edward?"

Bella was nonplussed with the question. It wasn't something she often stopped to think about. "It's ... well, I guess it's-," she groped for the right word, "easy isn't quite right, but it's comfortable."

"Right," Alice sighed, "so it's just me then."

"Oh, Alice no," Bella rushed in to reassure her, "you know I wasn't sure about Edward for a long time, but we just took things slow and-," she smiled just thinking of him, "he was always there for me."

"Uh-huh," Alice nodded, "go on."

"Like Jasper seems to be there for you."

"Tell me about it," Alice said with an air of gloom, "every time I turn around lately, there he is."

"Maybe it's a sign," Bella said with a gentle smile. "How do you feel when you see him?"

Alice thought for a moment, thinking of the way Jasper's smile had lit up his face when he saw her. "Good," she answered at last, not noticing that her entire demeanour had softened when she thought of him.

"Well then, that's a start," Bella offered with a gentle smile. "Alice, you don't have to label what the two of you are straight away, just take it as it comes and see how comfortable you feel."

"I guess," Alice nodded, "I'm so used to doing my own thing that it freaks me out a little."

"If you're happy when you're with him, then focus on that," Bella advised, "and whatever follows will be sorted out in time by the pair of you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward glanced at the time display in the upper corner of his laptop screen and then looked back at his work; he had made good progress today. Marcus would be more than pleased when he saw the volume that he had managed to produce over the last few months. *When it rains, it pours* he thought with a smile. Months with nothing to show for it and then the floodgates had opened. As long as his Editor could make sense of it all, then he'd feel confident about his work. He sat and rubbed his top lip while he re-read what he had written, wondering when Bella would want to read it. She had said little after their discussion. Perhaps the very fact that she was the source of his inspiration was still sinking in. He was sure that her curiosity about it would only be a matter of time. Words stirred in his mind as he sat thinking about her, and he looked at the keyboard for a moment before he smiled and began to type again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Another day's work completed," Angela commented as she shut the dishwasher door with a flourish and turned to stack some dried plates on the overhead shelf. "Got any plans tonight?"

"Not that I know of," Bella answered. She and Edward hadn't made any plans for the week now that she thought of it. Feeling a buzzing in her pocket, she dug out her cell phone. It was Emmett.

*Dinner?*

She grinned and typed out a response.

*Sure, where?*

The response came so quickly she knew he had to be waiting for her reply.

*Pizza + beer = happy bear. Meet u at shop. X*

"Looks like I'm catching up with Emmett," she smiled. "He's probably wanting to check up on me after the weekend to make sure everything's okay."

"As far as protectors go, you can't get much better than him," Angela commented. "He's pretty good value."

"Yeah he does good," Bella acknowledged with a proud smile, "Charlie told him to look after me, and I guess he takes that pretty seriously at times."

"Well, you're all each other has, don't forget," Angela said.

Alice paused on her way past and gave a slight cough for dramatic effect. "Hello, I'm standing right *here*."

Bella laughed and threw her arms around her. "And of course I've got you," she said. Angela caught her eye and made her lower lip tremble. "And you," she added, reaching out to haul her in for a hug as well.

"Just so we're clear on that," Alice said, squeezing Bella for emphasis. "Bear's all well and good, but the sisterhood will always be here too."

"Damn straight," Angela seconded.

"And that's always good to know," Bella said, her voice muffled as she hugged her two friends.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward stood up from his desk and wrapped his arms around his shoulders to give himself a squeeze before stretching his arms up and over his head, feeling his muscles pop. The action pulled his t-shirt up, and he stood absently scratching his abs while staring out the window. It was late afternoon; Bella would be closing up shop soon and they hadn't talked about they might be doing that evening. He picked up his cell phone and dialed the number he knew by heart.

"Hey," he greeted in a soft voice, "doing anything this evening?"

"Hi," Bella greeted. He could hear the smile in her voice. "Actually Emmett just messaged me wanting pizza and beer tonight. I think he's doing his Brother Bear after Jake unleashed the bitch on the weekend."

"Sounds fair," Edward laughed. He wondered if Bella noticed she tended to adopt Emmett's syntax when she spoke. "Should I leave you to it?"

Bella paused. "No, I'd like you to get to know him better. How about I run a couple of things past him and let you know where we'll be?"

"Sure, but no pressure okay? If you need family time I'll cool with that."

"Thanks, Babe," Bella replied, "I'll be in touch soon, 'kay?"

"Okay, have you had a nice day?"

"It's getting better all the time," she assured him.

Edward put his phone down and strolled towards the bathroom. If he didn't see Bella tonight he was sure he could keep working. Still, it would be good to see his girl. He got into the bathroom and shucked off his jeans, pausing when he saw Bella's toothbrush and a tube of mascara sitting on the bathroom cabinet. He had a toothbrush and deodorant at Bella's place now, and these small domestic touches made him smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't have to ask who that was," Alice commented, "just hearing his voice makes you go all goofy."

"Takes one to know one," Bella retorted, swatting Alice on the rump as the smaller woman passed her to empty the water jugs in the industrial sink behind the counter.

Bella started tapping out a message to Emmett on her phone.

*Can I bring Edward or do you need Bear time? x*

Her phone beeped a few minutes later with his reply.

*Cool. It's a double-date x*

Bella's eyebrows went up at this.

*Anyone I know? x*

The reply was faster this time.

*You could say that. How about Bear time gets 30 min head start? x*

Bella pursed her lips, wondering but already having suspicions about just who Emmett's date was going to be.

*Sounds good. C u soon x*

*Not if I c u first! x*

Bella groaned at the old joke and put her phone back in her pocket.

"Is that good or bad?" Angela asked as she untied her apron and folded it carefully.

"Definitely good, and a bit mysterious," Bella answered. "Edward's coming out with Bear and I tonight, and Emmett just called it a double date."

"Oh really?" Angela looked curious at this piece of news, "do you know who it is?"

"No idea, but knowing Emmett," Bella paused and gave a slight smile, "it'll be someone foxy."

"Speaking of foxy," Alice chimed in, "what do you think of this?" she unbuttoned her little black waistcoat and pulled it open to reveal a smiling fox print on her t-shirt.

"I think it was made for you," Angela grinned. It was true; the fox even had dark brown – almost black – grinning eyes that reminded both women of Alice.

"Funny you should say that," Alice replied, buttoning up the waistcoat again.

"You made it?" Angela gaped.

"Yep, the shirt and the print. You like?"

"I love," Angela enthused, "I've got to put an order in."

"Me too," Bella agreed. Alice smiled beneath their praise, soaking it up like a drug.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again," Bella said, "you've *got* to start selling your fashion somewhere. Hell, you can even sell it here if you like, but you've got to get your work out there."

"We'll see," Alice conceded. The idea excited and terrified her all at once.

"So will you once it starts flying off the racks," Bella said. "You'll have fans everywhere. Speaking of which-, " she raised an eyebrow towards the doorway.

Jasper had reached the bakery and had stopped to read the quote of the day. He was still laughing as he stepped inside.

"There's my girl," he said with a chuckle as he walked towards her to pull her in for a kiss.

Alice ducked her head under his chin and looked oddly shy at his obvious pleasure at seeing her. Bella and Angela exchanged a glance and went about their final duties for the day.

"You ready to go?" Jasper murmured, running his hands on her back.

"Soon," Alice said, "I've just got to-,"

"No you don't," Bella broke in, "I've got it from here. I'm waiting for Bear so you two can take off. That goes for you as well," she added, turning to include Angela.

"Are you sure?" Angela began, "I was just about to-," she broke off as Bella pulled the dishtowel she had slung over her shoulder and began to twirl it meaningfully. "We're going," she squeaked. She had learned from experience that Bella could snap a dishcloth with deadly accuracy.

"What?" Bella said as Jasper laughed, "it's good to be the boss."

"No argument from me," Jasper held his hands up in surrender.

He leaned against the counter and made idle chitchat with Bella while Alice hung up her apron and gathered her things. When she appeared, he helped her on with her coat and then put his arm around her shoulder as they made their way out of the store as they called out their farewells.

"Had a good day?" Jasper leaned down as he spoke, his breath chuffing against her hair.

"Yep," Alice nodded, "you?"

"Can't complain, not when I've got you at the end of it," he grinned.

Alice smiled back. She wasn't used to this. She wasn't used to having someone to talk to, to wake up with. For all her conquests, Alice was used to being alone; she had never shared her life with anyone, and yet with Jasper there was a strange sense of familiarity, as if she had known him for years.

Her life had been one of isolation, one that had been dictated by her mother and subsequently adopted by unconscious and later by conscious choice. Carefully created barriers had kept others at bay until Jasper. He had slipped under and around her defences as if he belonged at her side. His ease at which he maintained physical contact with her all the time both frightened and reassured her, and again she wondered at the strange affinity between them.

"Got any plans for tonight?" he asked.

"Uh-," Alice stalled. She had wanted to sketch some designs, "a few, but I guess we can-,"

"Babe," Jasper gave her a gentle squeeze, "I just want to eat and watch television, if that's something I can do in the background of whatever you're doing, it's all good."

Alice squinted up at him. "Really?"

"Really," he said with a solemn nod before he grinned at her confusion. "Why, you think I need to be entertained?"

"Maybe," she replied. They had stopped at the lights now. "I don't know how this works," she went on with a shrug.

"It's pretty straightforward, you just wait for the lights to change to green and cross when everyone else does."

"Not that," she gave an exasperated snort. "This whole girlfriend gig."

"Mmm?" Jasper was kissing her temple and appeared to be half-listening.

"I'm serious," she dug her elbow into his ribs and he gave a grunt of surprise.

"So I gather," he said, "alright so let's talk, what's the problem?"

Alice kept her head down. She hadn't wanted to have this conversation and now she was going to look foolish. Jasper gave her a gentle nudge, signalling he was waiting for her to reply.

"I don't know how to be a girlfriend," she said in a rush.

"You want to run that by me at half speed?" Jasper gave her a curious look.

Alice huffed in annoyance.

"I *said*," she repeated, "I don't know how to be a girlfriend."

Jasper's forehead wrinkled as he frowned in confusion. "Yeah, and?"

"And that's it," Alice muttered. "I don't know how all this shit works."

They walked on a few paces in silence before Jasper gave a sigh and slowed down. He looked over his shoulder before steering Alice over to lean her against a building, bracing his hands on either side of her face.

"Alice, this isn't some sort of job description you have to aspire to," he began, and then cupped her chin in his hands to turn her gaze back to him when she tried to look away. "No, listen. I want *you*, Alice. Just the way you are."

"But you don't really know me," she replied.

"So the joy will be finding out," Jasper shrugged.

Alice mulled this over, and Jasper watched the different emotions flicker across her face.

"Alice, I like you, and I want to be with you. That's all that matters, and the rest we'll make up as we go along."

Alice could feel a tightness in her chest that had perhaps always been there soften and release at his words. She sighed and felt her shoulders loosen as she relaxed under Jasper's steady words and gaze. Jasper was still cupping her face, his thumbs brushing over her pulse.

"Okay," she said at last. "I'm game if you are."

Jasper's hands slid down to the nape of her neck as he leaned in closer and kissed her, his mouth warm and open against hers. Alice wrapped her arms around him and pulled him closer still.



## Chapter 19 Brother Bear and That Word

Bella was tidying up loose ends around the store when she heard a quick tattoo on the store window. She looked up and saw Emmett letting himself in, closing the door after himself and flipping the sign on the door to *closed*.

"Hey," Emmett greeted as he crossed towards her with a grin, "how's my favourite sister?"

"Good," Bella said as she stepped into his hug before returning to the counter to collect her bag where it sat waiting, "you?"

"Yeah," Emmett stretched and gave a quiet groan, "I've had better." He rolled his shoulders and then his neck with a slight wince as his muscles protested.

"I'm sorry," Bella returned to his side with a guilty look, "all that extra work yesterday wouldn't have helped."

"If I didn't want to do it I wouldn't have offered," Emmett said in a mild tone as he propelled her towards the door with a light touch on her back. "Any I had Jake there to help."

"Hmmm," Bella sounded dubious at that, making him laugh.

"Granted he made a fuss over getting dirty, but he was pleased with the way it was going when you and Edward showed up," Emmett paused outside as Bella reached for the security grill.

"Right," Bella commented over her shoulder as she locked the door, "and look how that worked out," she finished locking up and stashed her keys inside her satchel, "Jake's evil bitch twin came to the party, Edward went home and you got left with all the work."

"Not that much, we were nearly done," Emmett relied as he draped a brotherly arm around her shoulders, "and you and Jake had some business to attend to."

"That's what you're calling it?"

Emmett gave an expansive shrug. "It sounds better than hissy fit," he said, looking down at her as she gave a rueful smile. The pair of them began to walk across the Village. Bella hadn't asked where they were going, instead trusting that Emmett's need for pizza would mean he had already decided their destination well in advance. "So," Emmett began then they paused at the lights waiting to cross the street, "Edward. How's all that going."

"All that?" Bella looked up at him, noticing yet again the height difference between them; the top of her head barely reached his shoulder. The lights changed and they began to cross the street along with the rest of the

crow. Emmett drew her close to his side in an instinctively protective gesture as the pedestrians from the other side of the intersection drew near.

"You know," Emmett said giving her a quick glance before returning his attention to negotiating a clear path, "did you guys have a talk too? He left you and Jake to it but I'm guessing he was wondering what the hell was going on."

"You guess correctly," Bella sighed. She felt tired again. It seemed all she was doing was talking lately and it was wearing her down. Not for the first time she realised how easy it was at times to be single; now it felt that by putting herself on the dating radar she had somehow entered a minefield of emotions.

Emmett didn't miss the sigh. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah we're fine, everyone's fine," Bella answered as she hitched the strap of her satchel on her shoulder.

"Fine as in Fucking Insecure Neurotic and Emotional type fine, or okay?" he ventured after a brief pause.

Bella snickered at this.

"I mean we're *good*," she emphasised the last word, watching as Emmett gave a sage nod. "Jake and I talked it all out, and then Edward joined us at the bar for a drink and the boys played nice."

"Really?" Emmett tried not to look too surprised at this, "that's gotta be a first."

"I know, but-," Bella considered this as they kept walking and then frowned as she looked further down the street, "where are we going by the way?"

"Lombardi's," Emmett answered, "and don't change the subject."

"Hang on, I said I'd let Edward know where we'd be," Bella said, slowing her pace a little as she dug in her satchel and then began to tap out a message to Edward on her phone.

Emmett glanced down and saw what she was doing. "You want to stop and do that?"

"No, you steer and make sure I don't trip over anything," Bella said in an absent tone as she kept composing the message.

Emmett nodded and tightened his arm around her shoulders, whistling tunelessly as they walked.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward looked at the word count of the document and gave a low whistle. For someone with writers' block for a few months he had certainly managed to redeem himself. Marcus would definitely be pleased with this. Or not. Edward paused as he considered this. It was certainly a break from his usual style of writing, although the sheer volume of this would give Marcus enough to work on for a while. With luck they would be able to work

their way towards a mutually agreeable finished product. He looked away from the screen as his phone beeped with an incoming message.

*Pizza at Lombardi's cnr Spring & Mott – see you soon? B.*

Edward smiled and wrote a reply.

*No probs. Let me know when x E*

He relaxed in his chair and waited for her response, rubbing an absent hand over his chin and feeling the rasp of stubble against his fingers. His phone beeped again and he smiled when he read her message and then flicked the phone back onto his desk where it landed on some paperwork with a dull thud. For a moment he considered shaving and then remembered with a grin that Bella enjoyed his scruff on occasion. Glancing at the laptop screen again he began to re-read the afternoon's efforts, his smiling fading as a small voice in his head wondered what Bella would make of it. He sighed and rubbed his face again. There was nothing for it but to wait and see. He'd come this far.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are we there yet?" Bella teased as she slipped her phone back into her bag.

"Nearly," Emmett said, "you hungry?"

"A little," Bella conceded.

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to eat a bit more," Emmett commented. It hadn't escaped his attention that Bella had shivered each time a cold gust of wind had swept against them. She had been working too hard again and he could see that she had lost a couple of pounds. She had inherited their mother's slight build and any loss showed. Turning his attention back to the street and looking ahead towards the pizzeria he resolved to ask her more about her relationship with Edward. Not for the first time, he wished Charlie were still alive. He knew Bella would have borne Charlie in Papa Bear mode with more grace than she would an inquisitive older brother, no matter how well intentioned.

"Don't fuss, Bear, I'm okay," Bella shook her head at him. It hurt her to see the worry in his eyes; she preferred to see him happy. She cast about for a distraction. "On to more important things," she said, "pizza. Have you thought about what you want?" She knew her ploy had worked when Emmett laughed.

"Bells, dinner's a done deal. I've been thinking about it all afternoon."

By the time they were crossing Houston they were indulging in a good natured squabble about toppings.

"Definitely sausage," Emmett said, "and plenty of peppers."

Bella gave him a look of amused tolerance. "Like you could possibly consider anything else," she said. Ever since their teenage years Emmett had been known for his devotion to pizza, "just don't forget I want mushrooms."

"Of course," Emmett inclined his head in agreement, "but before we get there the next stop has to be beer," he went on, pointing out a liquor store ahead of them. "Anything you want?"

"Nope, I'll stick with mineral water once we get there," Bella said and shrugged when Emmett raised an eyebrow, "it's Monday night, I only tend to have a couple of drinks on the weekends."

A while later they were settling themselves at a table, Bella stashing her satchel between her feet and accepted a bottle of mineral water from a waitress with a smile of thanks while Emmett opened one of his beers and took an appreciative swig.

"Good?" Bella asked with a smile when he set the bottle down on the table with a sigh.

"There are times when hard work means a hard earned thirst," he sighed, "and today is one of those days." He looked at her and then started to fidget with the label on the bottle. "So, getting back to business," he raised an eyebrow at her, "you said that you and Jake played nice yesterday when I kicked you out of the store. How did it go?"

Bella sipped at her water while she considered his question. "As well as could be expected," she said at last, "things got a little bumpy."

"I bet they did," Emmett said, folding his arms and leaning slightly towards her. "But it's a talk that's been a long time comin'."

"Yeah," Bella nodded slowly.

"You're both as bad as each other sometimes, you know that, right?" Emmett pressed on.

This time Bella's nod was slower.

"I'm not saying that you two can't be friends, but c'mon, Bells, sometimes it hasn't been too healthy."

Bella couldn't look at him now. She traced the beads of condensation on her glass and drew on the tabletop with a wet fingertip. Emmett said nothing further. Instead he sipped at his beer and waited for her to say something. Finally she looked up and gave him a watery smile.

"You're right," she admitted at last, "but we talked about it." She reached over and picked up Emmett's beer bottle, raising an eyebrow at him and taking a swig after he nodded.

"So what did you talk about?" Emmett prodded as she set the bottle down.

"All the stuff that has been building up for a few years. His sabotage, my passivity, our love lives – together and with other people," she thought for a moment and shrugged. "Guess it was all the stuff that needed to be said to clear the air."

"And how about Edward?"

"We talked about him too," Bella nodded.

"No, I meant how was Edward with it all? He took off pretty quickly."

"Yeah," Bella nodded, "he left us to talk it out, but came and had a drink with us later on."

Emmett gave a slow considered nod of approval. "Gotta give props to the man for showing up after Jake had the bitch off the leash."

Bella laughed at Emmett's choice of phrase. "I know, right? He was really good, and Jake behaved himself too."

"I'm glad to hear it," Emmett nodded, "Edward seems like a nice guy, if that smile on your face is anything to go by-," he grinned, "and that blush." His grin broadened as Bella groaned and put her hands to her face in a futile attempt to hide the colour in her cheeks. "Wow, getting serious, huh?"

"I think so," Bella conceded, "how about you?" she asked and was delighted to see Emmett drop his gaze to the tabletop with a quiet smile. "Is it who I think it is?"

"If you think it's Rosalie, then you'd be right," Emmett said as he tried and failed to look modest.

"I had a hunch that it might be, you two looked pretty taken with each other at the store a while back, is that when things started?"

"Yup," Emmett swigged at his beer again, "we went out for dinner that night and we kept on dating ever since."

"Really?" Bella's eyes widened, "you kept that pretty quiet."

"Eh, we're quiet when we have to be," Emmett said with a suggestive leer and laughed when Bella put her hands over her ears. When Bella rested her hands on the table again she could still feel the heat in her cheeks raised her glass to Emmett with a wry smile.

"So, both of us, huh?"

"Looks like we've both fallen," Emmett answered as he tilted his bottle towards her glass in a silent toast.

Bella gazed at Emmett as she waited for him to finish the sentence, watching as he lifted his bottle to his lips and took a long sip. He kept drinking, widening his eyes at her before releasing the bottle from his lips with a soft 'pop' and setting it down.

"What?" he said.

"Fallen in what?" Bella asked as she leaned forward in her seat waiting for him to speak, although she already knew the answer.

"You know," Emmett mumbled, fidgeting with the paper label on the beer bottle for a moment. He glanced back up at her, his forehead creased with curiosity. "You've fallen too, right?"

She nodded. They were both very serious now.

"So," Emmett went on, "you haven't said it either?"

"Not to him," Bella answered. She had all but admitted it to Jacob. "You?"

Emmett shook his head.

"So when?" she asked, turning her water glass in small circles on the table.

"Soon," Emmett said, his voice emphatic. "How about you?"

"When the time is right," Bella said at last, looking up when she saw Emmett's grin. "What?"

"Bells, there's no such thing as the right time. You're talking about feeling safe enough to say it."

Bella sipped at her water again and realising she wanted something more, flagged a passing waitress to order a Coke. She turned back to see Emmett watching her, his face impassive as he waited for her answer. There was nowhere for her to go, no way she would try to bluff her way through the conversation. No matter how hard she could try to stall, he would simply wait her out. He had done it before.

It had been Emmett who had sat waiting by her hospital bedside after the accident with Charlie; waiting for his only sibling to wake up so that he could tell her that they were orphans. He had been the only person other person besides Bella listed as next of kin, and had made the journey from upstate to keep vigil by her side. He had watched and waited for her grief to burn down to ash before telling her she had to leave home and make a life for herself.

"You're no good here, Bells," he had said one day.

Bella still remembered the way he had said that, his body looming large in her bedroom doorway, his boot scuffing at the hallway carpet.

She had been sitting on her bed going through an old photo album after another quiet dinner when Emmett had appeared at her door and made the announcement.

"Bear, I'm fine-," she began, and stopped when he slowly shook his head.

"See, Babycake, that's where you're wrong," he said in a gentle tone. "I've been watching you," he went on as he stepped into the room and took a seat beside her on the bed, "and you're just going through the motions of living."

"Bear-," Bella began again.

"No, Bells," he said as he shook his head, "this isn't living, and it doesn't honour Mom and-", he stopped and swallowed hard, "Dad. You *know* they wouldn't like this, so you've got to make a life for yourself." He had reached out and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Go back to college, Bells, get your degree, and make a good life for yourself. You know that would make them proud."

"You want me to leave here?" Bella kept her eyes on the album in front of her, tracing the corner of the heavy page over and over.

"You have to," Emmett had said, "and you won't be alone."

Emmett had been as good as his word. Bella had gone back to college and immersed herself in her studies. Her social life had receded even further, and she had become a lonely figure on campus until she had met Jake. With Jake, Bella had found someone who could make her laugh again; an intimate friend who steered her through the peaks and troughs of college stress as she completed her degree. The relationship had fallen apart in the wake of Jake's revelation.

When Bella had phoned Emmett she had barely been able to speak through her tears. After he had ascertained that she was physically all right he had stopped asking questions and told her to pack a bag and get herself to the airport. She had arrived at New York to see her brother waiting, the lines of anxiety on his face etching deeper as he took her in defeated posture. He had said nothing, but had simply wrapped her in his arms and held her for a long moment before relieving her of her bag and walking her outside knowing that when she was ready to talk to him about whatever it was that had left her so distraught, she would.

Now Emmett sat waiting again, watching Bella smile her thanks as her Coke was delivered to their table, checking her wristwatch to see how much longer it would be before Edward and Rosalie arrived.

Bella looked up and saw Emmett regarding her with a steadfast gaze.

"Bells," Emmett said, reaching out a gentle hand, "he's not Jake."

"I know," Bella nodded, "I'm just scared, you know?"

"Oh I know," Emmett said, giving her hand a soft squeeze before leaning back in his seat. "When I think about Rosie my heart's in my throat."

"Really?" Bella cocked an eyebrow at Emmett's declaration, "sounds serious."

"It is," Emmett nodded.

"But how can you be so sure?" Bella ventured after a careful pause, "I mean, you guys haven't been dating for all that long."

"I just know," Emmett waved a hand in an entirely vague gesture, "and sometimes you just have to throw yourself wholeheartedly into something, or not at all."

Bella cocked her head as she gazed at her brother.

"That's quite a philosophy you've got going there," she said.

"It was Mom's," Emmett said easily, making Bella smile. Their mother had been a free spirit compared to Charlie's more conservative nature, but had managed to impart life lessons along the way.

"Mom could be a flake at times," Emmett shrugged, "it her words kinda stuck, I guess, and it's a philosophy that works for me. Anyway, you want to finish your life feeling like you've had one helluva ride, or regret that you didn't do more when you had the chance?" He leaned forward and grasped Bella's hand again. "We both know that life can finish anytime, so why hold back?"

"I guess," Bella muttered, thinking of Edward. She glanced at her watch again and then looked up as Emmett straightened in his chair and waved with a broad smile. She followed his gaze and smiled; it was Rosalie.

Emmett stood up from his seat and stepped forward to give Rosalie a kiss of welcome when she drew near, and then put a proprietary arm around her shoulders as they both turned to face Bella.

"Hey, Bella," Rosalie said with a broad smile, "I guess it's been a while since we caught up."

"Hi Rose," Bella answered with a smile of her own as Emmett pulled out a chair for Rosalie to sit down, "good to see you too, guess we've all been busy lately."

"You could say that," Rosalie laughed, "I hear you've been occupied lately too."

"You have, huh?" Bella shot a sidelong look at Emmett who endeavoured to look innocent, "Bear, you are so busted."

Rosalie was looking from Emmett to Bella. "Have I spoken out of turn?"

"Not at all," Bella reassured her, "it's just good to catch Emmett gossiping now and then."

"So you and Edward are still on?"

"Very much so," Bella nodded, "he's joining us here tonight. Actually," she consulted her watch again, "he should be here any minute."

"Really?" Rosalie brightened, "that's great. It'll be nice to get to know him a bit better, I didn't get much of a chance last time."

"Why's that?" Bella asked as she tried to downplay her grin.

"I was ... uh ... otherwise distracted," Rosalie admitted as she leaned over in her seat to nudge Emmett with her shoulder, "and you can get that smug look off your face."

"Sorry, Babe," Emmett said, clearly unrepentant, "but you had no chance."



"Oh really," Rosalie said, narrowing her eyes as she looked at him.

"Really, why do you think Bells here invited you to drinks in the first place?"

Rosalie glanced at Bella who gave a sheepish nod. "Probably just as well you didn't tell me, I hate set ups," Rosalie smiled.

"Oh me too," Bella sighed, "I've had more than my share."

"Looks like you don't have to worry about them anymore though, Bells," Emmett said, nodding in the direction of the door before giving a loud whoop and a wave. Bella turned to follow his gaze, and Emmett watched as his sister's face lit up with a smile of recognition.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward had been standing in the doorway scanning the dinner crowd when Emmett's whoop had caught his attention. Emmett's wave barely registered before Edward's attention swung to Bella's smiling face beside him. Walking over to the table he stooped down to brush his lips against Bella's before leaning over to shake Emmett's proffered hand.

"Good to see you again, Emmett," Edward smiled and then pulled out the spare seat beside Bella and sat down.

"Likewise," Emmett gave him a cordial grin, "and this is Rosalie." He couldn't help the note of pride in his voice as he introduced the blonde woman by his side.

"Hi, Edward," Rosalie smiled and shook his hand, "I've heard all about you."

"Really?" Edward felt a twinge of caution at this, wondering what had been said.

"Uh-huh, Em here tells me you're the one that's the cause for Bella's smiles lately."

"Is that so?" Edward relaxed into his seat, grateful that he was going to be spared any further conversation about his writing career.

Bella shot Emmett a look that had her brother fumbling for the menu. "So," he began in a slightly-too-jovial tone, "who's for pizza?"

Rosalie gave an enthusiastic affirmative and Emmett peered around the room for a waitress so that he could get their order placed as quickly as possible. Edward slipped his arm around Bella's shoulders and drew her close.

"Smiles, huh?" he whispered, dropping a kiss on her forehead.

"That's Bear for you," Bella replied, "either all protective or gooey matchmaker. When he's this happy," she nodded her head at the couple opposite, "there isn't much middle ground."

"You didn't answer my question," Edward replied, watching as she bit her lip before smiling again. Edward looked into Bella's warm brown eyes and thought again how much he needed her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella looked at Edward and realised how much she had wanted to be with him this evening. She was about to answer when Emmett directed a question to Edward about pepperoni and the two of them fell into discussion about the pros and cons of sausage pizza. Rosalie and Bella exchanged a smile that something so banal could be turned into such a manly topic of conversation, but gave them free rein until pizzas were at last agreed upon and the order placed.

She watched as Edward and Emmett worked their way through the usual dance steps of conversation as they negotiated their way towards common ground. Of course, sport was the universal leveller although they surprised each other with their mutual interest in books and music. Likewise, Bella and Rosalie found themselves talking about their sources of creative inspiration. Bella felt quiet joy as she watched Emmett reach out and run his hand over Rosalie's back, or hold her hand. The easy intimacy between the two of them spoke volumes about the depth of feeling present. Emmett caught her gaze and smiled, his dimples flashing before he turned his attention back to Edward, although his hand kept rubbing Rosalie's as he spoke. His attention might have been focussed on Edward, but his heart was focussed on Rosalie, just as it should be.

She smiled as she felt Edward's hand rest on her back and begin to make lazy circles as he continued to converse with Emmett. She leaned into his touch and felt content to simply watch him; his strong jaw line as he spoke, the way his eyes crinkled with amusement, and best of all, the way he glanced at her from time to time. It had been cold outside, but she felt as if she could warm herself in warmth of his regard.

The conversation ebbed and flowed, the pizzas arrived and were consumed with gusto. It didn't escape both Edward's attention that both Rosalie and Bella had a healthy approach to food, and they ate their pizza with every sign of enjoyment, a sight he found oddly attractive. A flicker of Emmett's eye told Edward that he felt the same.

Bella licked some grease off her fingers, laughing as Emmett told them a story about his day, and then happened to glance over at Edward. His eyes were watching her lips as they sucked and pulled at her fingertips one by one as she licked them clean. She licked her bottom lip slowly for good measure and watched his eyes grow darker still. Emmett was still entertaining the others with his anecdote, and so she leaned back in her seat and rested her hand on Edward's thigh and rubbed her thumb against the rough denim. She heard his breath hitch for a moment before he remembered himself and laughed on cue as Emmett's story reached its conclusion.

"How are the flea markets going, Rosalie?" Bella asked, applying a little more pressure to Edward's thigh as she spoke.

"Getting colder," Rosalie answered, "but they're good fun while they last."

"What do you do once the season finishes, do you exhibit somewhere?" Bella asked, shifting her hand a little higher this time.

"I've got a studio where I can show some of my work, and there are a couple of galleries where I exhibit from time to time," Rosalie said with a modest smile, "so it all adds up to keep me busy year-round."

Bella could feel the heat of Edward's body against hers. All she wanted to do was run her hand up under his shirt and across the hard planes of his chest as she pressed herself against him.

If she did that, he would touch her like only Edward could touch her. He knew all her sweet spots; the places on her body that made her sigh and arch against him, to find some release from the need that was spiralling up from her core. Somehow she was able to smile and keep talking, smiling and nodding to Emmett and Rosalie, all the while realising she wanted nothing more than to feel Edward's mouth on hers. She shifted a little in her seat, trying to ease the sudden ache.

"Don't do that," Edward's words were a hot whisper against her ear, tickling her neck and making her give a delighted shudder. "Oh god, don't do that. I don't think I can stand much more."

Bella felt a rush of pleasure at his murmured plea.

*I did that. I make him feel like that.*

She turned her attention back to Emmett who, she realised with a guilty start, was gazing at her expectantly.

"Uh-," she temporised, "sorry, what were you saying?"

"Miles away, huh?" Emmett asked with a knowing smile.

"Something like that," Bella admitted, although the distance had been much closer than Emmett had given her credit for. Edward was after all, right beside her.

"I was saying that we ought to call it a night soon given you and I both have early starts tomorrow."

Bella nodded, sliding her hand further up Edward's thigh and biting her lip as he clamped his hand over her wrist to stop her from going further still.

"Guess it's easier for you creative types," Emmett said, sliding his hand up to cup the nape of Rosalie's neck, "you can set your own hours," he glanced at Edward, "being your own boss, that sort of thing."

"Oh I don't know," Rosalie mused, "if the ideas aren't coming then there's nothing to do, and nothing can be a lonely place if you're relying on it for a living, right, Edward?" she turned to look at Edward for support.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Speaking from personal experience, there's nothing worse than waking up and realising that you're living in an inspiration wasteland," Edward commented, releasing Bella's wrist with a warning look and then settling his arm around Bella's shoulders, wishing he could shift his attention away from the warmth of her hand resting on his thigh.

"Then the pressure you put on yourself gets even worse," Rosalie added, leaning into Emmett's caress. Bella shifted a little closer to Edward, and he wondered if she realised that both couples were mirroring each other.

Edward nodded slowly as he considered Rosalie's comment, thinking of his self-imposed isolation and how lonely he had been until he had met Bella.

"Everyone's their own worst critic," Bella added, "and being your own boss can be a different kind of pressure in itself."

"C'mon, Bells, you love your store," Emmett commented as he finished his drink.

"Oh sure, I do now, but those first couple of years were hard."

"Were they?" Edward looked at her, curious. She hadn't told him much about the early days of the bakery, and however tired the day made her she still managed to make it look easy.

Bella shot him a tired smile. "There were weeks when Cup o' Noodles for dinner was considered haute cuisine when the business was still getting off the ground. Money was pretty tight."

Edward felt a twinge of guilt at how his career and financial success had all but dropped in his lap.

"But you kept at it," Emmett commented, giving his sister a proud look before looking at Edward. "Man, I wish you could have seen it. That store was a roach hotel when Bella found it. Hey, Bells," he went on as his face lit up with remembered amusement, "remember the shouting match we had when you said you'd found the venue?"

"You guys fought?" Rosalie looked surprised.

"Definitely," Bella nodded, although the smile on her face belied her words. "Emmett was still deep in commerce territory then, so he crunched the numbers and was sure I was headed for financial Armageddon."

"So what made up your mind?" Edward asked, his interest growing.

"Oh," Bella reached up to flip her hair off the back of her neck as she thought for a moment, "I guess it was just a hunch really. I walked through the door and knew it was the place for me to be." She gave Emmett andurchin grin. "I just stuck to my guns."

"Edward," Emmett sighed, "let me just give you a tip right now. You might think you know stubborn, but then that woman you've got there redefines the word."

Bella scoffed at that, making Rosalie laugh.

"Seriously, we had some knock-down fights about the store but she would *not* budge."

"I just knew I was right," Bella commented in a serene tone, "so all I had to do was get you on my side and I couldn't possibly fail."

"You must have been pretty determined," Rosalie commented. She was following the conversation with interest now, as was Edward.

"Oh she was," Emmett nodded, "you know-," he went on in a doleful tone, "sometimes she wasn't happy until she'd made me cry."

The table erupted into laughter at the notion of the diminutive Bella towering over the enormous, jovial man, Emmett included.

"All right, so she broke me down using her power of persuasion on her brother," Emmett added, "and more sweat and elbow grease than I would've thought possible."

"It wasn't *that* bad," Bella chided in a gentle tone.

Edward watched the interplay between brother and sister, noticing how they were both smiling as they recounted the story for Edward and Rosalie's benefit. For all that the period had obviously been one of high stress they were both genuinely pleased with its eventual success.

"No, but you have to admit it wasn't that great either," Emmett replied, then to Rosalie said, "the place was a tiny Asian food store. Great concept but it just didn't seem to fit where it was. The lease was up and the owners decided to move on which is where our girl stepped in." Emmett relaxed in his chair, watching the memories flicker across Bella's face.

"What got your bakery idea across the line with the owners?" Edward asked, reaching up to twine a strand of hair around his index finger. He was soaking up the story, filing it away for future reference.

"Babycake pitched some woo," Emmett said with a cheeky grin.

"Oh there was a whole lotta woo goin' on," Bella agreed.

"Bells started sending cupcakes to the leasing agent and the owners, she got someone to draw up some concept boards of what she wanted the store to look like. You name it, she pretty much did it." Emmett shook his head at Edward.

"It seems to have worked," Edward commented, releasing the strand of hair and combing his fingers through the silken lengths, "they must have been happy with what your vision."

"They're still happy," Bella smiled. "Remember that high tea you saw in the store weeks ago?"

Edward sifted through his memories; flicking through scents, sounds and images. "Balloons and little girls?"

"That's the one," Bella was pleased at his recollection, "the birthday girl was the grand-daughter of the owner."

"You've got that kind of relationship with them?" Edward was surprised at this and from what he could see Rosalie was too.

"We don't get in each other's way," Bella clarified, "but when the store opened after the renovations," she nodded her appreciation at Emmett who inclined his head by way of response, "I sent them some cakes and a letter expressing my appreciation. They stop in once or twice a year to see how things are going."

"That's really ... nice," Rosalie said at last. "It's something you don't hear about much these days."

"That's Bella," Emmett answered.

Edward nodded. That was his girl.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emmett, Rosalie and Bella stood by the door watching as Edward settled the check. There had been a protracted argument over who was paying for dinner, which Edward had settled by grabbing simply picking up the check and strolling over to the register without another word. Emmett had gaped at his retreating back for a moment before startling Bella with a face-splitting grin.

"I like him."

"That's all it takes?" Bella gazed at him in disbelief. "Whatever happened to overprotective Brother Bear that saw off the other guys I've dated?"

"None of them bought me pizza," Emmett shrugged.

Rosalie suppressed a smile as Bella snorted.

"I never thought I'd see you become so easy," Bella commented, "throw some food into the equation and you can't even pretend to play hard to get."

Emmett ignored her sass. "None of them made you smile the way he does," he went on, "face it, Bells. You're going to have to say it sooner or later."

"So will you," she shot back.

Rosalie looked at them, obviously curious but not wanting to press the issue.

Emmett stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Bella. "So are you going to?" he whispered into her ear.

"Yes," she whispered back, "but not until I'm ready."

"Okay," Emmett said, giving her a squeeze before stepping back, "just don't be scared. I'm with you."

"I know," Bella offered him a smile, "and it's appreciated."

Edward turned from the counter, stuffing some change into his pocket and reached for Bella's hand with a smile. He drew her to his side, waving off Emmett and Rosalie's thanks for dinner with an easy grin.

"Ready?" Emmett opened the door and ushered them outside.

Standing on the pavement the four of them began to make their farewells for the evening. Bella and Rosalie exchanged a hug and made plans for a studio visit so that Bella would see the latest works in progress.

"I'm there most days," Rosalie said, "so just give me a call when you're passing by."

"And you've got stuff there like my fox?" Bella asked, shrugging her coat on as Edward held her satchel.

"That and plenty more," Rosalie smiled, "I think you'll be surprised."

"I know I was," Emmett added, "wait until you see it, you're going to go out of your pink little mind if you thought the fox was good."

"Let it be a surprise," Rosalie shushed him.

"So," Emmett clapped his hands and rubbed them together briskly, smiling expansively at everyone, "this was good, let's do it again." He reached out and shook Edward's hand. "Edward," he said, "good to see you again."

"Likewise," Edward smiled, "and I agree. Let's catch up soon."

Bella managed to keep the surprise off her face. This was the first time Emmett had volunteered to spend more time with someone she was dating. Even better, it seemed to be entirely mutual between the two men.

The two couples went their separate ways and Bella snuggled into Edward's side as they talked. The wind had picked up during the evening and she was feeling the cold a little more than she cared to admit. She made a mental note to dig out some of her warmer coats to wear to work. Her arm was around Edward's waist and so she felt the tremor of silent amusement.

"Penny for your thoughts?" she asked.

"Just thinking about Emmett's turn of phrase," he replied, "*pitching woo*. I like it." He thought about the large gentle man who had watched him through fatherly eyes, and smiled again at Emmett's vernacular. Edward had listened and admired the sibling bond between the brother and sister all evening, and for the first time began to understand what it was he had missed out on by being an only child. Paying for dinner tonight had been a spontaneous gesture, one that he was well within his means to make, and yet he couldn't help but feel that Bella and Emmett were far richer. Words bubbled in the back of his mind.

By the time they reached Bella's apartment block the words were louder, and his fingers twitched. Edward knew from experience that the words would simply gather momentum until the sound became a roar, and he would get no rest until he had poured the words onto the page.

"Do you want to come up?" Bella turned to lean into his chest and he put both of his arms around her to hold her close.

"I'd like nothing more," he admitted, "but I've got to do some work tonight."

Bella nodded her head against his chest, and he dipped his head slightly so that he could inhale the fragrance of her hair. He had noticed her shivering a little on the walk home, and he held her to his chest; a combination of wanting to keep her close, and just plain wanting her.

"Okay," Bella said at last. He could hear the disappointment in her voice and it stabbed through him, but he had to write. He didn't want to lose his words again, not when he had at last found so much. "I'll miss you in my bed," she sighed.

For a moment, Edward forgot to breathe. He thought about persuading her to come back to his apartment, but decided against it. He could be poor company until he had gotten the latest vein of words out of his system.

"Not as much as I'll miss you," Edward said, tilting her head to give her a soft kiss.

He saw her to her door and waited until she had closed it with considerable reluctance. When he got back outside he crossed to the other side of the street and looked up at her apartment. The words tumbled over themselves in his mind as he tried to keep the memories fresh, rejoicing and resenting the rush of creativity all at once. He stood alone, trying to think unexciting thoughts while his body ached for her, watching until at last he saw her bedroom light go out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella blinked against the sudden darkness of the room and then rolled over onto her side, trying to get comfortable enough to get to sleep. She had wanted him to spend the night, but she had seen the distant look in his eyes and known that she couldn't compete with his words. She shifted in the bed, kicking against the sheets that felt too constrictive over her feet and then reached up to pull a spare pillow against her chest. She wrapped her arms around it and took a deep breath realising that she could detect a trace of Edward's scent.

Perhaps Emmett was right. Nothing in life was certain; that was a lesson that she had learned the hard way. She had no way to predict the future, no way of knowing what life had in store for her. Perhaps there would never be a right time to tell Edward she was falling in love with him. Curling herself around Edward's pillow she felt her body ache and wished he were there beside her. She rolled over and gazed at the bedside table where she had left her phone. Perhaps she could call him back to her. For a moment she began to reach out and then arrested the gesture, her arm half extended before she turned back to the pillow with a sigh.

With Edward gone, she suddenly felt alone, as if something warm was missing. She wasn't sure she wanted to be alone, but that was ridiculous. She had been alone plenty of times, she should be used to it. She usually *was* used to it. But she had grown accustomed to Edward's presence. She wasn't entirely sure how she felt about that.

She wondered what he was writing and then told herself again that she didn't want to know. The conversation with Jake was very fresh in her mind. She was glad they had aired their grievances yesterday; it was time for



their college relationship to mature into adult life once and for all. A part of her would always love Jake, just as a part of her would always hurt. Her thoughts wandered from Jake back to Edward and she sighed again.

Perhaps it was best if she didn't read what he was writing. Some secrets were better left unsaid.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward walked home deep in thought. Snippets of the evening conversation flickered through his mind setting off an unconscious trail of word associations that lead his attention back to his work. He sighed and shoved his hands deeper into his coat pockets. He really didn't know how Bella would feel about the book when it came out, and again he wondered if he should encourage her to read it. Her refusal had surprised him at first. He had offered the manuscript to her on the spur of the moment, and now he realised how much he needed her to read it and to understand.

But she didn't want to read and he couldn't force her. Perhaps in time she would be ready. All he would do was wait and wonder. He wished he knew how she felt about it. In the meantime he knew how he felt about her.

He loved Bella, he was sure of that now.

When he had left her at the store to deal with Jake his chest had felt hollow and the empty feeling hadn't dissipated until he had seen her again. It was a feeling he was experiencing more and more these days. He was only just beginning to realise that when he had entered her store he had stepped into her world, and she had been steadily binding him to it ever since. She left him feeling satisfied in a way that no amount of words had been able to accomplish.

He wanted to tell her how he felt, perhaps when the time was right.

Edward walked on, words swirling in his head.

## **Ch20 Tiaras and Winter Warmers**

Bella nodded a greeting as she approached Alice who was waiting underneath the store canopy rubbing her mitten-clad hands together.

"Morning, Boss," Alice called out as she gave a quick salute.

"Alice, don't call me Boss," Bella replied as she produced the door keys from her pocket and unlocked the roller door.

"Sorry, Boss," Alice blew a bubble and stamped her feet in a bid to keep warm while Bella rolled up the security grill.

"Been waiting long?" Bella asked as she unlocked the front door.

"Longer than usual," Alice admitted, "stayed at Jasper's last night and woke up early is all."

"You had *another* sleepover?" Bella glanced at Alice as she opened the door and stepped aside to usher the smaller woman inside, "keep this up and I'll start to think you guys are getting serious."

Alice snorted as she headed towards the kitchen, shrugging off her coat as she went. "Talk to Jasper about it," she quipped as she hung up her coat and began to tie on her apron, "he's the one that keeps pushing the issue."

"How so?" Bella had flicked on the coffee machine and was now stowing the shop keys on their usual hook before removing her coat. She rubbed her hands briskly against her upper arms in a bid to warm up quicker, making a mental note to wear more layers tomorrow.

"*He* thinks we're dating," Alice said as she picked up the chalkboard and hefted it onto a nearby table for better writing access.

"Right," Bella said as she flicked a lever to measure coffee into the filter.

"Hey guys," Angela let herself into the store, her cheeks reddened from the chill outside.

"Hey," Alice called over her shoulder as she picked up her stub of chalk.

"So what would you call it?" Bella asked as she kept her attention on the espresso filter running into the two cups.

Alice stopped and considered Bella's question. "Actually I don't know," she admitted at last, "but I don't know that we're *dating*."

"What'd I miss?" Angela re-appeared from the kitchen typing on her apron.

"Alice here isn't sure she and Jasper are dating," Bella advised in a droll voice.

Angela stopped and looked at Alice with disbelief. "You're kidding, right?"

"What?" Alice shrugged, "it doesn't seem that serious."

"Right," Angela said as she got out a third cup and slid it towards the coffee machine where Bella was standing. "Have you been seeing anyone else?"

"No she isn't," Bella answered for her, "and from what I hear neither is Jasper."

"How did you know that?" Alice turned around to look at Bella.

"Edward told me," Bella said with a smug smile. She removed the two cups from the machine and added the third, refilling the coffee filter with practised movements and reaching for the milk jug.

"Right," Alice said. She had the feeling she was losing ground in the conversation, but wasn't entirely sure how.

Bella shot her a quick look and then went back to making the coffee as she thought about what Edward had told her a few days ago while they were getting dinner ready at her apartment. From what Edward could tell, Jasper was more serious about Alice than he had been for any other woman in quite some time.

*"He's down playing it," Edward had commented as he sliced some fresh bread, "but he thinks Alice is the one."*

*"The one?" Bella had stopped stirring the pot of soup she was simmering on the cook top to turn and look at Edward. "As in-,"*

*"For keeps," Edward nodded, "and just so we're clear we never had this conversation, right?"*

*"Right," Bella had nodded and returned to getting dinner ready, her mind churning. She knew Alice was getting in deep with the Jasper situation, but whether Alice was ready to admit that was a different matter.*

"What about you and Edward?" Alice asked, pulling Bella's attention back to the present.

"What about us?" Bella replied, stirring some sugar into her coffee.

Alice pushed herself away from the counter and took a few steps towards the table where the chalkboard waited, before she answered.

"Well-," she scrawled absently on the chalkboard, frowning when she realised she had doodled Jasper's initials and wiped the board clean with her hand, "the two of you seem tight. You're practically living at each other's homes, you spend every free moment you have together, you've met his parents and he's met Emmett." Alice gave her an expectant look.

"And?" Bella looked at her.

"Have you told each other how you feel?"

"Not in so many words," Bella hedged, "but I think we both know."

"Boss, even Lincoln said 'to assume is to make an ass of you and me', I don't think you should keep taking things for granted." Alice huffed.

Bella coughed to cover her laugh. "Spoken by the woman that can't admit she's dating."

"It's always different when it's someone else," Angela commented in a sage tone from her position at the bench where she was pulling out the tubs of salad fixings for the day. She paused when she saw both women looking at her. "Or easier to call," she went on with a slight shrug, "just sayin'."

"The Oracle speaks," Alice muttered in a not-so-quiet undertone.

Angela paused in her task and strolled over to the counter to collect the proffered coffee with a smile. "I just want you two happy, but you're going to have to accept what's in front of you and admit what it is that you want."

"Uh-huh," Alice nodded, looking dubious now, "and that's what you did with Bookstore Ben?"

"Yup," Angela gave her a Cheshire cat grin of satisfaction, "and things have never been better."

"Really?" Bella was intrigued now, "you just came out and said it?"

"Well," Angela gave the matter some thought, "there was some give and take on both sides really, but the time came where we told each other how we felt. Trust me, when you finally give words to how you feel it's really-," she paused to search for the right words.

"Terrifying?" Alice suggested.

Angela shook her head, "I'd go with 'liberating'."

"Mmph," Alice snorted with a dubious expression as she rubbed chalk dust off her hand.

"It's only terrifying if you let it be," Angela replied. "Seriously, what's the worst that can happen?" she shrugged again and returned to her work.

Alice said nothing.

Bella carried her cup into the kitchen and switched on the industrial oven to pre-heat. She set her cup down and looked at her tiny kitchen space. Everything was as it should be. The stainless steel counters gleamed, and the large clear plastic tubs of flour and sugar were tightly sealed and stacked. As always, she felt a rush of pleasure at her workspace. She wondered what Alice was going to come up with today, and walked out of the kitchen to see Alice staring at the fox collection on the wall. Rolling the stub of chalk in her fingers she seemed lost in thought.

Rosalie's artwork and Emmett's beer coasters seemed to have started a trend. Last month a photography student had offered Bella a sepia photograph of a fox in the wild for a small sum, which Bella had happily invested. Alice had been charged with finding a frame and had somehow managed to produce an over-the-top ornate gold filigree affair. It had seemed an incongruous pairing at first but when the frame and picture were combined it had a sense of style that seemed to work. The next contribution had been an anonymously donated fox snow globe, which had appeared without fanfare one afternoon on the store counter. Angela in particular had been quite charmed and make sure the globe was kept well polished.

Bella watched her for a moment and then picked up one of the other coffees and carried it over.

"Here you go," she offered the cup.

"Hmm?" Alice snapped out of her reverie and accepted the coffee with a slight smile, "Thanks, Boss, I was miles away."

"So I see," Bella said as she strolled back to the counter to pick up her coffee. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Alice replied and then shrugged. "Maybe."

"Talk about it?"

"Not first thing in the morning," Alice shook her head, "maybe later. I've got to do my quote."

"Okay, but I'm here and ready to listen anytime you want to spill." Bella's gaze flickered to Angela who was hard at work making a large tub of salad. "You know, the Oracle might have had a point."

"I know," Alice sighed, "but I'm scared. You?"

"Sometimes," Bella admitted. "Emmett had a similar conversation with me a few days back."

"Bear's in love?" Alice's eyebrows went up at this revelation as Bella nodded.

"He figures if *he* can say it, anyone can."

"Oh please, like it's a stretch for him," Alice scoffed, "Bear loves the planet."

"It's one thing to be the big lovable guy, and it's another thing to put your heart on the line though," Bella cautioned, "I think that's what he was trying to get across to me."

"Noted," Alice nodded. She took a long sip of her coffee and the two women stood in a moment of companionable silence. "Of course in the meantime there's always shopping."

Bella smiled over the rim of her coffee cup. "That's your cure-all?"

"Of course," Alice looked shocked that Bella could think otherwise. "I always feel better after I've gone out looking at beautiful things, in fact I-," she broke off and stared at Bella as a smile began to tug at her lips. She bent over the chalkboard and began to write, finishing the quote with a flourish and a few artful stars and hearts. Bella strolled over to see what Alice had written and laughed. Another day had begun.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward's day started earlier than usual after a less than satisfying sleep. He hadn't slept well the night before, which he noted was happening with increasing regularity whenever he and Bella didn't spend the night together. He had woken alone, gripping at his pillow as he jolted into wakefulness. After staring at the ceiling for half an hour he finally gave in to the inevitable and rolled out of bed. By the time he had changed into his running gear and hit the pavement downstairs it was 6am. The chill in the air kept him shivering until he had warmed up enough for the early morning run to feel even halfway bearable.

The ranks of morning joggers in the park had thinned as the season had grown colder but those that still ran exchanged nods as they passed each other in silent solidarity. Finishing his cool-down stretches Edward jogged at a slow pace back towards his apartment, and along the way passed a pedestrian just in time to have to endure a heavy exhalation of cigarette smoke. His nose wrinkled in disgust at the rank smell and he marvelled again that he had ever found the habit satisfying. It had been six months since he had quit, a fact of which he was inordinately proud.

Showered and dressed after his run, he set his coffee machine and took a seat at his desk, opening his manuscript document on the laptop and began to check it against the annotated version that Marcus had sent back. He began typing, stopping only when the smell of the fresh percolated coffee wafted through the apartment enough to catch his attention. He padded barefoot towards the kitchen and poured some coffee, adding cream and sugar to his liking before sipping it and carrying it back to his desk. Sinking back down into his chair he took another sip and then set the cup down with mild regret. Bella's coffee tasted better but in the meantime this would have to do. The last passage on the screen wasn't reading well and he frowned over the words and kept working at it until they arranged themselves into a more pleasing pattern.

The cell phone lit up as the handset began to buzz and vibrate against the desktop. Edward shot it a brief look and kept typing. The call rang out and the apartment was silent again except for the tapping of Edward's fingers on the keyboard. After a moment the phone beeped to indicate a voicemail message had arrived. Edward kept working.

The phone began to ring again.

Edward's lips tightened in irritation before he turned from the laptop with a sigh and picked up the handset to answer the call.

"Cullen," he greeted, "What is it, Marcus?" Edward kept his focus on the screen as he scrolled through the text in front of him.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Only you can make my phone sound so insistent," Edward admitted, startling a laugh from his Editor.

"Well at least I know I'm good at something," Marcus replied, and Edward could hear the smile in his voice. "I'm calling to see if you got my revisions."

"I did," Edward said, "I'm working on them now."

"Already?"

"No time like the present," Edward admitted. Normally he preferred to wait until his work was finished before he let anyone else's influence intrude on the work, but Marcus had raised some interesting questions.

"I think I'm flattered. So you thought they were okay?"

"Some were," Edward allowed, "others were taking things in a direction I wasn't happy with, but you've given me some ideas to work on."

"That's ... I'm glad to hear it's going well."

Edward said nothing.

"Edward?"

"Sorry, what was that?" Blinking, Edward returned his attention back to the conversation.

"I said I was glad to hear it's going well."

"We'll see," Edward grunted. He wasn't one to get his hopes up in advance when it came to his work.

"Listen it sounds like you're busy so I'll check in with you later. I was just calling to see how things were progressing."

Edward leaned back and swivelled the chair slightly so that he was gazing out the window. The weather was getting progressively colder and he noted that today the city looked grey in the pale morning light. He wondered if Bella was keeping warm, knowing she walked to work every day. There wasn't much of her and he wondered if she had a good winter coat to withstand the weather. Perhaps he could do something about that.

"Okay," he replied in an absent tone. The more he thought about Bella the more he wanted to go see her. "Thanks for calling." He dimly heard Marcus say goodbye before disconnecting the call and reached out to drop the phone on the desk as he kept gazing out the window. The phone clattered on the hardwood floor, jolting Edward back to the present. He had been so wrapped up in thoughts about Bella he hadn't realised his reach had fallen short of the desk. Stooping over he picked up the phone and checked the time. Scrolling through his contact list he selected a number and dialled, leaning back in his chair and fiddling with a pen as the phone rang. He checked his watch. It was still relatively early but he knew at least one of his parents ought to be home.

"Hi, Mom," he said when the call was answered.

"Edward," his mother replied warmly, "how are you?"

"Good, all good here. How're you and Dad?"

"Missing you of course, how's Bella?"

"Actually she's the reason I'm calling," Edward flicked the pen back onto the desk and began scrolling up and down the screen for something else to do.

"You have my complete and undivided attention." There was a slight scrape in the background and Edward knew that Esme had just pulled out a chair to take a seat at the kitchen table. His father always laughed when she did that, saying she was bunkering down for serious business.

"Mom," Edward laughed, "don't panic, I said it's all good. I just wanted your advice on something."

"Don't propose on Valentine's Day," she responded promptly, "it's too cheesy."

"Okay so that wasn't where I was going but I appreciate the advice all the same," Edward scratched his chin listening to his stubble rasp beneath his fingertips.

"You said advice," she replied in a mild tone, "you didn't say what *for*."

"Only because you didn't let me finish," Edward rebuked her but smiled as he spoke.

"All right, so what's the situation?"

"The weather," Edward said promptly.

"Oh honey," Esme sighed, "by the time you're just talking about the weather there's something seriously wrong. Have we taught you nothing?"

Edward rubbed his forehead. His mother was being deliberately obtuse which was something she did from time to time when he hadn't been in touch often enough for her liking.

"You win," he sighed. "What's this conversation going to cost me?"

"Sunday lunch with the two of you." Esme had the answer so readily that he knew she must have been thinking about inviting them for a while now. "Come early so we've got plenty of time, no need to bring anything."

"I'll check with Bella and let you know," Edward allowed with a slight smile. "Can we talk now?"

"Of course, now that we're taken care of business I'm prepared to play nice."

"I appreciate it," Edward said in a droll tone, "but I really was calling to talk about the weather."

"Really?" Esme sounded taken aback now, "in what context?"

"Getting Bella a winter coat." Edward sat waiting as his mother gave the situation some thought.

"I'm assuming she already has a duck down one," Esme ventured after a pause.

"Sure," Edward replied. He'd caught a glimpse of the puffy sleeve of it in Bella's wardrobe the last time he'd been over. No self-respecting New Yorker was without a coat that could withstand the wind chill factor once winter tightened its grip on the city, "but I'm thinking some of middle ground would be good."

"Okay," Esme was thoughtful now, and Edward smiled at how seriously she was taking the proposition.

It had been a month since Edward had introduced Bella to his parents. They had been well aware that he was dating, thanks to an injudicious comment Jasper had made to *his* parents, thus setting the lines of communication aflutter between the two families. Esme had phoned Edward, ostensibly to see how he was but



fishing for information. Bowing to the inevitable Edward had suggested his parents meet Bella and a lunch invitation and promptly been issued. Naturally, Bella had been flattered and nervous all at once.

*"Do you think they'll like me?" Bella had asked, combing her fingers through her hair to smooth it as they climbed the stairs to his parents' townhouse the following weekend. She patted down her Chinese brocade jacket and brushed an invisible speck of lint off her jeans. Edward had insisted that she dress casual for the lunch as his parents, but she and Alice had fussed over her wardrobe selection all the same.*

*"They'll adore you just like I do," Edward had reassured her as he reached out to snake his arm around her waist and pull her close so that he could give her a kiss before knocking on the door.*

*Edward still remembered Bella's hesitant smile as she had been ushered into his parents' home, stilling when Esme had reached out to clasp Bella's hands in hers. Esme had given her a warm smile before Carlisle had stepped forward to introduce himself.*

*His parents had worked to put Bella at her ease and their approval of her had only deepened upon the discovery that she had a degree in English literature. Esme had all but dismissed Edward to the kitchen to fetch some drinks as she settled Bella on the sofa, taking a seat opposite her and the pair of them began talking. Carlisle had watched the pair of them with mild amusement before joining Edward in the kitchen.*

*"I think your mother approves," he said as he opened a drawer and produced the corkscrew that Edward had been looking for. Leaning his hip and shoulder against the kitchen door jam he watched as Edward fetched some wine glasses and began to work the corkscrew.*

*"You think?" Edward grunted as he pulled the cork out of the bottle and set the corkscrew aside. He paused and cocked his head in the direction of the living room where the steady murmur of voices continued, punctuated with the occasional burst of soft laughter, "You know Mom, she could put the Spanish Inquisition to shame."*

*"True," Carlisle admitted, "but she means well." Both men knew full well that when Edward and Bella left, Esme would be on the phone to Jasper's mother to share information.*

*Edward poured the wine with a slight smile, wondering if Jasper's parents knew about Alice yet. He heard Bella's voice again felt a surge of satisfaction at the ease with which the afternoon was already progressing. There had been few women in his romantic life that he had chosen to introduce to his parents. When he had phoned to suggest he and Bella join them on the weekend they had been quick to grasp the significance despite his casual tone. As he had expected Bella's warm nature had won them over and from what he could make of Bella's relaxed demeanour the feeling was mutual.*

*They had enjoyed a lazy afternoon lunch which had been lingered over long enough for his parents to extend a dinner invitation before Edward had glanced at his watch and then at Bella with mild regret. He had always enjoyed his parents' company and now found himself in the situation where the addition of Bella to the occasion had highlighted his pleasure immensely. Bella caught his glance and gave a small nod.*

*"Time to go?" she had ventured with a warm smile.*

*"We'd better, otherwise you'll be tired tomorrow," he had replied, reaching up to brush her hair off her shoulders and rubbing her arm. They were both reclining on one of the comfortable sofas in his parents' living*

room. Edward had his legs stretched out and propped up on the coffee table, a move Esme had protested until Carlisle had matched him and she had subsided with a practised grumble.

"What time do you open, Bella?" Carlisle had asked as he swirled the last of his wine before swigging it back.

"I normally get there at about seven," Bella replied, "and we open for business at eight."

"And Edward tells us that you have some help in the store?" Esme was leaning against Carlisle's side following the conversation with interest.

"Alice joined me while I was still renovating, and she brought Angela on board just a few months ago. I don't know what I'd do without either of them, they're fantastic."

"Edward has told us so much about the store, I'm going to have to pay a visit soon," Esme mused. "I'm cutting back on my work hours these days, so when I've got some more time in the afternoon I'll have to stop by."

"Oh please do," Bella urged her, "it'd be great to see you."

"Likewise," Esme agreed, "because if I have to rely on my son to get us together I'll be old and grey before I-," she broke off as Edward groaned.

"I get the hint," he said in a weary tone, "I'll call more often."

"You know, Son," Carlisle chimed in this time, "we used to hear from you more when you had writers' block."

"Maybe that's my fault," Bella commented.

"And we couldn't be happier," Carlisle assured her, "just give Esme the chance to feed you two from time to time, okay?"

"Deal," Bella replied before Edward could respond, and then, "What? You know I love getting cooked for."

"True," Edward agreed and then turned to his parents, "Bella bakes all week so time off from the kitchen is always welcome."

"I must say it is nice when Carlisle cooks dinner now and then," Esme said to Bella.

"You know it," Bella nodded, "seeing Edward in the kitchen is my idea of porn." Seconds after she had spoken her eyes widened and she clapped a hand over her mouth as a tide of colour rushed up into her face while Carlisle and Esme laughed. "Oh god," she moaned and tried to bury her head in Edward's chest as he joined in the laughter, "just kill me now."

Edward had looked at Bella's mortified expression and as he listened to his mother's delighted laughter fell in love with his girl all over again.

Returning his attention to the present Edward realised his mother had asked him question that he hadn't caught.

"Sorry, Mom, I didn't catch that," he apologised.

"I was asking you what other coats she has," Esme repeated.

"I haven't gone prowling through her wardrobe if that's what you're asking," Edward retorted, "but we were out a couple of weeks ago and what she was wearing didn't look warm enough."

"Lucky you were there, huh?" his mother replied, and he would hear the smile in her voice.

"Yeah," he conceded, "but getting back to the question, what do you recommend?"

"You're after a mid-winter coat, so something fully lined and something that isn't black. Bella likes colour," Esme had concluded. She had visited the store a couple of times and the vibrant aprons and artwork-covered walls had given her a good sense of Bella's style.

"I'm going to need some more information than that," Edward admitted, making his mother laugh.

"Edward, go to Saks, find the women's fashion department and then go to the coat section and get someone to help you."

"Really? Just like that?"

"Just like that," Esme confirmed, "you've got the money and they want the sale."

"If you say so," Edward replied, trying to keep the dubious tone out of his voice.

They talked for a while longer before Edward excused himself and ended the call. He set the phone down on his desk again and stared out at the grey weather. He wanted to make sure Bella kept warm.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella blinked as she opened the oven door and the rush of warm air hit her face. Grabbing a couple of dishcloths she pulled the trays of golden cupcakes out of the oven. Moving quickly she set them down on the waiting cooling racks, and transferred another two trays into the oven to cook.

"Smells good in here," Angela commented as she popped her head around the doorway with an appreciative sniff, "nice and warm too."

"How is it out there?" Bella asked, jerking her chin towards the storefront, "Everyone okay?"

"It's fine," Angela assured her, "I don't think we'll need to start using the heaters just yet."

"Okay, as long as it's comfortable."

"Sure, Boss," Angela nodded, laughing as Bella gave her a look of fond exasperation. "By the way those muffins you made are popular this morning."

"Really?" Bella looked pleased. She had been in an experimental mood so had whipped up a tray of cranberry and orange muffins with a sugar crust to hold off the morning rush before the daily cupcakes were ready.

"Really," Angela confirmed with a nod. "I think you might have to make those again." She gave the cooling cupcakes a curious look and then glanced back at Bella. "What's today's special going to be?"

Bella shook her head, "Work in progress Angela, you know the drill."

"Okay," Angela held up her hands in surrender and withdrew.

Bella gave the cupcakes a gimlet stare as she pulled the mixer towards her to start making the frosting. Pouring in a generous measure of powdered sugar she added a scoop of soft butter as she switched on the mixer. "Tiaras," she muttered to herself as a faint idea began to stir, "tiaras and shoes." Leaving the mixer running she turned and opened a drawer, eyeing the collection of inch-tall pots sitting in a neat row. She hadn't used the contents before; perhaps today was the day. She glanced at her watch; the morning was still early but she was willing to bet that Edward was already working too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward frowned over the latest passage he had written; something didn't seem right. He sat thinking for a moment and then opened another document that contained off-cuts and draft passages he kept for moments like these. He rested his chin in one hand as he scrolled through the random passages of text. It was rare that he ever accessed anything from the document, but perhaps today was the day. He was prepared to experiment a little if it got the job done. Pausing, he glanced at the time display and smiled. Bella would be baking by now; and the store would be filled with delicious smells.

The more he thought about Bella the more an idea began to form. He sat thinking for a moment and glanced at the time again. He had a few hours to work before he went shopping and then to see Bella. The story idea gathered speed and Edward took a sip of his coffee, barely registering that it had gone cold before he began to type.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice spooned some milk froth into the waiting cups and quickly drew a leaf pattern into the coffee. Angela grinned at her as she picked up the coffees and transferred the cups to their saucers and carried them out to the waiting customers. A quick glance confirmed that all the orders had been filled, and she held up an empty cup to Angela as she approached.

"Oh please," Angela sighed as she rounded the counter. "The first one barely touched the sides."

"Another heart starter comin' right up," Alice replied as she cranked the coffee measure again. She turned to face the kitchen door. "You okay in there, Boss?"

"Sure," Bella answered, "be right out."

"Coffee?" Alice called back.

"Yup."

Angela leaned against the counter and watched Alice get to work. Her own coffee skills had improved considerably since she had started, but she didn't think she moved with the confident grace that Alice did. The small woman moved seamlessly from one task to the next, shooting Angela a couple of sidelong glances as she worked.

"Okay," Alice said at last, "I give up, what's on your mind?"

"You and Jasper," Angela had the answer so readily that Alice knew it had been on her mind for a while.

"What about us?" Alice kept her attention on the espresso coffee that was filtering into the cups.

"Just-," Angela paused and fidgeted with a pen before taking a deep breath and continuing, "Just how long do you think you can keep downplaying what you've got with him?"

"Huh?" Alice added a third cup and tried to feign ignorance.

"You heard me. You can shrug off Jasper all you want, but the man is *good* for you, Alice. If you lose him you've got no-one to blame but yourself."

Alice paused and brushed some hair off her face as she tried to collect her thoughts.

"That's a bit harsh don't you think?" she replied in a mild tone.

Angela huffed out a breath and to Alice's surprise, nodded her agreement. "It is, but maybe it's the kick in the pants you need."

"Mmph," Alice shrugged and began to frappe some milk. "If you say so."

"I do say so," Angela said in a quiet tone. "Alice, you're happier than I've seen you in a long time, why can't you admit it?"

Alice said nothing. Angela waited her out.

"Maybe sometime," Alice said at last when she finished frothing the milk.

"When?" Angela pressed, and was startled to see the look of vulnerability on Alice's face.

"Soon," Alice replied. She knew that Angela was right, the moment was coming and it excited and exhilarated her all at once. Jasper was a patient man, but even Alice knew that he wouldn't wait forever. She sighed, letting her shoulders slump as she finished making the coffees and slid Angela's cup towards her.

"You know, for someone that puts so much work into making everyone else happy, why can't you accept some happiness of your own?" Angela said as she took a sip.

"Self-preservation," Alice quipped, "it worked for Mom, so I thought I'd try it too."

"Hmm, and how happy is she?"

Alice was silent, and sipped her coffee.

"Look," Angela said quietly, "I won't push you any further, this is a conversation that you and Jasper need to have, not us."

"Thanks," Alice said, surprised at this sudden reprieve.

"Just do yourself a favour and talking to him about it. You might be surprised at his reaction."

"Okay," Alice nodded, turning as she heard her name called from the kitchen.

Bella appeared carrying a tray and a broad smile. Alice and Angela exchanged a glance and stepped out of Bella's way to let her pass.

"Oh wow," Angela breathed, "is that-,"

"Yup," Bella nodded, pleased.

"You're kidding, right?" Alice gaped. "I didn't even know you had that stuff."

"Babe, we've only just begun," Bella replied as she set the tray down in the counter and tweaked Alice's nose. "Is that my coffee?"

"Sure," Alice said automatically, her eyes not leaving the cupcakes. "Boss, they look spectacular."

"They sure do," Angela agreed, "what are they called?"

Bella smiled. "I thought you'd never ask, Alice, get your chalk."

"Got it," Alice picked up the stub and reached for the small chalkboard that sat waiting on the counter.

Bella dictated; Angela laughed, and Alice wrote with a sigh.

"You like?" Bella asked when Alice had set up the chalkboard on its easel.

"You win," Alice replied, as she exchanged a high five with Bella.

"Let's see how long they last," Angela replied as she nodded towards the door. All three women glanced up to see customers heading indoors, drawn by the smell of fresh coffee and baking.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward tried not to wince as he strolled past the perfume counters at Saks; they all seemed to smell overtly floral and saccharine. A familiar scent caught his attention and followed the suggestive trail until he saw the familiar entwined logo of the Chanel counter. He smiled at the woman standing behind the black counter that had been polished to a high sheen and reached for a bottle of *Allure*.

"Can I help you, Sir?" the woman asked in a polite tone.

"No," he answered with equal courtesy, "just satisfying my curiosity." He held the bottle up to his nose and took a cautious sniff. It was Bella's scent he had detected, and he smiled at the way she had insinuated herself into his senses.

"You have excellent taste, Sir," the sales woman commented with a smile, "*Allure* is our floral oriental with top notes of peach and bergamot; it then warms to a floral heart of peony and sandalwood before finishing with a lingering scent of-,"

"Vanilla," Edward supplied with a smile.

The woman was surprised. "You know your perfumes," she inclined her head with an appreciative smile.

"I know how my girl smells," Edward replied, "and to me she's like cupcakes and sunshine which is how I got the vanilla reference."

The woman's smile dimmed momentarily before returning to its customary retail mega-wattage.

"Lucky girl," the woman smiled, only just managing to hide her disappointment as she took in Edward's smile.

"Lucky me," he replied, "but actually I'm looking for women's fashion, coats to be specific."

"Certainly, Woman's Apparel is on the next floor."

"Thanks," Edward flashed her another smile before continuing on his way.

"You're welcome," the woman murmured, watching his figure disappear into the crowd.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella waved off another customer with a smile and leaned back against the bench behind her with a mild sigh. The day had been a busy one and now things seemed to be winding down. She pushed herself away from the bench and strolled towards the display counter to bend in for a quick inventory.

"Stock seems to be holding," Angela commented as she walked past with a tub of cups and plates to be stacked into the dishwasher.

"Which is good, I don't know that I'm in the mood to bake more this afternoon," Bella replied as she slid the Perspex door closed and straightened with a mild wince. She hadn't slept very well the night before and her back still felt a bit stiff. The best nights for sleep and pleasant dreams seemed to be when she was with Edward; a fact she had only realised when she had woken up clutching the pillow that held the most of his scent.

"You're looking a bit tired, are you okay?" Angela paused in her stacking and gave her a concerned look.

"I'm fine," Bella assured her, "I think I'm just burning the candle at both ends."

"The store does keep you busy," Angela agreed, "but what about the home front?"

"Mmm?" Bella pushed some damp hair off her forehead and reached beneath her apron to tug down her t-shirt. She was going to have a long shower when she got home, wherever that was.

"You're dividing your time between your place and Edward's. That must get a bit tiring."

"Sometimes," Bella admitted. There were evenings when she found herself wanting a favourite book to re-read, only to discover that it was at her apartment and Edward didn't have a copy. Edward had given her free reign at his apartment, but there were times when she found herself wanting her own things. Edward's kitchen was impressive, but she found a certain level of comfort in baking with her mother's bowls and equipment. A sentimental approach perhaps, but one that provided a certain amount of tranquillity that she found reassuring at the end of the day. "But I'm okay."

"And Edward?" Angela pressed.

"He's fine," Bella replied, opening the refrigerator and reaching in for a bottle of sparkling mineral water. She offered it to Angela who shook her head, and then opened it and took a long swig, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "Edward can work anywhere."

"But he'd rather work at his place?"

"I guess," Bella shrugged, not noticing the contemplative look on Angela's face.

"So if he's okay and you're tired, we need to work out how to cut you some slack," Angela continued.

"Don't fuss so much, I told you I'm fine," Bella smiled.

"Yeah? So what happens to the store if you get hit by a truck?" Angela regretted her words the moment she saw Bella's face blanch. "Oh God," she babbled, "poor choice of words, Boss, I-,"



"Relax, Ange," Bella waved off Angela's remonstrations, "it's just a figure of speech."

"Yeah but you've experienced it literally," Angela said, her expression overcome with remorse. "What I meant to say was-,"

"Seriously," Bella interrupted again, "it's okay. You were talking about a backup plan, am I right?"

"Something like that," Angela gave a weak nod, inwardly cursing herself at her poor choice of words.

"Well," Bella wiped some condensation off the bottle and rubbed her damp hand on the back of her neck, hoping the cold would revive her a little, "you've jumped the gun on what I wanted to talk to you about, but I guess now's as good a time as any."

"For what?"

Bella gave Angela a tired but fond smile. "To talk about you being second in command if you're interested."

Angela gaped at her.

"Finally, the Oracle is speechless," Alice commented as she stepped out from the kitchen. She glanced at Bella who was watching Angela's reaction with quiet pleasure. "I take it you told her?"

"I've just started to," Bella replied.

"You knew?" Angela managed at last as she glanced at Alice, "and you didn't tell me?"

Alice gave her a smug smile by way of answer.

"I thought you didn't do suspense?"

"Actually it's something we talked about a while ago, but we had to wait and see how things worked out for you and the store," Alice answered, "not to mention that the Boss lady here threatened me with grievous bodily harm if I gave away so much as a peep." Alice glanced at Bella, "Now how about you two take this conversation to a table, and let me know when Ange says yes."

Bella picked up her bottle of water and draped a comradely arm around Angela's shoulders.

"She sounds like she means it," Bella said, "so let's go."

"It's okay," Alice said soothingly to Angela who was still looking surprised, "I'll bring you a soy chai, it'll soothe your nerves."

"Bossy little thing isn't she?" Angela commented as they headed towards a table.

"You're only just telling me that now?" Bella muttered as she took a seat. "Now, about the offer-," she paused to take another swig of water and then leaned forward in her seat to begin talking.

Alice began to frappe some milk and stirred in some chai syrup, glancing over at the two women with a smile from time to time. She knew that Bella was doing the right thing, and was pleased for both of her friends.

"So here's the offer," Bella began, "and feel free to turn it down, but I'm offering you more work, more responsibility and a bit more money."

"Right," Angela gave her an uncertain nod, "but shouldn't you be having this conversation with-,"

"Alice?" Bella finished for her, "No. She and I have already talked about this, and it's not the direction she's heading in. You on the other hand, have got a good approach, you like baking, and I think this could be good for both of us."

"But, Alice-," Angela paused and swallowed before continuing, "I mean, she's been with you from the start, shouldn't she be the one who takes this on?"

"Have you not seen my stunning fashion creations?" Alice chimed in as she set down a cup in front of Angela. "Honey, you know fashion is my thing, not cupcakes. Sure I can make a mean bagel, but that's the extent of my kitchen prowess. You on the other hand, are a natural." Alice smiled as she said this, her hands smoothing down her apron lovingly as she spoke, twining some of the fluttering ribbons around her fingers. "Sorry to interrupt, but that's just my humble opinion."

"Humble," Bella snorted as she swatted at Alice's rump, "yeah, right."

"I'm going," Alice protested as she retreated to the kitchen.

Bella was laughing as she turned back to see Angela looking thoughtful. "So, what are your thoughts?"

"When you say more work and responsibility, what would I be doing?"

"We can work that out, but I'd imagine it will be opening up for me on occasion, cupcake production-," she paused as Angela gave a mild squeak, "what?"

"You want me to make the cupcakes?"

Bella reached out to pat her hand. "All the recipes are written down, you'd be surprised just how easy they are."

"It's not the baking that worries me, it's the *competition*," Angela replied, making Bella laugh.

"Alice has promised to go easy on you," Bella assured her, "you'll be fine."

"Okay," Angela shrugged.

Bella looked puzzled.

"Okay, as in, okay I'll do it," Angela clarified.

"Really?" Now it was Bella looking surprised. "I thought I'd have to sweet talk you for longer than that."

"Meh," Angela sipped at her chai, "Alice probably told you I was a sure thing, and what have I got to lose by giving it a try?"

"You go girl," Bella said as she raised her bottle of water in a toast, "here's to you."

"No, here's to us," Angela said with a smile as cup and bottle clinked together.

Alice watched them from her position at the kitchen doorway with a wistful smile. The chance to manage the store had been offered to her, but she had refused it. She knew that in her heart of hearts the bakery wasn't the right path for her, but the prospect of job security had been enough temptation to give her pause. It had been Jasper who had helped steer her back on course.

*"Alice," he had said at last when she had finished explaining the scenario a few evenings earlier "would that make you content?"*

*"I don't know," Alice had stared down at her risotto she had arrived home to discover Jasper cooking in her kitchen, "I guess."*

*"That's not enough of an answer," he chided her gently, "think about it."*

*"I know I have a lot of fun there during the day, Bella makes the store a happy place to be."*

*"Sure she does," Jasper agreed, "but being happy can come and go, contentment is a kind of core happiness that lasts a lot longer."*

*"Right," Alice allowed cautiously. Jasper was having another one of his 'moments' as she now thought of them; moments when he seemed to take her happiness very seriously indeed, and urged her to think about what it was that she wanted and why. She wasn't used to being challenged like this and found it deeply unsettling and provocative. She found herself looking at the crease between his eyebrows and wanted to smooth it away.*

*"Would making cupcakes make you as happy as you are when you've finished another one of your couture creations?" Jasper persisted.*

*Alice had paused at that. "N-o," she had ventured at last.*

*"Then you know what it is that will make you content, and you go for it."*

*"And that's why you threw away a journalistic career to go back into academia?" she challenged, "Because the financial rewards must be huge."*

*Jasper threw his head back and laughed, confusing her all the more.*

*"Oh you know I didn't do it for the money. I just realised that life is too short to have an average day at work."*

*"Right, and what does your landlord say?"*

*"My landlord is fine," Jasper's tone was still amused, but milder now, "you know I wouldn't do anything stupid, but I wanted to feel proud of what I do."*

*"And teaching comatose students makes you proud?" Alice was curious now.*

*"They're not comatose by the time I've finished with them," Jasper retorted, aware that Alice had not yet discovered that he had a reputation for being unconventional in his approach to his subject, "and I'm working to get published soon so that'll bring some more dollars in."*

*"You've covered all the bases then," Alice replied in a dry tone.*

*"Got to, if you're going to be realistic about it. If you're doing what you love, it'll never feel like work again."*

*Alice gazed at him for a long moment, lost in thought.*

*"How's your dinner?" he prompted her at last.*

*"What?" she gazed at her bowl and took another mouthful, smiling at him as she chewed. "It's wonderful."*

*"Just like you," Jasper added, scooping up another mouthful for himself.*

Alice turned away from watching Bella and Angela and stepped into the kitchen looking for something to do. There was nothing to clean up, Bella kept her prep area immaculate as always. She checked her watch; it was nearly 3pm. The afternoon didn't have long to go, and she suddenly realised that she wanted to see Jasper; she wanted a cuddle and a long talk about her day. She hoped some more customers would come in soon, the distraction would make the afternoon go a little quicker.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward was about to enter the store when he remembered to check the chalkboard hanging outside. He stepped back a pace to scan Alice's quote of the day and grinned.

*With the right pair of shoes and a tiara, I could rule the world.*

He could just imagine Alice writing that, and wondered how Bella was going to match it; he stepped inside, eager to find out. He glanced around to see a few of the tables occupied by customers, but for the most part the café seemed quiet. He walked to the counter and peered at the cupcake display, smiling when he saw the daily special.

*Everyone's a Princess; strawberry shortcake with white chocolate frosting and Regal Red glitter.*

Edible glitter? Now he'd seen everything. He turned from the counter with a grin and that's when he saw Bella and Angela sitting at one of the side tables having a quiet talk. Angela saw him first, and Bella turned in her seat to see who she was smiling at.

"Hey you," she called as her face lit up with a smile of recognition.

Edward felt an answering smile of his own, walking towards the table and dropping the shopping bag at his feet to give her a long kiss.

"Phew," Alice walked past them with a comment as she moved out to collect some empty cups, "and there I was thinking someone had turned the heat up, but it's just you two."

Angela muffled a laugh of her own and got up to move away. "Take a seat, Edward, I think the Boss and I are done."

"Funny girl," Bella broke away from the kiss to laugh, but kept her fingers twined in Edward's hair as he nuzzled her neck. "So," she turned her attention back to Edward, "how's my guy?"

"Better now, how's my girl?"

"Much, much better," she said, rubbing his stubble with the tips of her fingers and gently bit his earlobe.

Edward felt a jolt of heat start in his belly and start to drill down. "Bella," he warned in a rough whisper as he dragged a chair over to sit as close to her as possible, "don't start what you can't finish."

"Can't?" she breathed as she ran her tongue along his lower lip.

"Won't," he amended with a shudder as she pressed her soft body closer, hitching one of her legs over his thigh.

Bella continued her gentle assault for a moment longer and then broke off with a sigh of regret. "You're right," she admitted, "don't want to scare the customers off."

Edward looked over his shoulder to see a couple of customers regarding them with quiet amusement. "I don't think they're scared, but you might have given a couple of them ideas," he commented, and smiled as she ducked her head against his shoulder with a quiet snicker. "Had a good day?"

"Real good," she smiled, "I just told Angela my dastardly plan."

"How did she take it?"

"I think she's in shock, but she's accepted the offer."

Edward twisted in his seat, "Congratulations, Angela," he called, grinning when her 'thank you' carried back to him from behind the counter.

"That was a big step you've taken, handing the reins over to someone else like that," Edward commented.

"Bear said the same thing," Bella agreed, "but he thinks I'm doing the right thing."

"If Emmett gives it the nod then that's good enough for me. In fact, I think you deserve a reward." He lifted the Saks back onto the table in front of him and gestured for Bella to open it.

"What have you done?" Bella asked, straightening up in her seat to peer into the bag. All she could see was tissue paper.

"Got you a present," Edward replied with an expectant grin.

Mystified, Bella reached into the bag to pull out the contents. Tissue paper rustled and fell away to reveal a cherry red cashmere coat. Bella gazed at it for a moment before clutching it to her and rubbed the collar against her cheek as she gave Edward a delighted smile.

"For me?"

Edward was very pleased with her reaction. "I didn't want my girl to be cold when I'm not around," he said in a low voice, stepping towards her to give her a kiss.

They both looked up as Alice gave a low whistle. "Edward," she said as she walked towards them, her eyes not leaving the coat, "I'm impressed. That's the new Kenneth Cole wing collar trench."

"Huh?" Edward gave her a blank look.

"I think that means it's good," Bella said by way of translation as she reached up to give Edward a kiss of thanks.

"Better than good, it's one of this season's hot looks," Alice added as she reached out for the coat, "may I?"

"Sure," Bella said as she handed the coat over.

Alice took the coat by the shoulders and gave it a quick shake so that it hung properly and after turning it this way and that for inspection, held it out for Bella to put on. "Come on, let's see it on you," she commanded.

"Here?" Bella glanced down at her apron and jeans.

"Why not? Come on," Alice jiggled the coat for emphasis.

"You might as well, Jasper's told me what she's like when she's on a mission," Edward whispered into Bella's ear, making her giggle.

"Preaching to the choir," Bella said in an undertone before untying her apron and handing it to Edward before turning and slipping her arms into the waiting coat sleeves.

Angela strolled out from the kitchen to see Bella trying on her gift and grinned. Crossing the store she indicated the apron in Edward's hands.

"Give that to me and I'll hang it up," she offered, "I think she's done for the day."

Edward handed it over with a smile of thanks and Angela retreated to the kitchen again. Alice helped her pull the coat on and then made her turn around, fussing over her as she made sure the coat was sitting properly and then reaching for the belt.

"I think I can manage-," Bella began, only to be shushed by Alice as she quickly buckled the belt and stepped back with a nod of satisfaction.

For a moment Alice and Edward just stared at her, making her blush a little under their scrutiny. Bella ran her hands down the front of the coat, loving the feel of the soft fabric beneath her touch. The coat fell to mid-thigh which Alice assured Edward was perfect.

"How does it look?" Bella said after decided they had been quiet for long enough.

"You'll do," Edward smiled. The red cashmere was a perfect foil for her dark hair and pale skin, and her lips curled invitingly as she smiled back. He took up the silent offer and leaned forward for a soft kiss.

"It's gorgeous," Alice said approvingly, "now all you need is something to keep your head warm and-," she broke off as Edward reached into the shopping bag again.

"You mean something like this?" Edward held up a smaller tissue wrapped bundle.

"There's more?" Bella was feeling very spoilt. Again the tissue paper was dispensed with to reveal a grey cashmere cap that fit softly onto her head like a beanie along with a matching scarf.

"Cullen," Alice said once Bella had been accessorised to her satisfaction, "I like your style."

"I can't take all the credit," Edward admitted at last, "I spoke to my Mom about where to go, and then the saleswoman at Saks picked out a few to choose from."

"You didn't talk to me first?" Alice tried to look affronted, "I think I'm hurt."

"I only just got the idea this morning," Edward explained, "but trust me, next time I get an idea I'll be sure to call."

"Good," Alice nodded. "You guys look pretty cosy now, why don't you take off?"

"Huh?" Bella looked surprised.

"What, you think Angela and I can't lock up for the day? You're standing there all rugged up and gorgeous, go enjoy yourselves."

"But-," Bella began, blinking as Alice snapped her fingers peremptorily at her.

"No buts, we'll call this a training run," Angela joined in. "Give me the keys and then you two can go."

"What, you're drunk on power already?" Bella teased.

Angela laughed but stood firm. "You were saying yesterday that you wanted to check out some winter warmers, so why don't you just go do some research or something if calling it that is going to make you feel better."

"Winter warmers?" Edward looked interested at this.

"The Boss here likes to have a winter drink menu. We were talking about getting some fresh ideas this morning so I think this is your cue to take her out for some research," Angela replied.

"Winter drinks, huh?" Edward looked thoughtful. "You know, I think I know just the place." He'd glanced at a menu in passing when he had left Saks, and on the basis of Alice's conversation knew that it had to be just what Bella was looking for.

"You are *so* bossy," Bella laughed at the two determined women before her. "Alice," she appealed, a little help?".

"Sorry, Boss," Alice grinned, "New Boss has a point, you're outta here."

"So it's mutiny, huh?" Bella replied.

"You should be getting used to them by now," Alice quipped, "Really," she went on to Edward, "Angela and I gang up on her all the time these days."

"So I see," Edward grinned, "and who am I to argue?" He gave Bella another kiss, "Get your bag, we've got research to do."

Bella retreated to the kitchen to get her bag and Edward congratulated Angela again on her promotion.

"Thanks," she gave him a shy smile, "it was quite a shock."

"It's well deserved," Edward assured her, "Bella has been thinking about it for a while."

"It's a great opportunity," Angela nodded, "she really is something."

Edward looked up as he heard Bella laughing at something Alice had just said as she rounded the corner from the kitchen and walked towards him, her arm outstretched to take his hand.



"She sure is," Edward smiled. "C'mon, let's go research."

"See you tomorrow," Bella called as Edward tugged her towards the door.

"Not too early," Alice answered, "we'll open up."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice flipped the sign on the door to *Closed* and returned to the counter to finish up for the day. A few minutes later she heard the door open, and looked up from wiping down the bench to see Emmett letting himself into the store, his shoulders hunched up a little from the cold.

"Emmett?" Alice shook out her dust cloth and set it aside, "How's are you?"

"Okay," he shrugged in response. He seemed easy-going as usual, but Alice noticed that his smile didn't seem to reach his eyes. "Is Bells around?"

"No she's not," Alice replied, "Edward came in earlier with a present for her, and Angela and I told her to take the rest of the afternoon off."

"Nice," Emmett nodded, "she could do with a few more breaks. I like the way you guys keep an eye on her."

"It's entirely mutual," Alice assured him, "we watch out for each other."

"Good, that's ... well, that's good-," Emmett said in a distracted voice, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

Alice was puzzled. Emmett was someone who had always appeared larger than life, with a smile that was ready to take on the world. This distracted, listless apparition before her was entirely new. She also noticed that he was dressed a little more smartly than usual. A button down dress shirt and smart trousers rather than his customary jeans. He looked all dressed up with nowhere to go.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," Emmett nodded as he glanced around the store. Alice watched as his gaze lingered by the fox picture that Bella had purchased off Rosalie at the flea markets all those weeks ago.

"You know, you kinda don't look okay," Alice ventured after deciding he had stood silent for long enough, "want to talk it over?"

Emmett ducked his head and to Alice's amazement, scuffed the floor with one shoe before giving her an uncertain look.

"Maybe," he replied, "yeah. I guess I could use a woman's take on this situation."

"And I fit the bill, huh? I'm flattered," Alice said in a droll voice.

Emmett gave her a quick glance. "Alice, you know I-,"

She waved him off. "Relax, big guy, I'm fine. So grab a chair and let's talk."

The big man allowed himself to be ushered towards a table and slumped into a chair, watching as Alice settled herself at a seat opposite him and regarding him with curiosity.

"Spill it, Bear. Whassup?"

"Rose," he admitted. "It's about Rose."

"I figured," Alice quipped, "what's happened?"

"It was all going to be so good," Emmett mumbled, "I had it all worked out."

"So what happened?"

"It all went to shit is what happened," Emmett said, reaching out and picking up a sugar sachet, flicking it against the tabletop as he spoke. "I had this big romantic dinner planned tonight, I was going to take her to our favourite restaurant and spoil her."

Alice nodded to indicate she was following him so far, and Emmett continued.

"So I got to her studio where she'd told me to meet her, and she was still working," Emmett shook his head. "She hadn't even started to clean up, and when I told her I had dinner reservations she said she couldn't go."

"Mm-hmm," Alice nodded slowly, she had a feeling she knew where this conversation was going.

"So I suggested she pack up and finish later, she said she wouldn't, and before I knew it we were fighting," Emmett said, his face showing his disbelief at the turn of events. "All I said was that she could finish the picture anytime, but that-,"

"Oh, Bear," Alice said in a weary voice, "you didn't."

"What?" He was defensive as well as confused now. "She'd barely started, and before I knew what was happening, she's telling me that I don't take her work seriously enough and kicking me out."

"Really? She threw you out?" Alice was impressed. The couple of times she had met Rosalie she had the impression that the woman was easy-going. It seemed there was more to Rosalie than met the eye.

"It's why I'm here," Emmett said, giving her a morose look. "Guess the big romantic gesture just bit me on the ass."

"I'm not surprised," Alice replied, "bad enough that you pout over her not being ready without dumping on her career."

"Give a guy a break," he protested, "I haven't dealt with this sort of shit before. Rose is really ... special, you know? I wanted it all to be perfect."

"Thing is, Bear," Alice replied in a gentle voice, "you were thinking about what *you* wanted. I'm sure Rose will love being spoiled-," she smiled as she remembered Bella's smile when Edward had surprised her this afternoon, and her own delight at discovering Jasper had cooked her dinner, "but you've got to cut her some slack."

"I did, I *do*," he protested. "She knew what time we were having dinner, it's not that hard to be ready."

"Bear," Alice was shocked at his last comment, "I'll overlook that comment in the interests of your personal safety."

"What?" Emmett shrugged, "Rose looks hot no matter what she wears."

"And I'm sure she'll love hearing that too, but you've gotta know that when creativity strikes people like Rose just have to go with it. It's the same with Edward."

"Yeah? Bella's had to deal with this too?"

"Sometimes," Alice was trying to be cautious now, she didn't want to overstep on what Bella may or may not have shared with her brother. "I know that they've had more than a few late dinners because he's been working."

"You mean he's stood her up?" Emmett's dejection over his own affairs of the heart became indignation as he began to stand up for his absent sister.

"No, well, not really," Alice amended, "they work things out, just like you and Rose will."

Emmett scratched at his chin. "It's all new to me, I haven't been shouted at like that for a few years." He regarded Alice for a moment and then sighed. "So what can I do?"

"Well, if I'm any judge I'd say Rose is pretty upset right about now, so cancel your dinner reservation, go back to her studio and say you're sorry."

"And?" Emmett nodded for her to continue.

"And then take her out for a nice casual meal, have fun, and then go home for lots of really hot makeup sex."

"Now you're talking," Emmett brightened considerably at this.

"I haven't finished," Alice held up a cautionary hand, "Next time, remember that Rose's work is just that, *work*. She takes it seriously, and so should you."

"Is that how Bella is with Edward?" Emmett looked curious.

"Sure," Alice said after a pause. Emmett picked up on this.

"What aren't you telling me?" he said, giving her a shrewd look.

Alice sighed. "Cone of silence, right?" At his nod, she went on. "Sometimes I think she takes his work a little *too* seriously. She's got the guy up on a pedestal, so when he's writing she just tiptoes around the whole time."

"From what I gather, the whole pedestal thing seems to be pretty mutual," Emmett mused, remembering the way Edward watched Bella.

"True," Alice agreed, "but I worry that she lets him get away with a little more antisocial behaviour than he should."

"He doesn't seem like that kinda guy," Emmett was surprised at this.

Alice rubbed her face with both hands. The conversation wasn't going well, she had overstepped the mark on this one and had to try to recover. "Listen, this is just my take on the situation. I know they adore each other, but I just want them to be healthy about it too."

Emmett leaned back in his chair, rubbing his top lip in a thoughtful gesture.

"Remember," Alice cautioned, "cone of silence."

"Done deal," Emmett said, giving her a serious nod. "So," he said after a considered pause, "you've got me not taking Rose's career seriously enough, and Bella going in the opposite direction. Where does that leave you?"

"Me?" Alice gave him a blank look, "I'm not family."

"Like hell you're not," Emmett snorted as he stood up and held out his arms, "c'mere."

Alice let herself be drawn into Emmett's embrace, which was not unlike trying to cuddle a barn.

"Thanks, Pocket Rocket," Emmett's voice was muffled by Alice's hair.

"Anytime, Bear," Alice reached up to pat his back, stepping back as he released her.

"So, you know what you have to do?"

"Hot makeup sex?" Emmett said with a broad grin.

"No, *before* that," Alice laughed.

"Go to Rose, fall on my knees and apologise," he sighed, "fine, I'll do that too."

"Make sure that you do," Alice admonished him, "now skat."

She waved him off with a smile and turned to see Angela peeking out from the kitchen.

"All clear," she advised, smiling as Angela stepped out with an uncertain smile.

"Sorry," Angela said as she slipped her coat on, "I was out back for a bathroom break and when I came back in you guys were talking. I didn't want to interrupt. Is everything okay?"

"Sure," Alice nodded as she walked past Angela to get her coat and bag. "Emmett was having love problems so stopped by to see Bella."

"That's so cute," Angela enthused, "those two are really tight."

"They sure are. I was the proxy for this evening, so we had a chat, I set him straight and he's off to patch things up."

"Do you think they'll be okay?"

"I don't see why not, as long as they talk things out," Alice pulled on her coat and beanie, thinking wistfully of Bella's new acquisitions.

"Speaking of which-," Angela trailed off meaningfully and raised an eyebrow.

"What?" Alice busied herself by slinging her bag onto her shoulder and tugging on her mittens.

"Well I'm sure you've got a few things to talk about with Jasper too," Angela commented.

"Sometime," Alice gave a flippant nod.

"Those who can do, those who can't, teach," Angela murmured as she and Alice headed towards the door, flicking out the light switches as they went.

Alice stood waiting as Angela went through the lockup routine, and the pair shook mittened hands when she was done.

"All set?" Alice asked, watching Angela stow the shop keys carefully in her bag.

"Yup," Angela confirmed, "I'll see you in the morning."

"You know I'll see you first," Alice laughed, "it's tradition. Now you go get warm with Bookstore Ben."

"And you do the same with Gentleman Jasper," Angela rejoined, "get talking, get warm, and see how things go."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Look at those red leather lounges, I'm warming up just looking at them," Bella marvelled as she stepped inside.

Edward had taken them to the Flatiron Lounge, an art deco bar that was warmly lit and already getting busy for the evening with the after-work crowd. After a brief wait they were seated side by side at a booth and Bella was pouring over the menu as she unwound her scarf and gloves.

"Wow," she said after a considered pause, "their mixologist here really knows their stuff." Her eyebrows went up in surprise, "Jasmine-infused vodka with white peach puree?" She gave Edward a happy smile, "we're going to have to come back here when I don't have to work the next day."

"Which could be sometime soon now that you've got more backup," Edward said as he settled himself more comfortably and put his arm around her shoulders.

Bella leaned into him and kept reading, and then sat up straight tapping the menu decisively. "Sold, I've just found what I want."

"What's that?" Edward leaned forward to check the menu.

"Cocoa Chanel," Bella read for him, "Valrhona hot chocolate mixed with Herradura reposado tequila and served with a floater of loosely whipped cinnamon cream."

"Cocoa Chanel?" Edward chuckled with quiet amusement as he remembered his afternoon.

"Am I missing something?"

"When I was at Saks this afternoon I smelled you, or rather, your perfume. I followed the trail and it let me to the Chanel counter." He had smiled at the thought of Bella's scent trail leading him throughout the store, and wondered not for the first time, if Argon had any scent of its own. The more time they spent together, the more their breaths mingled, the more the immortal molecule continued to bind them together. It was an invisible bind that he never wanted to break.

"Ah," Bella nodded knowingly, "my *Allure*."

Edward leaned in to give her a soft kiss, and when he pulled away Bella smiled at the intensity of his regard as their breaths washed softly over each other. "It certainly is," he agreed.

## Ch21 The L Word

Bella finished her cocoa and swiped some of the cream off the rim of her cup with a finger and licked it off.

"How was it?" Edward asked as he watched her over the rim of his cup of affrogatto.

"Just as good as the first," Bella replied, and scooped up some more cinnamon cream on her finger and held it out to him, "want some?"

Edward dipped his head towards her hand by way of answer and gently sucked the cream off her finger, kissing the tip of it as he withdrew.

"I see what you mean," he said, "do you want another?"

Bella had another lick of cream and then pushed her empty cup away with a regretful sigh.

"I think two is my limit," she said as she leaned against his shoulder, nestling against him as he pulled her closer. "I'm actually kinda tired."

Edward set his cup down so that he could check his watch. "It's just gone seven," he commented, "do you want to do something for dinner?"

Bella played with her spoon aimlessly as she considered his offer and then glanced up at him. "I don't think I'm hungry," she swallowed and then lifted a hand to her throat as she swallowed.

Edward watched as she rubbed her throat and sipped at a glass of water with a slight grimace. "Is everything okay?"

Bella looked surprised. "Sure, the day was good," she patted her collar of her coat and gave him a pleased smile, "and I adore my present." Her smile faltered, "I guess I just feel a little off."

"Hmm," Edward stroked her face with the back of his fingers, "you've been working pretty hard, maybe you're burning out."

"Like you can talk," Bella scoffed, "you've been putting in some ridiculous hours yourself."

"True," Edward conceded, "but sitting on my butt is different to what you do."

"I guess we're busy in our own way," Bella commented, shrugging off his comment.

"Just as well I'm here to make sure you look after yourself then," Edward teased, and then was startled to see Bella looking at him with her eyes watering. "What's wrong? Sweetheart, are you-," he broke off as Bella's face crumpled and she sneezed three times in quick succession.

"Guh," she said, groping for a napkin and blowing her nose, "that was unexpected."

"That's it, I'm taking you home," Edward decided as he signalled for the check. Bella was looking a little flustered now and he began to rub her back with one hand as they waited. The check was delivered and Edward spared it a cursory glance, pulling out his billfold and tossing down a few bills as he stood up.

"No, I'm okay," Bella protested as she wiped her eyes, "if you want to get something to eat we can-," her words were cut short by another sneeze.

"You were saying?" Edward started to laugh as he helped her to her feet.

"I don't know what the hell is going on," she muttered as he allowed him to steer her towards the bar, "I felt just fine earlier."

"So what happened between then and now?" Edward asked before stopping her at the door to make sure she was rugged up enough against the cold before ushering her outside.

"Nothing," Bella shrugged, "I had a talk to Angela about the new arrangement."

"And it all went well?" Edward put his arm around Bella's waist, hooking his thumb on the belt of her coat as they walked.

"Better than," Bella confirmed, "she's excited and scared but I think she'll be great."

"And Alice is okay?"

"Oh sure," Bella nodded, swallowing and wincing against the slight pain, "Managing the store is something she never wanted to do, so she's good."

Edward nodded as he listened to Bella talk; she had been worried about broaching the subject of the store with Alice and had talked it over at length with him. Alice certainly had more experience with the store than Angela but it was obvious that her natural creativity would eventually lead her into a world beyond the bakery doors. They paused at the traffic lights and Edward glanced down in concern as Bella sneezed again.

"That definitely doesn't sound right," he commented as she blew her nose with a groan.

"There's a right way to sneeze?" Bella quipped as the lights changed and they crossed the street.

"Oh sure," Edward replied, "Dad and I made it a point to sneeze in a manner we saw fit."

"Really," Bella said with amused scepticism.

"Yup," Edward winked at her and then moved his attention back to the sidewalk as he navigated them through the pedestrian traffic, "practically anyone can say *ah-choo* when they see, but Dad and I worked on different sayings."

"Such as?" Bella blinked and leaned against Edward a little more as a wave of fatigue swept through her.



"Well, there was *Wa-hoo*," Edward began, "that's always a classic, and *Wee-ha*. Of course," he went on in an off-hand tone, "Dad went through an Al Pacino phase after *Scent of a Woman* came out, so all of his sneezes sounded like *Hoo-ah* for a while there."

Bella shook with laughter and Edward quirked an eyebrow at her in mock disdain.

"You mock our time-honoured efforts when the best you can manage is some kind of cat sneeze?"

"A what?" Bella rubbed at her nose; it had started to tickle again.

"You haven't noticed? You come out with a kind of-," he broke off and performed a series of soft high-pitched *Ish Ish Ish* sounds.

"You're telling me I sneeze like a cat?" Bella managed when she had stopped laughing.

"I am," Edward said as he gave her a fond look, "and I for one, think it sounds adorable."

"Fine," Bella said waving a hand with resignation, "I'm the girl with the cute sneeze, whatever."

"More than that," Edward said as he pulled her close to kiss her temple, "you're *my* girl with the cute sneeze."

Bella considered that and nodded. "Works for me," she said, "So where are we sleeping tonight; yours or mine?" she asked as they kept walking.

"Tricky," Edward mused, "your place is closer so I'm happy to go there-,"

"Your place," Bella decided while he thought aloud, making him glance at her in surprise.

"Really? I thought you'd want to go home if you weren't feeling well."

"You've got a king size bed," she admitted with a sheepish grin, "*and* a bath."

"Ahh, now we get to it," Edward nodded sagely, "you only want me for my bed and bath."

"I guess you had to find out some time," Bella sighed, "now take me home."

"Yes Ma'am," Edward answered, grinning to himself as Bella tried to muffle another sneeze with minimal success. They exchanged a quick sidelong look but said nothing as they kept walking.

The first thing Edward had done when they arrived at his apartment was to run Bella a hot bath. A quick rummage in the bathroom cupboard had produced a bottle of bath foam that Bella had purchased and she had settled back into a sea of foam with a sigh of satisfaction as soon as the water was to her liking.

Some time later Edward peered at Bella around the bathroom doorway. "Do you think you'll be up for something to eat after you're done soaking?"

"I think so, but nothing big," Bella replied after a considered pause. "You know," she went out as she scooped up a handful of foam, "there's plenty of room in here for two."

"Oh I'm well aware of that," Edward said as he crossed the room to kneel beside the tub and gently kiss her shoulder, "but you're not well."

"I could feel better," Bella said in a hopeful tone, turning her face towards him for a kiss that quickly became heated.

"I think," Edward growled when he managed to pull away at last, "you need some rest before I have my way with you."

"I feel rested now," Bella argued as she reached out a wet hand to grab a fistful of his t-shirt.

Edward put up a half-hearted resistance at best before his tongue licked inside her mouth as he cupped her face in his hands. Her skin felt warm to the touch, and he looked at the flush in her cheeks and beads of sweat dotting her forehead.

"Baby, you're hot," he said in concern.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Bella smiled as she evaded his hands and nipped at his throat.

"Uh," Edward's eyes fluttered closed for a moment as her breath puffed against his neck, "Wait, no I meant you could be running a fever." He drew in a shaky breath as he watched a clump of suds slide down her arm and rest against her naked hip that peeked out of the water. He shifted slightly and slid a hand down her arm and across her body so that he could cup a breast, his thumb rubbing over the rosy tip. Bella closed her eyes and subsided in the bath, curling up slightly in pleasure. Edward watched her as she opened her eyes and gazed at him, the tip of her tongue darting out to moisten her lips.

"Sure you don't want to join me?" she asked as she ran a damp finger along his forearm.

"No," he admitted as he dipped his head to kiss her again. This time when he broke the kiss they were both looking flushed. "I'm going to get you something to eat," he said, his voice sounding hoarse now, "and you're going to get into bed and get comfortable, and I'll bring you something to eat."

"Okay," Bella smiled, although her bottom lip was sticking out a little.

Edward cocked his head and regarded her demure acceptance for a moment.

"Are you pouting at me?" he asked.

"Maybe a little," she admitted. The tequila in her cocoa had been minimal at best, but the combination of a little alcohol on top of feeling tired and then a hot bath had her feeling more than a little silly.

"Just when I think you can't get cuter," he muttered. He gave her another kiss but got up before she could wind her arms around his neck and yanked a fluffy towel off a nearby hook to leave beside the bath. "Take your time, I'll be about twenty minutes."

"Will do," Bella lifted a leg out of the water and gazed her foot to see how wrinkled she was getting before relaxing back into the water with a splash. She could dimly hear Edward moving in the kitchen, the run of a tap and the clank of what sounded like a saucepan. A small part of her wondered what he was up to, but she dried her hands and picked up the magazine she had found on one of Edward's bookshelves earlier. It was a copy of *Vanity Fair*; a couple of years old by the looks of it but the articles looked interesting.

She flicked through the pages giving them a cursory glance. Her mind felt too fuzzy to handle anything too intellectual at the moment; most of the articles looked to be beyond her tolerance levels for the evening. The magazine was glossy and the advertisements catered to the wealthy, but an Annie Leibowitz portfolio of Hollywood actors soon distracted her. The bath water had cooled slightly but her skin was still flushed. She wiped some stick tendrils of hair off her forehead and kept reading.

"Hey," Edward's soft voice interrupted her and she blinked up at him owlishly as he leaned against the doorpost, his arms folded over his chest as he regarded her with a slight smile. "You done?"

"Sure," she replied, startled when her voice came out sounding like a tired croak.

"Come on, let's get you to bed."

Bella stood up with a slight wobble and stepped out of the tub into the towel that Edward held out for her. He rubbed her down with gentle movements, wrapping her up in it and giving her another kiss as he steered her towards the bedroom.

"Get changed, and I'll get your snack."

"Why are you being so good to me?" Bella asked, the question bubbling out of her without any conscious thought.

"Because I can," Edward said in a mild tone, "because I want to."

"Really?" Bella stood at the foot of his expansive bed, naked but for the towel she held clutched around her damp body. Her hair had half fallen out of the sloppy knot she had tied it up in, and it straggled around her shoulders making her look like a wet dandelion. Edward didn't think he'd ever seen her look more vulnerable.

"Really, you just make yourself comfortable and let me take care of the rest."

Another smile of reassurance and he was gone.

Bella stood in the bedroom blinking at his retreating back and then turned to look at the bed. Even when she and Jake had been dating he'd never fussed looked after her like this. It had been freshly made by the looks; the comforter was a beige waffle-weave bordered with white sheets, and there were enough pillows to make a fort. She crossed to the tallboy and opened what she thought of as her drawer to grab some clean underwear and an old t-shirt of Edward's that she liked to sleep in. Retrieving the magazine from the bathroom, she climbed

into bed. The sheets were crisp and cool against her warm skin and she settled herself against the pillows with a sigh.

She could still hear Edward banging into the kitchen and wondered just what he was up to. Flicking some damp hair off her neck she thumbed her way through the magazine to the last photo she had been studying. She let her gaze dwell on the couture gowns worn by a group of A-list actresses posed amidst an elaborate set of chaise lounges, packing crates and afghan rugs. Lost in a study of plush fabrics and body language she looked up at the sound of movement nearby to see Edward padding towards her with a small ceramic bowl in his hand.

"Here you go," he said, "I know it's simple but it's what I feel like when I don't feel good."

"Mashed potato?" Bella surveyed the bowl with surprise. The mash was creamy and topped with cracked pepper and a generous curl of butter. She smiled when she realised that Edward had drawn the shape of a heart in the mash with the fork that accompanied the bowl. She looked up at him with a smile of thanks, and suddenly the words that she had been hesitating over were there. "I love you."

Edward looked at her and a slow, pleased smile spread across his face.

"If I'd know mashed potato would earn that kind of declaration I'd have made it weeks ago," he commented as he sat down on the bed.

Bella looked down at the bowl in her hands and then gave him a tremulous smile. "I guess it's been a while since I've been looked after like this."

Edward leaned closer and gave her a kiss.

"It's no less than you deserve," he said, "and I love you too." He straightened and gestured to the bowl. "Now, eat."

Bella picked up the fork and took her first mouthful. The potatoes were creamy and delicious. "Wonderful," she said at last. "Just what I needed."

Edward smoothed her hair with one hand. "It's the best I could do on short notice, what you really need is some of Mom's soup."

"Renee used to make great chicken soup," Bella said in between mouthfuls, "it's been a long time since I've had Mom-cooking."

"Speaking of which," Edward kept stroking her hair as he spoke, "the folks want to see us again for lunch sometime."

"Yeah?" Bella gave him a glance and kept eating. The mash was warm and smooth, which felt soothing against her sore throat. Even more soothing was the feel of Edward's hands as he smoothed and combed her hair with his fingers.

"Yup," Edward nodded and kept talking, "it was a part of the deal I made with her this morning."

"Deal?" Bella glanced at him, careful not to disturb his hand; she wasn't ready for him to stop just yet. In fact, he could keep doing it forever as far as she was concerned.

"Uh," Edward looked a little embarrassed, "I called her this morning to ask her where I could get you a good coat," he explained.

Bella laughed which turned into a cough. "You know, that's kinda cute."

"Kinda lame," Edward admitted, "a grown man asking his Mom where to go shopping for his girlfriend."

"I bet she was happy to help out though," Bella said with a smile.

"You have no idea," Edward smiled at the memory of Esme's happy voice as she rattled off her instructions. "It's the first time I've asked her about that kind of thing, and she and Dad love you."

"Do they?" Bella flushed a little at this.

"You know they do," Edward gave her a smile.

Since meeting Bella, Esme and Carlisle welcomed her with open arms into their home at every possible opportunity. Aside from the fact that they had a love of literature in common, Bella's natural warmth and her obvious affection for Edward had endeared her to them all the more.

Edward's previous girlfriends had been charming in their way although they were more career-hungry than Bella, who seemed more content with her bakery and friendships than she was in scaling the profit ladder. They had also derived a certain satisfaction from dating a known author, and delighted in taking him to various corporate functions where they could introduce him. By contrast, Bella had known nothing about his success and seemed quite content to keep it that way. Even the discovery that Edward was writing about her had done little to upset her equilibrium, at least it seemed that way on the surface.

Bella's reluctance to read his published works was a matter than Edward dwelled on from time to time. He didn't care if she read them or not, but her refusal to read the incomplete manuscript despite his offers (a rarity to anyone that knew how protective Edward was of his writing) despite knowing she was featured had him puzzled. Other women would have pestered him senseless had they known they were going to be immortalised in the printed word. He didn't need Bella to read his work for his own satisfaction or her approval, but it bothered him that his words seemed to be building some sort of invisible barrier between them.

"Well they're kinda cool too," Bella admitted. She finished her meal and set the fork down in the bowl with a clink and a sigh.

Edward reached over to take the bowl off her and set it on the bedside table before taking her in his arms and resting back against the pillows. The pair of them lay there together in silence until Bella spoke.

"You know, I think Charlie and Renee would have really loved you too."

Edward said nothing but kissed her temple by way of reply. He recognised her hesitant words for the accolade they were. Bella rested her head against his shoulder and gave a soft sigh as Edward kept stroking her hair. After a time her breathing evened out as she slid into sleep. Edward checked his position and decided he would be comfortable enough for the time being; he didn't want to move and risk Bella waking up. He glanced at his watch and saw that the evening was creeping towards ten o'clock.

Words bubbled in his head and a slight inclination of his head gave him a partial view of his desk in the living room where he could see the glow of his laptop screen. He glanced down at Bella sleeping against him. Her hair was beginning to dry and he smiled to see the soft curls springing out from her temple. Bella mumbled something under her breath and settled against him with a soft chuffing sigh. She felt warmer to the touch now; he felt sure that she had a fever. The words were still there, and he rolled them around, until he had shaped them into a pleasing construct. He repeated the phrasing to himself a few more times until he knew he would remember in the morning and then let them subside.

He felt content.

\* \* \* \* \*

"And then what did he do?" Jasper paused in the act of unloading his satchel while Alice told him about her day. He had come to her apartment this evening and they had fallen into their usual routine of unloading the events of the day before settling down to dinner, whatever that turned out to be.

"You mean after Rose kicked him out of the studio?" Alice glanced at him as she stripped off her t-shirt, quite unselfconscious as she stood there in bra and jeans, "he came to see Bella."

"Who wasn't there, so you talked to him instead," Jasper said for his own clarification.

"Yup," Alice said, sitting down on the bed with a thump to take off her boots. "He seemed okay by the time he left."

"Right," Jasper's brow wrinkled as he tried to keep track of the conversation in his head, "but tell me again how you brought Edward and Bella into the mix?"

"I used Bella as an example when we were talking about dealing with creative people," Alice said, standing up to wriggle out of her tight fit jeans.

"Uh-uh, but how did you phrase it?" Jasper pressed, his expression careful now as he watched Alice shrug off her clothes as easily as she seemed to shrug off her day. He settled a bundle of paperwork on the table and set a pen on the top reading to read through and grade some of them later. Much later, he thought to himself, if Alice was going to keep undressing like that.

"I just told him that he needs to respect Rosalie's creativity when it hits, and told him that Bella does the same, just maybe a bit too much."

Much to Jasper's disappointment, Alice padded into the bathroom and returned wearing a pair of cookie monster pants and what had to be a child-sized t-shirt.

"You said that about Bella?" Jasper walked into the kitchen to pick up the bundle of take-out menus that Alice kept clipped in a bundle beside the telephone, and began to flick through them.

"Not in so many words," Alice paused to reflect on the conversation and gave a slight shrug, "I told him that Bella tends to tip-toe around Edward maybe a bit *too* much when it comes to his writing."

"You don't think that was crossing the line?" Jasper asked in a mild tone. Perhaps Japanese would be a nice change, but there was a Chinese restaurant that never let them down.

"Huh?" Alice called over her shoulder. She was back in the bathroom removing her mascara and so Jasper strolled over to lean against the doorframe as he kept reading the menus.

"You don't think that was maybe crossing the line a little? Telling Bella's brother about his sister's relationship?"

Alice paused and turned to regard Jasper with some exasperation. "I didn't exactly spill any State secrets." She paused as Jasper gave her a look that showed he was trying not to laugh and checked her reflection in the mirror to see that her eye-makeup remover had her looking like a racoon. She glanced back at Jasper and shook her head before resuming her efforts.

"I know, Baby," Jasper soothed, "but from what you've said, Edward's writing is still a bit of a no-fly zone for Bella so we don't know what she'd make of you talking about it."

"But I wasn't," Alice was confused, "I was talking about what she's like *around* it."

"Fine line," Jasper drawled, "and once you cross it you're dealing with all sorts of issues."

"Such as?" Alice put her hands on her hips as she regarded him, feeling defensive. Perhaps Jasper had a point after all. She felt a stab of worry that her comments to Emmett could have repercussions for her friend.

"Well I don't rightly know, but I know there's one big call on the horizon," Jasper pushed himself away from the doorway and took a step towards Alice, looking serious.

"Yeah?" Alice looked up at him as he cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Yeah," he deadpanned and then held up some menus, "Pizza or Chinese?"

Alice snorted with amusement as she took the proffered menus off Jasper and began to skim read them. Jasper wandered back to his pile of papers and after picking up his pen selected the top one and flopped onto the sofa to begin reading. After a slight pause Alice followed him. He had just gotten comfortable when he got up with a quiet grumble and retrieved his reading glasses from his satchel.

"Do you think I did the wrong thing?" she ventured as she curled up in an old armchair she had rescued from the street and covered with a colourful throw rug. She reached up and began to twine some hair around her finger, nibbling on the end of the strands; a habit she unwittingly did when she was nervous.

Jasper looked up as he sat down and noticed how Alice was sitting. Her legs were curled under her, and she sat huddled on the armchair as she regarded him. She looked, Jasper realised, vulnerable and child-like in her concern.

"I'm sure things will be fine," he answered, but you know what they say about getting between a man and a woman."

"What's that?" Alice cocked her head to one side, still nibbling on her hair as she regarded him.

Jasper leaned over and retrieved his pen from the floor where he had left it. "It's where angels fear to tread."

"Crap," Alice's voice was quiet now.

"Maybe," Jasper agreed, "then again maybe not. What did you want for dinner?"

Alice stared at him.

"You've got me worried about putting my foot in my mouth and now you're talking about food?"

"Yup," Jasper regarded her over the rim of his glasses and then went back to his reading.

"Are you heartless?"

"Far from it," he answered, "just hungry."

"Oh really?" Alice got up from her armchair and walked towards the sofa, bracing her hands on the back and armrest to lean over Jasper where he was sitting.

"Really," Jasper gave her a lazy grin, the one that always made her heart somersault.

The pen was relegated to the floor again as he reached out to run his hands up her sides. Alice's eyes fluttered closed as his face neared hers, ready for his kiss. Jasper grinned at her expectant look and then he grabbed her in a smooth move and pulled her onto his lap. Alice gave a squeak of surprise and then squealed as he began to tickle her. He had spent enough time worshipping her body to know all of her sweet spots as well as several of her strategic weak points.

"Stop," she gasped, "I'm gonna pee!"

Jasper laughed but complied, keeping his arms around her as he watched her struggle into a more comfortable position on his lap. The worry in her eyes was still there but it had subsided after his surprise attack, which was his desired goal.

"You nut," she said, kissing the tip of his nose.

"You missed," Jasper commented.



"So I did, can I try again?"

"I'd appreciate it."

She didn't miss the next time and they explored each other's mouths for a long, sweet moment in the quiet apartment.

"Better?" Alice asked when they came up for air.

"You tell me," Jasper replied.

Alice looked away, pursing her lips as if giving the matter some serious consideration. "I think I am," she said at last. She gave him a sidelong look. "Dinner?"

"I narrowed it down, what do you feel like?"

Alice could feel the warmth of Jasper's body through her thin clothes, and the insistent nudging at her hip told him that he had reacted to her kiss just as strongly as she had to his. Still, she was hungry, and they had gone without dinner enough times over the last few days for the same reason.

"Pizza," she said in a decisive tone, "I need comfort food."

Jasper nuzzled Alice's neck to hide his smile. "What is it with women and carbs?"

"It's a mystery," Alice said, wriggling around on Jasper's lap as she looked for her cell phone she had left on the coffee table. Jasper bit his lip to stop from groaning as her movement caused a delightful friction. She spotted her phone and lunged for it instead of getting up. The movement had Jasper grabbing her by the hips so that she didn't fall off the sofa. Alice shot him a triumphant smile as she got the phone and began to dial. The two of them were yet to argue over food and so the ordering process was easy although Jasper kept kissing her neck while she was talking. Minutes later she snapped the phone shut and gave Jasper a satisfied smile.

"How much time we got?" Jasper gave her a speculative look.

Alice tossed her phone in the general vicinity of the coffee table, not caring when it fell onto the rug with a muffled thud. Jasper's hands were kneading her hips, pulling her closer to him.

"Thirty minutes," Alice replied as she twined her arms around his neck and began to nibble at his earlobe; a manoeuvre that generated a soft growl from Jasper.

"We can work around that," Jasper said as he tightened his grip on her and stood up. He waited until Alice had wrapped her legs around his hips before he began to stride towards the bed.

"We can be quick," she assured him before making a soft growling noise and sinking her teeth into his neck.

Thirty-five minutes later Alice took delivery of dinner with a smile of thanks and a spectacular case of sex-hair.

Jasper resumed his position on the sofa—shirtless this time—and took a big bite of pizza. Alice was pouring over the pages of a fashion magazine as she ate but handed him a paper napkin to wipe his chin without looking up. Jasper accepted it with a mumble of thanks as he kept reading, nodding from time to time and scribbled notes in the margins.

"Think I should say something to Bella?" Alice asked after long moment of companionable silence.

Jasper pulled his attention away from his reading and gave her a fuzzy look of incomprehension before the memory of their previous conversation returned.

"Would tell her make you feel better?"

Alice considered his question and then shrugged. "I don't know."

"Do you think Bella would feel better?"

Alice looked shamefaced. "Probably not."

Jasper took another bite of pizza and nodded thoughtfully while he chewed.

"Well," he said at last, "leave it."

"Really?"

"Yup," he nodded.

"How about Emmett, should I say something to him?" Alice persisted.

Jasper gave her a look of mild exasperation.

"Okay," she subsided, nibbling on her pizza. Jasper watched her for a while and then returned to his paper. Alice finished her slice and then opened her mouth but was silenced when Jasper held up his hand.

"Babe, leave it," he said, "trust me."

"If you're sure," she muttered.

Jasper nodded and kept reading.

"Tomorrow's another day," he commented.

\* \* \* \* \*

"G'morning," Edward whispered, "I love you."

"Iloveyoutoo," Bella mumbled as she reached out and fumbled to pull his face towards hers for a kiss.

"How are you feeling?"

Bella cracked an eye open to see Edward hovering over her with a look of concern, and then blinked and rubbed her eyes, which felt as if they were full of sand. Her body ached and her skin felt hot and parched in a way that had her longing for another bath. Inventory over she grimaced at Edward.

"Bad?" he asked as he put a hand on her forehead. "You were running a fever all night."

"I was?" she frowned at that. She couldn't remember the last time she had been sick.

"Yeah," Edward smiled, "you kept me warm all night."

Bella pushed her lank hair off her face and plucked at her shirt. As grimy as she felt Edward didn't seem to care. He kept his arm around her as he lay on his side with his head propped in one hand, his legs entangled with hers. Glancing over Edward's shoulder she saw the curtains shift a little in the breeze.

"You opened the window? In this weather?" She looked at Edward in surprise.

"You told me to," Edward smiled as if recalling a private joke.

"I did?" Bella shook her head against the pillow, "I don't remember that." She gave him a slight smile, "I talk in my sleep sometimes," she admitted.

"No kidding," Edward deadpanned.

Bella scanned his face and then groaned. "God, what else have I said?"

"What kinda guy would I be if I spilled your secrets from last night?" Edward protested with a grin.

"A *live* one," Bella tried to growl and ended up coughing instead.

"Still not saying," Edward grinned.

Bella shook her head in exasperation but closed her eyes and curled her body against his like a sleepy kitten.

"I guess you telling me I had to open the window because the apartment was sinking tipped me off about your sleep talking," Edward mused out loud. He decided not to tell her that she had been talking in her sleep since they had been sharing a bed, he could do that later.

Bella gave a sleepy chuckle. "Really."

"Uh-huh. You were very sure of yourself but you had a lifeboat tied up outside so we were going to be okay." His shoulders shook with silent amusement. "You kept trying to get out of bed to open the window do I did it for you."

"I'm ignoring you now," Bella told him, her eyes stayed closed but her lips curled in a smile.

"Really?" Edward nuzzled her clavicle.

Bella sighed as she felt Edward's lips ghost across her skin. Seconds later her eyes flew open and she sat up so abruptly Edward's nose bumped on her chest.

"What's the time?" she looked at the bedside clock and groaned. "I've got to get to work."

"I don't think so," Edward watched as Bella kicked away the sheet and tried to stand up. She had just gotten to her feet when her head thumped with pain, making her sit down just as quickly as she had gotten up.

Bella put her head in her hands. "This isn't happening," Bella muttered, "I haven't been sick in years."

"You are now," Edward observed; Bella's attempt to start the day had left her ashen faced and shaking. "Give me your phone, I'll call Alice."

"I'll have to call Angela," Bella shook her head, "Alice doesn't have any keys."

"She hasn't?" Edward glanced at her, "how long have you guys been working together?"

"I know," Bella nodded her agreement, "I've offered and she kept saying no."

"That doesn't make sense," Edward comment as he retrieved Bella's phone from the living room.

"Her argument was that she kept losing her *own* keys, so she didn't want the stress of losing the store keys as well."

Edward snorted. "For someone called Pocket Rocket she's awful scared sometimes."

"I know," Bella sighed and scratched her head. "I'll have a shower and get going, I just need to let Angela know I'll be late."

"Like hell," Edward shook his head, "you're staying right where you are."

"Oh really," Bella glared and rubbed her eyes again. Her head was feeling stuffy and her nose was tingling, "and what's going to stop me?"

Edward was about to speak when Bella broke into a sneezing fit. Bella sneezed five times, annoyed at the interruption and aware that she was indeed sounding like a cat but seemed unable to do anything about it. She accepted the proffered tissue from Edward with what she hoped was a dignified silence and blew her nose.

"You were saying?" Edward asked in a mild tone as he proffered her cell phone.

"How about I start late?" she bargained.

"How about you talk to Angela and see what she thinks?" Edward asked.

"And then what?" Bella eyed the phone with a wary expression.

"And then if she tells you to stay at home, you stay in bed, I call Mom, and knowing her she'll come over with some soup."

"I can't," Bella's teeth worried her bottom lip, "this sort of thing doesn't happen."

"Bella," Edward took her hand, "it's happening now, and maybe it's because it can."

"Huh?" Bella gave him a blank look.

"Think about it, you've got Angela *and* Alice, you've got support for moments like these."

"But it's only the day after Angela and I talked about it," Bella's wail came out sounding like a croak.

"Just call Angela and see what she-," Edward began.

"What if she freaks out when-," Bella started.

"Sweetheart, *call* her," Edward gave her the phone. "Enough with the what-ifs."

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Angela hurried towards the store, her breath misting in the cool air. She saw the red canopy in the distance and could make out a pacing figure beneath it; it had to be Alice.

"Hey B2," Alice greeted as Angela reached her.

"B2?" Angela shot her a curious look as she sorted through the store keys to find the right one for the security grill. Alice reached over and pointed at the correct key and then helped her open the doors.

"Boss Two?" Alice suggested.

"At least you didn't call me Number Two," Angela grinned, "but it still feels weird."

"Not to me," Alice shrugged.

"You sure?" Angela looked at the smaller woman. That Bella had asked Angela to take more responsibility rather than Alice had been a point of worry all night.

"Yup," Alice answered with a clear expression, and Angela's confidence lifted a little.

"So where's Bella?" Angela asked as they both walked towards the kitchen to put away their bags and get ready for the day. "I'm usually the last one here."

"Don't know," Alice said, pausing in the act of switching on the coffee machine to look at the clock, "she should be here by now."

And then the phone rang. The two women exchanged a glance and then Angela reached for the receiver.

"Good morning, Take the Cake," she greeted, and then, "Bella," her face broke into a relieved smile and then she paused as she listened to Bella speak. "You sound *terrible*."

Alice took in Angela's look of concern and then without a word turned and walked into the kitchen. By the time she returned carrying a small notebook Angela was replacing the receiver and looking worried.

"What's the verdict?" Alice asked, although she already knew.

"She's sick," Angela said in a flat tone as she gave Alice a look of trepidation, "So I told her to stay home." Angela gulped. "I guess it's just us today."

"Looks like," Alice replied as she held up the notebook.

"What's that?"

"The recipe bible," Alice said as she handed it over, "I'll help get you started."

Angela flicked through the pages. Some of the recipes were written in Bella's handwriting and others she didn't recognise. She looked up at Alice, feeling scared now.

"Where should I start?" she asked with a dry mouth.

"Charlie's Favourite," Alice advised, "It's a simple butter cake recipe."

"Really?" Angela sounded hopeful now.

"It's how Bella got started," Alice smiled and put her arm around the taller woman's shoulders to steer her into the kitchen. Angela stood in the kitchen looking around with wide eyes.

"You've helped Bella out before," Alice soothed as she switched on the oven, "and you know where everything is and how she does it. You've made muffins, this isn't any different."

"Alice, I'm making the *cupcakes*," Angela said as she walked towards the bench and pulled the mixer towards her.

"It's just another product," Alice replied. "We'll be fine." She slapped Angela's rump on her way out of the kitchen. "I'll get us some coffee and get to work on the bagels. We've got an hour and a half before we open and we can get it done."

"Can we?" Angela raised an eyebrow.

"We have to," Alice grinned, "and you know how I like a challenge."

"True," Angela couldn't help but smile back.

Angela read the recipe again, looking at Bella's notations as the quantities had grown over the years. It looked easy enough. Angela glanced at the oven and nodded as she saw the thermostat increasing. She'd better get started.

Alice paused from frothing the milk and smiled when she heard the mixer start up.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here," Edward set a steaming mug on the bedside table, "I know it's not the standard you're used to, but I'll get us something later."

"S'fine," Bella said as she reached for the cup. Edward set down a glass of juice as well.

"You need to keep up your fluids," he parroted.

Bella smiled. "You called Esme."

"I did," he nodded, "and she's bringing lunch."

Bella sipped at the coffee and then slumped against the mountain of pillows that Edward had stacked up around her.

"I feel pathetic," she admitted. She had stumbled out of bed intent on having a shower to freshen up and had settled for soaking in the bath again. She had run a hot bath in a bed to sweat out her fever but it hadn't worked. By the time she had splashed her way out of the bath she had felt tired and light-headed. Edward had produced another shirt for her to sleep in and she had crawled back into bed and fallen asleep at once.

Edward leaned over and gave her a kiss. "I don't know, you feel pretty good to me, Babe. Kinda toasty."

"I'm going to be an impatient patient," she warned him.

"Okay," Edward nodded. "You want to sleep some more?" he asked as he watched Bella struggle to keep her eyes open.

"I'm fine," Bella shook her head even as she settled herself more comfortably on the pillows. She closed her eyes and sighed.

Edward stood watching her with a slight smile on his face. Her breath hitched once, twice and then settled into a deeper rhythm. Leaving the bedroom, Edward returned to his desk and sat down in front of his laptop. He typed for a while and then pushed back his chair so that he could glimpse the lump that was Bella's feet beneath the covers. There were no signs of movement; Bella was sound asleep. He smiled and went back to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice had powered her way through the bagel preparation, and was setting out some savoury muffins that Bella had made the previous afternoon. She stopped and surveyed the display cabinet. Levels of stock were looking good; there was just one thing more that she needed.

Angela appeared beside Alice looking pleased and nervous. "Want to come see?"

Alice gave her a flat look.

"Okay," Angela laughed and threw up her hands, "stupid question, come look."

Alice followed her into the kitchen and checked out the finished product.

"Nice, very nice," she nodded slowly.

"Thanks," Angela sighed with relief, "I was worried that-," she broke off, "*shit*."

"What?" Alice was wide-eyed at the sudden change in mood. "What's wrong?"

"We've done this all wrong," Angela said, "what's the quote for the day?"

"Hell, I nearly forgot," Alice put a hand to her forehead, "I'll think of something now and then see what you can come up with to name those," she pointed to the waiting cupcakes. She darted out into the store to grab the chalkboard and stared out the store window to the traffic outside, her mind racing as she waited for inspiration.

"Hey Angela," she called, "what's the main ingredient in those things?"

Angela appeared with one of the trays and slid them into the cabinet. "If you're including the frosting I'd have to say sugar or butter, why?"

"Thanks," Alice scribbled for a moment and then turned the board around.

Angela read it and laughed.

*What whisky or butter can't cure, there's no cure for.*



"Now it's your turn," Alice said.

"What do I do?" Angela said as she looked from the cupcakes to the chalkboard.

"Think of a cupcake name that matches the quote and you're done," Alice replied as she carried the chalkboard outside to hang it up. "You'll get the hang of it in no time."

"If you say so," Angela muttered under her breath. She leaned against the counter and crossed her arms as she studied the cupcakes. "Whisky and butter," she murmured to herself.

Alice returned inside to see Angela making them another coffee, her face a mask of concentration. Alice gave her a quick pat on the back as she passed and busied herself filling up the water jugs, dropping in slices of lemon before carrying them over to a small table for customers to help themselves. Angela finished making the coffee in short order and handed Alice her cup as she returned behind the counter.

"Thanks," Alice said as she took a sip. "So, got a name?"

"I have," Angela smiled.

"Great," Alice swooped on her piece of chalk and grabbed the smaller chalkboard and gave her an expectant look.

Angela took a sip of her coffee and then dictated, watching as Alice wrote down her words. When Alice held out the chalkboard both women studied it for a moment.

*Miracle Cure. Vanilla butter cupcakes with chocolate butter frosting.*

"You know, I think we're going to be just fine."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella slowly returned to consciousness to hear Edward talking quietly in the other room. She squinted at the bedside clock and saw that she had slept for another couple of hours. Struggling into a sitting position she pushed her hair off her face and rubbed her eyes. She felt gritty again, and so shoved the covers aside to make her way into the bathroom. She had a quick shower and then changed into some fresh clothes before making her way out into the living room.

"Hey," he had looked up when she appeared, "you're looking a little better."

"I feel it," she mumbled as she sat down on the sofa and then curled up on her side with her eyes closed. It felt good to be out of bed, but she couldn't find the energy to do anything. She heard Edward get up from his desk but didn't pay it any heed.

"Lift up," Edward instructed.

Opening her eyes, she saw Edward standing in front of the sofa with a pillow he had retrieved from the bed. She propped herself up so that Edward could slide the pillow under her shoulders and then subsiding, smiling her thanks when he covered her with a light throw rug.

"You want something to drink?" Edward asked as he brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers.

"Mm-hmm," Bella nodded, her eyes fluttering closed again. She was still feeling light headed. It felt as if her centre of balance had somehow moved six inches away from where she lay, leaving her with the curious sensation of feeling as if she was not properly anchored within her body. Closing her eyes, she let herself drift.

Edward went into the kitchen and returned with a glass of water, which he set down on the coffee table in front of her.

"I've spoken to Mom, so you can expect a soup delivery soon," he said as he took a seat on the arm of the sofa.

"She doesn't have to do that," Bella said in a drowsy tone as she blinked at him slowly. She felt guilty over the level of attention she was getting for what appeared to be a mild head cold.

"Just let us take care of you," Edward soothed, "we want to, okay?"

"If you say so," Bella said, "but don't you think you're too far away to do that?"

Edward took the hint and eased himself onto the sofa. Bella shoved the pillow aside and burrowed against his chest. In contrast to her body heat Edward felt deliciously cool. Settling her head on his shoulder, she looked up at him with a sleepy smile. Edward bent his head and kissed her out of reflex.

"Hey," he whispered, "love you."

"Love you too," she smiled.

Now that the words had been said, they wanted to say them often as is making up for lost time. Keeping his arm around her, Edward reached for the tv remote and flicked it on, scrolling through the channels to see if there was anything worth watching.

"See anything you like?," he asked as he kept his gaze on the screen.

"Not on TV," Bella murmured, running her hands up his chest.

"I had no idea you were such a horndog when you're sick," Edward smirked at her as her fingers traced idle figure eights on his shirt.

"You never know," Bella waved a hand in an entirely vague gesture before returning to Edward's shirt, "it could be a great way to break a fever."

"Mmm," Edward mused, closing his eyes as Bella kissed his jaw and ran a hand over his thighs, "don't forget we're getting a soup delivery."

"Yeah," Bella replied, "but I bet your Mom's soup can't do this," she gently bit his bottom lip before coaxing his mouth open with her tongue and dipping inside.

Edward's hands floated up to hold her in place as they kissed and stroked each other in all the ways they liked best. By the time they broke apart Bella's face was flushed and her eyes dilated as she gazed heavy-lidded at him. She looked, Edward realised, almost as if she was drunk. Her movements were slow and deliberate as if she had to concentrate on what she wanted to do.

"Damn," Edward's soft curse sounded shaky as he looked at his watch, "and Mom's on her way here already, it's too late to put her off."

Bella didn't take her gaze away from his lips as he spoke, and she leaned in to kiss him again the moment he stopped speaking. This time the kiss was not as gentle as their mutual desire grew.

"Honey," Edward's breath was ragged now, "you're not well, are you sure this is a good idea?"

"I've never been more sure of anything," Bella replied. She shifted her weight and threw a leg over his thighs so that she straddled him. Edward's hands automatically shifted to cup her bottom so that he could lift and pull her closer against him. They both gave a quiet moan as their cores came into contact through their clothes.

"Jesus," Edward had time to mutter before Bella fisted her hands in his hair and pulled him to her for another kiss. His hips lifted slightly as she ground down on his lap, and he shifted his hands to run them up and under her t-shirt as he gave in and accepted what she was offering. "Need this *off*," he growled as he pulled at the soft fabric.

Bella broke away from him long enough to pull the t-shirt up and over her head. As her arms lifted he leaned forward to pull the rosy tip of one of her breasts into his mouth. The t-shirt was tossed aside as she clutched his head to her. She couldn't sit still. Her hips rose and circled against his as she all but whimpered in her need to get him closer still.

"I need," Bella stuttered, trying to get the words out when all she wanted to do was kiss him. "Off," she tugged at his shirt, pushing him back against the sofa so that she could fumble it up and over his head.

Edward looked at his watch and then at Bella.

"Maybe traffic will be bad," he bargained.

"Could be," Bella agreed, licking and nipping at his chest before pausing to look up at him. "Now?"

"Now," he agreed.

Somehow they made it to the bed and fell onto it in a tangle of limbs that were immediately kicking off clothes. There was no murmured sweet talk, no gentle exploration; it was all need. Edward lunged for the bedside drawer and produced a foil packet, the contents of which were fitted with shaking hands as Bella tongued and kissed his skin. Rolling her onto her back and holding his weight above her, Edward stopped and gazed at her for a long moment.

"Bella," he began, "I-,"

"I know," she nodded and pulled his face towards hers. His hips flexed forwards as her legs wrapped around his hips, and he sank into her warmth. They both sighed and felt their bodies adjust to each other, before he flexed his hips again, withdrawing and returning over and over.

"More," Bella groaned as she jerked her hips to meet his thrusts, "Edward, I can't, I-,"

"What? Tell me," Edward whispered in her ear before kissing her throat, "you've got to tell me."

"I feel like I can't get close enough to you," she muttered. Her hands were splayed across his shoulders pulling him closer still.

"I know," Edward was trying to touch and kiss as much of her as he could as their bodies curled and thrust against each other. "Me too."

Bella felt hot, the fever raging through her body as her system fought to restore her equilibrium, and all the while she surged towards Edward. She felt light-headed and could hear her ragged breathing as she struggled towards release. Something had to give; it just had to. Opening her eyes to gaze at Edward she could barely see him; the fever was eating her up from the inside out. Edward's body felt cool and strong and she clutched to him as she tried to keep her awareness in check.

"Close," Edward managed as he slid a hand beneath her shoulder to give a firmer grip. Bella's only response was to nod and mumble something incoherent as she tightened her legs around his hips, her heels digging into his thighs and urged him deeper. Edward felt the familiar tightening as his body gathered its release. He broke away from kissing Bella to look at her before his body shook with its climax. At the same time Bella's breathing hitched; the fever broke and sweat popped and beaded over her skin.

Edward sighed and nuzzled Bella's neck, careful to keep his weight from crushing Bella's diminutive frame. When he had caught his breath he carefully withdrew from her and got up from the bed to perform the necessary ablutions as quickly as he good. Returning to the bedroom he saw Bella sprawled amongst the crumpled sheets with a peaceful smile on her face.

"Hey," he said as he crawled across the bed and gathered her into his arms. "Where did you go?" he murmured as he gave her soft kiss. "I lost you somewhere."

"Whaddya mean," Bella slurred, "I was here the whole time."

Edward's chest shook with suppressed amusement. "You know what I mean."

"Relax lover boy," Bella patted his thigh, "just because you don't hit the jackpot every time doesn't mean I'm not having fun." She blinked up at him and then lifted some sweaty hair off the back of her neck, "I got my release a different way and I feel *good*."

Edward gazed at her and then rested his hand on her forehead. "You feel cooler, did your fever break?"

"Feels like it," Bella's nod was sleepier this time.

"You need more sleep," Edward observed as Bella covered her mouth with a hand and gave a massive yawn.

"I do," she blinked, "but I want to have a shower first."

"I'll have to remember this," Edward commented, "when you get sick you're like a cross between a mermaid and a horndog."

Bella tried to look stern as she regarded him despite her nudity. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"No Ma'am," Edward replied.

"Good, now come take a shower with me."

"Yes Ma'am," Edward repeated as he helped her off the bed. Bella staggered slightly but made her way towards the bathroom and turned on the shower. Edward glanced at the clock as he followed her; he guessed they had five or ten minutes before Esme arrived. He stepped into the shower cubicle to see Bella standing directly beneath the spray, her hair plastered against her head and shoulders as she soaped her hands.

"Come here," she said with a soft voice as she turned to face him.

Edward stood and let her soap his chest before turning the favour. It seemed only fair. Edward was dressed but still barefoot when his mother arrived.

"Thanks for coming over," Edward said as he gave his mother a kiss hello as he helped her off with her coat. He had only just remembered to collect his and Bella's hastily discarded t-shirts from the living room floor and flick them into the bedroom before answering the door. "Did you drive?"

"I did, it was easier than catching a cab with what I had to carry," Esme replied as she indicated the two carry bags she had arrived with. "Where's the patient?" Esme asked as she saw the pillow on the sofa.

"She'll be out soon, she just had a shower," Edward replied as Esme made for the kitchen with her carry bag of goodies.

Esme arched an eyebrow at her son as she took in his wet hair, watching as he had the grace to look sheepish. "I'm not asking," Esme smiled.

"Good," Edward replied poker faced, "because I'm not telling."

"Fine by me," Esme replied airily as she set her bag down on the kitchen bench top. "You know, your father gets a similar look."

"When?" Edward asked without thinking and then immediately regretted it. He looked at Esme who was regarding him with a knowing smile. "Forget I said that."

Thankfully Bella appeared in the doorway and Esme's attention was immediately diverted.

"There you are," she said as she stepped forward to wrap her arms around Bella, "how are you feeling?"

"I'm okay," Bella replied as she returned Esme's hug.

Edward couldn't help but notice the genuine affection between the two women. He allowed himself to be relegated to the background as Esme ushered Bella back to the sofa and making sure Bella was settled comfortably.

"Have you eaten?" Esme asked as she pulled the throw rug over Bella.

"A little, I haven't been very hungry," Bella admitted.

"Edward," Esme gave son 'the look'.

"Hey," he protested from where he stood, "I tried to get her to keep her fluids up, but she slept most of the morning."

"Never mind," Esme rubbed Bella's shoulder, "we'll fix that." She paused and then took a seat on the coffee table whilst holding Bella's hands in her own. "I'm not here to intrude, but Edward told me you were sick so I've brought a few things over."

"Thanks, Esme," Bella nodded as she tried to swallow the lump in her throat, "it's appreciated, really." She picked at the throw and gave Esme a watery smile. "I guess it's been a while since I've had a Mom around me when I'm sick."

"How long has it been?" Esme asked in a quiet voice.

Bella did some mental arithmetic. "Coming up thirteen years now," she replied. "Longer I guess," she paused, "Renee was sick for a few years before she went so I looked after her as much as I could." She sat still, remembering. "It didn't seem right to complain about not feeling well when she-," she broke off and shrugged again.

"My Mom passed on a while ago," Esme replied, "it's a terrible thing, losing your mother." She gave Edward a sad smile, "Carlisle once said that our mothers hold the memory of our lives before we know ourselves, and when they pass on it's as if we can never be a child ever again."

"I'd never thought of it like that," Bella nodded as she considered Esme's words.

"So what sort of patient are you?" Esme asked with a smile.

"Not bad," Edward commented as he took a seat on the sofa and pulled Bella's feet onto his lap and rubbing her legs, "but she didn't like admitting that she couldn't go to work."

"I'm not surprised," Esme replied, "watching a parent succumb to a terminal illness would make anything else sound petty. *But*," she said as she turned back to Bella, "you do need to look after yourself."

"God," Bella rolled her eyes making Esme laugh. "It's not the end of the world, it was just a head cold or something."

"One that you're throwing off quickly which is good," Esme answered, brisk now, "but you can't keep pushing yourself."

"Okay," Bella nodded as she wriggled her feet in Edward's lap. He got the message and resumed stroking her legs.

"You're resting, so you stay there and I'll get you something to eat."

Esme got up and waved Edward to stay seated as she went into the kitchen.

"You know," Bella whispered once she had gone, "I feel kinda stupid just laying here and being waited on by your Mom."

"She wants to do it," Edward reassured her, "it's a Mom thing to do, just go with it."

Bella looked uncertain.

"Bells, you're just outta practice, you'll be fine."

Esme called Edward and Bella into the kitchen in good time, and they arrived to discover she had produced two bowls of steaming chicken soup accompanied by slices of buttered crusty bread and a jug of water. The kitchen bench had two place settings, and as they took their seats Esme busied herself with packing things away.

"Now," she said over her shoulder as she opened the refrigerator, "there's enough soup in here for another two meals. This container," she showed them another sealed plastic tub, "has got pie in it."

Edward swallowed a mouthful of soup and looked at his mother in amazement. "The one with the potato crust?"

"That's the one," Esme nodded.

"Wow," Edward looked impressed. "Even I don't merit that very often."

"Oh stop," she swatted his shoulder with a laugh as Bella grinned.

"Esme that's amazing, but you didn't have to go to so much tr-," Bella was waved into silence.

"Honey, just let me do this. I'd be doing the same for Edward, so it's just nice to have someone prettier to look after."

Bella snorted at this and tried to convert it into a cough without much success. She kept spooning her soup and studied through a lowered gaze. Sitting at his kitchen bench; unshaven, wearing an old t-shirt, wet hair and teasing his mother. He looked glorious. Bella dunked a chunk of bread into her soup and scooped it into her mouth. Sick as she was, she felt content.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angela looked at the wall clock and then checked the cake supply in the display cabinet. To her delight the cupcakes had been selling well and she was feeling quietly confident. Alice returned to the counter with a tub of plates and cups, and Angela opened the dishwasher to help her stack them inside. It was early afternoon and they had gotten through the main rush of the day. There had been periods of stress but between them they had coped.

"All good?" Alice asked as she straightened with a slight grimace. She glanced around the store and swooped into a downward dog pose. She held the pose for three exhalations before flowing through to upward dog, and then carefully stepped back up into a standing position.

"Feel better?" Angela smiled as Alice washed her hands. Over the last few months she had gotten used to Alice and Bella's spontaneous yoga, and had started to attend a few evening classes near her apartment.

"Yeah," Alice rolled her head from side to side, "guess it's been a hard day."

"I know," Angela looked guilty, "but it'll get better."

"Not you, Ange, you're fine," Alice shook her head, "I think we just got used to it being three of us instead of two."

"I don't know how you and Bella did it," Angela admitted.

"Now that you're here, neither do I," Alice said with a tired smile. "Now how about we call our boys and tell them they're taking care of us tonight?"

"Good plan," Angela nodded.

"I thought so," Alice smiled with satisfaction.

"Hey," Angela reached for the cordless phone and handed it to Alice, "do you think Bella will be in tomorrow?"

Alice took the handset and looked thoughtful, tapping one foot as she considered Angela's question.

"How did she sound?"

"Awful," Angela replied, "croaky and she said it was just a head cold."

"I think we'd better plan for her not to be in just to be on the safe side," Alice advised, "Why do you ask?"



"I had an idea earlier, something else I could bake for the morning crowd."

"Go for it," Alice shrugged.

"Just like that?" Angela wiped her suddenly clammy hands against her jeans.

"Why not? Bella put her faith in you, how about you try doing the same thing?" Alice began to dial.

"If you say so," Angela nodded. She was thinking fast now, wondering how many to make, but her attention was caught by Alice's dialling. "Who are you calling?"

"Jasper voicemail at work, he'll be in class now," Alice replied.

Angela leaned against the counter and folded her arms watching as Alice cooed a brief message into the phone about getting dinner that evening.

Alice disconnected the call when she had finished and handed the phone over to Angela who was still watching her with a quiet smile.

"What?" Alice said and when Angela said nothing she looked down at herself. "Do I have something on me?" she touched her hair, "something in my teeth?"

"Uh-uh," Angela shook her head. "So," she went on in a casual tone, "you called Jasper at work."

"Yeah," Alice gave her a blank look. "What about it?"

"And you knew his schedule," Angela ticked the facts off on her fingers, "you knew his extension to get his voicemail."

"Right," Alice nodded slowly.

"He has a key to your apartment, you have a key to his," Angela went on.

Alice bit her lip and waited, but all Angela did was raise an eyebrow at her and then began to dial.

"What?" Alice said, "Ange, *what?*"

"Just sayin'," Angela shrugged as she listened to the phone.

"You haven't said anything," Alice protested.

"Haven't I?" Angela said, and then, "Hey, Ben-,"

Alice picked up a damp cloth and began to wipe down the counter as Angela spoke to Ben, making plans, joking and exchanging easy warm endearments. By the time Angela got off the phone her expression was tranquil.

"You two sound really good," Alice commented as she flicked out the cloth and rinsed it under cold water before writing it out and hanging it on a rack to dry.

"We don't sound any different to you and Jasper," Angela commented as she set the handset back in its holder and began to head into the kitchen. After a moment's thought she opened the refrigerator and checked the contents before flicking on the industrial oven. What the hell, she'd try out her idea.

"You really think so?"

Looking up she saw that Alice had followed her and stood leaning against the kitchen doorway, her expression uncertain.

"Sure," she smiled, "Now, what do you think about a breakfast muffin?"

Alice grinned and any introspectiveness for the afternoon dissipated in the wake of her natural curiosity. "I think you'd better tell me more."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Not even a hint?" Bella wheedled from her position on the sofa.

"Nope," Edward called over his shoulder as he walked back into the kitchen to get her some more juice.

"How about just a little taste?" she tried again.

"Give it up, Swan," Edward replied as he reappeared and set the glass down on the table in front of her, "you're just doing to have to wait until we're ready for dinner."

Esme had stayed and talked over a cup of coffee as Edward and Bella finished their lunch and then had gone on her way. They had stood in the doorway to wave her off, Edward's arm around Bella's waist as Esme waved to them as the elevator doors closed. Edward had led Bella back inside and gotten her comfortable on the sofa.

"I feel much better than this morning," Bella said, "maybe I could just go into the store for an hour to-", she stopped when she saw the look on Edward's face and subsided. "Maybe not," she amended.

"You're right, you're not a good patient at all are you," Edward observed.

"No," she said, giving him one of her little guilty smiles that he loved, "but Emmett is even worse."

"Oh really?" Edward sat down beside her and pulled her into his arms.

"Really," she said snuggling against him.

"Well if he's gets sick I'm not cuddling *him*," Edward stated. He settled her in his arms and reached for the remote to see what was on the movie channel.

Bella leaned against him and gazed at the screen. "You know," she said at last, "this is really nice."

"What is?" Edward said in an absent minded tone as he scrolled through the list of movies available.

"Being self-employed," Bella replied. "I mean, it's stressful but being able to take a day like this without thinking about a boss, it's-," she shot him a look, "maybe you don't know what I'm talking about."

"We go about it differently but I know what you mean," Edward said, "here's one, have you seen *The Hangover*?"

"No," Bella's attention returned to the screen, "but I've heard good things about it."

"Done," Edward selected the movie and they both settled back to watch.

They were both chuckling at the movie an hour later when the words woke up and stirred in Edward's mind. He had pushed them aside for a few hours but now they were back and wanting attention.

"A tiger in the bathroom?" Bella was giggling now. She had eased herself down so that she was lying on the sofa with her head in his lap.

Edward leaned his head on the backrest and closed his eyes as he willed the words to go away, but it was no good. Another wellspring had been tapped and the words would go on and on until he could silence them on the screen. He couldn't afford to lose them now, not when he was so close. He leaned forward; brushing Bella's hair aside from her ear.

"Sweetheart," he began in an apologetic tone, "I need to get some work done."

Bella rolled onto her back and gazed up at him. "You gotta write?" When he nodded, she got up into a sitting position and gestured at the TV screen. "We can watch this later," she said as she reached for the remote.

"No it's okay," Edward answered, "leave it on, I won't be long."

"Don't you usually work with peace and quiet?" Bella asked, and when Edward hesitated she had her answer. Reaching for the remote to switch off the TV and tossed the remote onto the coffee table. "You go do what you gotta do and I'll have a nap or something."

"I don't be long," Edward repeated as he gave her a soft kiss.

"No problem," Bella grinned. She got up and made her way into the bedroom.

"You don't have to leave the room," Edward protested as he stood beside his desk.

Bella paused in the doorway and smiled again. "Come get me when you're done," she invited.

Edward took a few paces away from his desk so that he could watch as Bella shucked off her yoga pants and crawled into the bed. She seemed comfortable enough with the situation; and yet he paused before taking a seat at his desk and opening the manuscript file on the laptop. He sat there for a moment with his fingers poised on the keyboard and then began to type; slowly at first and then with increasing speed.

Bella cocked her head in the bedroom listening to him typing and then turned her attention back to the magazine. She felt rested enough and she had flicked through most of it already. Edward had plenty of books in the living room but she was reluctant to intrude; especially when she had only just gotten into bed. Rolling onto her back she stared up at the ceiling and huffed out a quiet breath. She was in the middle of reading a really good book but it was back at her apartment. Rolling back over she leaned over the side of the bed and picked up the discarded magazine, flicking through the pages with a desultory hand after a quick glance at the clock. Edward had said he wouldn't be long.

An hour later Bella closed the magazine with a soft yawn. She had read articles about politics, the economic situation in Iceland, a Proust questionnaire, she had even re-read the puff piece about the latest Hollywood sensation, and she could hear that Edward was still typing. She leaned over the side of the bed again and peered around for her bag that she had left at the foot of the bedside table. Retrieving her ipod she put in her earbuds and scrolled through until she'd found the meditation podcast. Getting comfortable once more she closed her eyes and left the gentle voice guide her away.

At his desk Edward kept typing, and the words kept coming.

## **Ch22 Black Holes & Invisible Girls**

Something had awoken her; Bella opened her eyes and saw that the room was dark. The mattress dipped again and she turned her head to see Edward easing himself into bed.

"Sorry," Edward whispered as he moved closer to curl his body around hers, "I didn't mean to wake you."

"What time is it?" she asked in a drowsy voice as she shifted back a little and lifted an arm so that Edward to slide a hand around her waist and pull her closer still. At some stage during sleep her ear-buds had come loose, and she fished about in the bed to pull them out and stuffed them under her pillow.

"Sometime after two," Edward admitted after a careful pause.

Bella rolled over so that they were face-to-face. "You wrote for that long?"

"I didn't mean to, but the words kept coming," Edward apologised, leaning forward to give her a soft kiss and then rested his forehead against hers.

He hadn't meant to work for so long. When at last he had leaned back in his chair and realised his back felt stiff he had looked at the time and realised he had left Bella alone all evening. Shutting everything down for the

night he had made his way into the bedroom to see Bella fast asleep with a discarded magazine on the floor beside the bed.

Bella gave a sleepy hum of pleasure and tucked her head under his chin as she fisted his shirt in one hand, listening to the steady thump of his heart. She could smell the slight dampness of his skin and realised that he had showered before joining her.

"I'm sorry," Edward kissed the top of her head, "I really didn't think-,"

"S'okay," Bella mumbled as she began to slip back into sleep, "but we're going to have to do something ... about-,"

The room was quiet and still while Edward waited.

"Something about what?" he prompted in a whisper, but his only answer was Bella's steady breathing. Moving carefully so as not to disturb her again he settled his arm around her waist and stared sightlessly into the darkened room wondering what she had been about to say before sleep claimed him too.

When Edward woke up the next morning it was to the steady swish of turning pages. Cracking open an eye, he saw Bella sitting propped up against her pillows with a comic book on her knees. The bedside lamp was on, giving her face a golden hue as she read. Her face was intent as she read and so it took a few minutes before she realised that Edward was lying awake beside her.

"Hey," he smiled.

"Hey," she answered, carefully leaning down to give him a kiss.

"What time is it?" he asked as he rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hand. His voice sounded raspy with sleep.

"Sorry," now it was Bella's turn to sound guilty, "my body clock is still on work time, so it's a little before six."

Edward groaned and rolled towards her so that he could snuggle his head on her lap. Bella held the comic book out of the way until he was comfortable and then rested it on his shoulder.

"What are you reading?" he mumbled into the covers as he snaked an arm around her hips. He could feel the warmth of her thighs and his body reacted accordingly.

"New Mutants," Bella replied as she went back to her reading, "I haven't read these in years and I found some on one of your bookshelves when I was up earlier."

"They're good," Edward mumbled again. His eyes felt heavy and he chuffed out a content sigh as Bella began to stroke his hair while she read. He woke some time later when Bella shifted and lifted his head to see her regarding him apologetically.

"I have to get up," she whispered, "gotta get to work."

Edward frowned at this. He'd liked having her with him yesterday and wanted to make it up to her for leaving her to her own devices all evening. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay, maybe a little tired," she answered after a quick self inventory, "but much better than I was."

"Stay another day," Edward said as he dropped his head back onto her lap and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to hide his grin as Bella gave a gurgle of laughter.

"Easy for you to say," she protested, "but you know the drill, I own the store, I run the store."

"You've got backup," he rejoined, hooking her legs with one of his and holding her tight, "and you don't want to force yourself back to work too soon or you'll just burn out again."

"Mmph," Bella snorted although she had to admit Edward's argument had a certain amount of merit. "How about I go in and see how I'm feeling?"

"You'll get caught up and then you'll be exhausted by the end of the day."

"Maybe," Bella nodded, "but I've got to go in all the same." She squirmed and wriggled until Edward released her with a mournful sigh. Struggling out of bed she swayed for a moment and almost fell back onto the mattress before she righted herself and walked into the bathroom with a determined air. Edward watched her go, thinking of the tight ache in his groin and sighed again before pulling her pillow to his face and burrowing against it as he breathed in her scent. The shower started and Edward lay listening to the sound of the water running until he drifted back into a light doze. The next time he opened his eyes Bella was standing in front of his wardrobe looking at his shirts in thoughtful consideration.

"Something you need?" he asked, admiring the lace covered swell of Bella's breasts as she turned towards his voice.

"A shirt," she commented, "I just need a fresh one and I've just realised I need to do laundry."

"Something you could do if you weren't going into work today," Edward commented from the bed as he rolled onto one side and propped his head on his hand.

Bella shook her head and kept searching until she found what looked to be an old college shirt. She tweaked the sleeve enough to pull the shirt out slightly and without looking back asked, "May I?" She heard the sheets rustle a little as Edward sat up to see her selection and agreed with a slight chuckle.

"No objections at all," Edward said.

Bella slipped it on over her head and seeing it fall almost to her knees began to roll and twist the excess fabric into a knot that sat in the small of her back. The sleeves were rolled up as well and then she darted back into the bathroom to check her reflection. Satisfied that she looked presentable enough she walked back into the bedroom to see Edward regarding her with the kind of bare-chested, lazy grin that could surely be the downfall of saints. Her mouth went dry.

"See something else you like?" he raised an eyebrow; he still felt tired, but not *that* tired.

"You could say that," Bella managed at last as she tried to pick up her bag and keys while at the same time finding it very hard to tear her gaze away from him. She caught her satchel strap on the third try and started to back away into the living room.

"No kiss?" Edward looked disappointed.

"I think we both know what will happen if I go anywhere near that bed, I know that look in your eye, Cullen."

"And I know that look in *your* eye, Swan," he countered.

"Maybe so," she acknowledged, "but I really do have to go in today."

"Fine," Edward sighed, and then threw back the sheet and got out of bed.

Bella's eyes were drawn to the tell-tale bulge in his pajama pants and she swallowed before resolutely turning her back and heading for the hall closet where Edward had hung their coats the previous day. She was just about to pull on her new coat when Edward appeared to help her into it. As soon as the coat was settled on her shoulders he pulled her back against his chest and held her there as he did up the buttons he could reach, and knotted the belt. Positioned as she was, she could feel his arousal against the small of her back and the warm puffs of his breath against her neck. She closed her eyes and chanted *duty ... responsibility*.

"Have you eaten?" he asked as he gently propelled her around to face him.

"I'll have something at the store," she temporised, watching as a small line appeared between his eyebrows.  
"Don't fuss so, I'll be fine."

"If you're sure," he said trying to keep the doubt out of his voice.

"If I feel unwell I'll leave," Bella offered as she lifted the strap of her satchel over her head so that it crossed her body and rested against one hip.

"And you'll call?" Edward pressed.

"I'll call," she soothed as she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. Now that she was bundled up for work she felt safe enough to hug him, although the feel of his warm bare skin beneath her fingertips had her closing her eyes and reminding herself about duty once more.

"Mmm," Edward snuffed her neck, "you smell so good."

"So do you," Bella countered as she rubbed her cheek against his chest, "but I've *got* to go."

"Heartbreaker," Edward sighed as she turned towards the door.

"Oh hush," she smiled and offered herself up for another kiss before she stepped through the door and closed it behind her.

After she had gone Edward leaned against the heavy wooden door for a moment before strolling back to bed, yawning and scratching his hair as he went. The bed seemed bigger than ever now that Bella wasn't in it, but he pulled her pillow to his chest and after taking a few deep breaths, went back to sleep.

Bella waited until the elevator doors had closed before slumping against the rear wall and puffing out a loud sigh. Edward had looked so *good* and had smelled even better. There was something about his natural musky smell that her body responded to every single time. Watching the floor numbers count down she dug in her coat pockets and drew out the gloves that Edward had given her, pulling them on and settling her scarf around her neck. The doors opened with a soft chime and she strode across the foyer and out into the grey morning.

There were already people on the street making their way to work or wherever, rugged up in greys and blacks for the most part. For a moment she felt conspicuous in her warm red coat but when a passing woman eyed it and gave Bella a quick nod of approval she felt flattered and pleased all at once.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Babe," Jasper yawned as he stood aside and waited for her to lock the door, "all I'm sayin' is that you need to be able to take a compliment now and then."

"And what I'm saying is that they *don't* sound like compliments, it feels like you're putting pressure on me," she retorted. She stood regarding him with frustration until Jasper put his arm around her shoulder and they began to walk down the hallway towards the stairs.

"All I said was that you should sell your creations somewhere; get a stand at the markets when the weather's better or talk to some stores about selling for you."

"Maybe," Alice floundered a little at this point, jiggling her keys before stuffing them into her bag. It was one thing to nurse the secret dream herself, and quite another to have Jasper give voice to it.

"You should," Jasper urged her, "everyone loves what you make, why not try?" He removed his arm from her shoulders and manoeuvred around her so that as they went down the stairs she could run her hand down the balustrade, her other hand in Jasper's as he kept a firm grip. She had joked in passing a few weeks prior that she had slipped and fallen down the last few stairs, badly bruising her rump. Since then Jasper had silently ensured that whenever he was there she had support on either side.

Once outside they paused to tug on gloves before taking each other's hand and beginning the walk through Nolita. For the first block they were quite for the most part as they started to think about the work day ahead.

"Well?" Jasper asked as they crossed the street.

"Well what?" Alice replied.

"Why don't you give it a try?"



Alice shrugged and mumbled into the thick folds of her woollen scarf.

"Sorry, what was that?" Jasper ducked his head to catch her eye.

"I said," Alice wriggled her chin against the scarf to get her mouth clear, "what if I fail?"

"A valid concern," Jasper said, "but you're forgetting something."

"What's that?"

"What if you succeed?" Jasper wagged a roguishly at her making her laugh, and Alice walked on with a lighter heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angela rounded the corner and squinted ahead, her eyes widening in disbelief. There was no-one waiting. She'd done it; she'd managed to get the first one there. She picked up her pace but then huffed with amused disappointment when she saw a small figure sprinting along the pavement from the other direction. By the time Angela had reached the store Alice had gotten her breath back and was endeavouring to act casual.

"Morning, Boss," Alice said from her casual stance against the wall.

"Nice try, Alice, but I saw you *running* not a moment ago," Angela laughed as she got out the keys and unlocked the security grill.

"Running? Moi?" Alice gave her a wide-eyed look before giving up and helping Angela with the grill. "Jasper and I got to talking this morning and it made me a little late."

"Talking?" Angela raised an eyebrow at this as she unlocked the main door and pushed it open.

"Yes," Alice pursed her lips and gave a prim nod, "*talking*."

"If you say so," Angela said as she waved for Alice to enter the store, "you were talking."

"Shut up, Boss, and make me coffee," Alice retorted.

The two women hung up their coats and bags and were waiting for the coffee machine to warm up when Bella arrived, flushed but pleased to be back.

"Hey," Alice said in mild surprise, "I wasn't sure if we'd be seeing you today."

"Oh I can feel the love," Bella grinned as she good naturedly nudged Alice with her hip as she walked past her into the kitchen.

"You know what I mean," Alice called after her, "How are you feeling, Boss?"

"I'll live," Bella called back. Her coat was carefully hung up and she grabbed at her apron and tied it on as she walked out into the front of the store. "How was yesterday?"

Alice and Angela glanced at each other and shrugged.

"Fine," Angela said, "no problems."

"Really?" Bella was surprised.

"What, you didn't think we could handle it?" Alice stepped aside from the coffee machine and gave Bella a meaningful look as she slid three empty cups across the counter.

"Not that," Bella corrected her as she stepped up to the machine and slipped into the routine of making the morning coffee, "but I feel bad about not coming in."

"Sometimes the best way to learn is under pressure," Angela shrugged. "I won't lie, I was terrified for a while there but we managed okay."

Angela leaned back against the workbench and watched Bella make the coffee with practised ease. She had been exhausted when she had arrived home the night before, but Ben had been pre-warned and had looked after her all evening, and the next morning, now that she thought about it with a slight flush. The day had certainly been tiring but she had felt a rush of pride on her way home, that she had risen to the challenge so well. Still, it was reassuring to have Bella back.

"Well," Bella emptied the coffee filter with a few sharp bangs and gave it a quick rinse before accepting the jug of milk that Alice passed her and began to steam it, "as long as you were okay. How was business?"

"Good, no different really," Alice replied, "Ange here made some *Charlie's Favourites* and the day went well."

"Good to hear," Bella smiled with relief.

"Everything's cashed up and in the safe out back," Angela added, "so you can check it later before you do the bank drop."

"Sure," Bella answered, "but for now-," she slid two cups towards the waiting women, "what I'm really wanting to know is-," she arched an eyebrow at Alice who reached for her chalk.

"Oh I'm well ahead of you on that one," Alice retorted. She sipped at her coffee and leaned against the counter, looking pleased with herself.

"Okay," Bella tasted her coffee. Edward was right, her coffee was much nicer than the stuff he had at home. She made a mental note to take a bag home for him soon. "Don't let me rush you."

"By the way, Boss," Angela interrupted with a slight smile, "that's a ... uh ... nice shirt you've got on there."

"What, this?" Bella glanced down at herself, "it's one of-,"

"Edward's, we know," Alice chimed in.

Bella looked from Alice to Angela and then back again. "How did you know that?"

"Likes to mark his territory does he?" Angela went on, her smile getting bigger.

"Huh? I don't know, it's just a shirt I grabbed from his wardrobe this morning, why?" Bella twisted her neck to see if there was any printing on the back. Angela stepped towards her and ran a finger along the bold letters that were printed across the shoulder blades.

"Cullen," Angela read aloud, "guess it's a shirt from his college days."

"You're kidding," Bella turned and gaped at her, "so I'm walking around branded?"

"Yup," Angela nodded, "he didn't say anything?"

"Not as much," Bella admitted as she remembered Edward's knowing smile. "I guess he didn't have to."

"He knew you'd find out soon enough," Angela grinned, "I think it looks cute."

Alice snickered until Bella cleared her throat and nodded at the chalkboard.

"Impatient are we?" Alice said as she pick up the chalk and walked over towards the door to pick up the chalkboard where she'd left it in its usual place beside the door. Laying it down on a nearby table and wrote quickly and added a few flourishes when she was done. Giving a nod of satisfaction she carried it over to the counter to show Bella and Angela who were finishing their coffee.

*If you reach for the stars your lungs will collapse from lack of oxygen.*

Bella narrowed her eyes and looked thoughtful and then her expression cleared. "Got it," she said as she snapped her fingers, "Alice, are you going easy on me?"

"No," Alice protested, "I thought I was being clever, damn," she went on as she turned to carry the chalkboard outside to be hung up, "I'll get you one day."

"Ha," Bella retorted as she went into the kitchen to start baking.

Angela smiled and shook her head at the friendly rivalry between the two women as she collected the empty cups and put them in the dishwasher. Alice returned from outside looking happy and stopped to straighten up the magazines and books before making her way back behind the counter.

"What's on?" she asked Angela as she began filling the water jugs.

"I'll do some bagels and wraps, can you check the tables?"

"Sure," Alice nodded at Angela's suggestion and when the jugs were filled and set out she grabbed the plastic tub that held the sugar and sweetener sachets and began her rounds. The mixer started up in the kitchen as the store became a hive of activity. When the first batch of cupcakes was in the oven Bella reappeared wiping her hands on a dishcloth before stopping at the cd player and opening the cd folder that sat beside it. She leafed through it and selected a disc which was inserted and set to play and then returned to the kitchen. The cd player whirled to life and then the store was filled with the sound of steady guitar strumming as the mellow voice of Feist filtered out of the speakers. Alice paused at what she was doing and straightened up as she listened to the lyrics.

*1, 2, 3, 4 tell me that you love me more, sleepless long nights, that's what my youth was for, oh teenage hopes are alive at your door, left you with nothing but they want some more. Oh changing your heart, oh you know who you are.*

The steady beat of the music swirled around her and Jasper's words came back to her again. Perhaps he had a point. It was exciting to consider but she wished she had a crystal ball so that she could be sure of the outcome. She shook her head at the fanciful notion; too bad life just didn't work that way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward leaned back in his chair and scrubbed at his face with his hands. After Bella had left he thought he would be able to get back to sleep but he was wrong. The smell of her had wrapped around him and all he could think about was her absence. When Bella was with him and the apartment was quiet it felt peaceful. Now the silence felt oppressive. Sitting up with a grumble he threw off the covers and got up to get into his running gear. Maybe he'd catch up on some sleep later. When he reached street level and started jogging the book was back on his mind. He was reaching the conclusion, he was sure of it now and then it would be time for Marcus to take over. That was the part that Edward always found the hardest, putting his months of hard work into someone else's hands.

By the time he reached the park he had warmed up and his breath frosted on the cold morning air as he made his way along his usual route. There were fewer joggers than usual and it seemed that people were perhaps rethinking their winter exercise routines. Edward considered this as he ran, wondering if he ought to invest in a treadmill. He hadn't realised how sedentary his life had become until Jasper had gotten him jogging again and now he felt the need to do more. When the book was finished he was going to have to find something else to do, of that he was certain. The days were going to be long if he had nothing to do while Bella was at work. Edward grunted to himself at this. He knew he was more than capable of being a moody bastard, which had been fine while he was single but now there was someone else to consider.

He had progressed from feeling pleasantly warmed up to feeling his leg muscles burning and he saw the park entrance ahead with a sense of relief. For a moment he considered leaving his cool down stretches until he got home but remembered the soreness he had experienced the last time he had thought he could get away without them. Not for the first time he wished he had the powers of recovery he'd enjoyed when he was 18. Sighing he paused and stretched until his heart rate had slowed, and then began to walk back home. He wondered how Bella was feeling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella set down the baking tray and turned to close the oven door, blinking as the rush of warm air hit her face. Turned back to the bench she surveyed the cupcakes that sat cooling, pressing a cautious finger against a

couple of them and nodding to in satisfaction as they sprang back. These cupcakes were going to be a little more work than she usually did but Alice's quote had been too good to resist. Bella went to the storage shelves and selected a large jar of her favourite raspberry jam that was then spooned into a bowl and stirred until smooth. Setting the bowl aside, Bella started to make the frosting to match, humming to herself as she walked, pausing occasionally to yawn against the back of her hand. It felt good to be back in the store but she envied Edward his sleep in.

By the time she carried the finished cupcakes out towards the display case she had started to feel better, and nodded gratefully when Angela held up an empty cup in silent query.

"Alice," she called as she set the tray into the counter, "c'mon girl."

"Be right there," Alice called back as she delivered a coffee to a waiting customer. She returned promptly wiping her hands against her jeans and grabbed her chalk. "Okay, shoot."

"Black Hole Cupcakes," Bella announced as Alice scribbled, "Chocolate cupcakes with a rich, raspberry centre and dark chocolate frosting."

"Oh god," Angela whimpered as she looked at them, "I don't think I'm strong enough."

Bella laughed and reached back into the cabinet to pick up a cupcake and hand it to Angela. "Don't torture yourself, just bite into it carefully."

Angela peeled off the wax paper cup with all the reverence the cupcake deserved and took a cautious bite, rolling her eyes appreciatively as the raspberry jam and chocolate cake oozed into her mouth. Bella and Alice both watched her reaction.

"Good?" Bella said at last.

"Mmmmp," Angela nodded.

"She likes it," Bella commented in satisfaction, turning around just in time to see Alice swipe one.

"What?" Alice said in a defensive tone as she picked the raspberry garnish off the top and popped it into her mouth, "It's only fair."

"I'm not judging," Bella said holding her hands up in surrender, "I had one in the kitchen." She regarded the two women as they both ate and then walked over to the coffee machine to get another coffee ready.

"You're having another one already?" Alice asked in between mouthfuls.

"I'm still tired," Bella commented as she got out the milk.

"You know the caffeine doesn't kick in for at least an hour, anything you feel at the time is just a placebo effect," Angela commented as she licked her fingers clean of jam and crumbs.

"Don't spoil the magic," Bella swatted at her, "I need it." Before she could stop it she yawned again, ducking her head towards her shoulder to try to hide it.

"So just out of curiosity, Boss," Alice asked in a mild voice, "what the hell are you doing here if you're still tired?"

"I'll be okay," Bella shook her head and blinked before returning her concentration to the coffee that was filtering into the cups.

"Right," Alice shook her head, "so if you're feeling that great, how come you look like shit?"

"Hey," Bella objected, "that's a bit harsh."

"Sorry," Alice held up her hands in a placatory gesture, "I'm just saying that you look exhausted, and one day off isn't going to cut it. Come on, Boss," Alice walked towards her and gave Bella a hug, "You haven't had a break since I've been here. Don't you think it's about time you started to be a bit gentle with yourself?"

"If you won't, I'm sure Edward will," Angela chimed in when Bella paused.

"Are you guys trying to get rid of me?" Bella joked, feeling self-conscious.

"Kinda," Angela shrugged, "but it's for your own good."

"Yeah," Alice added, "I'd hate to have to call Emmett."

Bella whipped her head around to glare at the smaller woman. "You wouldn't," she accused.

"Wouldn't I?" Alice matched Bella stare for stare. Bella broke her gaze first.

Bella watched the coffee drizzle into the cups as she steamed the milk and sighed quietly to herself. Perhaps the two women had a point. Emmett had certainly been pushing her to hire some additional help and take some time off. The arrival of Angela had been a welcome boon to the business but Bella had still found it very difficult to step away from the store that she had steadily built up from scratch. Other employees had come and gone but Alice had stayed with her for over two years now, and Angela provided just the kind of stability that Bella had been looking for. Of course, being single for the most part had made it easy to pour all of her energy into the store. She had no-one else making demands on her time and there was no need to compromise. The store was also a very convenient excuse when people wondered aloud why she wasn't dating. And then along came Edward.

Bella poured the milk into the cups and topped them off with some froth. A customer approached the counter and she picked up her cup and stepped away as Angela stepped forward with a bright smile. Sipping at her coffee Bella retreated into the kitchen still deep in thought. When the customers had been dealt with Angela followed Bella into the kitchen.

"So, Boss, what's it gonna be?" she asked as she folded her arms and leaned against the doorway.

Bella had pulled herself up to sit on the bench and sat sipping at her coffee, legs crossed at the ankles as she swung them back and forth, lost in thought.

"I dunno," Bella shrugged.

"Okay, I'll make this simple for you," Angela replied, "what do you want to do right now?"

"Um," Bella considered the question, "Well I guess I ought to-," she broke off as Angela shook her head.

"Not what you think you should do, what do you *want*?"

Bella stared into her cup for a long time and then huffed out a long sigh. She thought some more, swinging her ankles and feeling like a lost child before she looked up at Angela.

"I think I want to go home."

"Then go," Angela nodded.

"Just like that?" Bella blinked.

"You're the boss," Angela said, "and you know Alice and I will be fine. If we need something we'll call you."

Bella stared into her cup again and then swigged back her coffee.

"It's not like you're going to be doing this every day," Angela reasoned, "you're not 100%, so why don't you just give yourself a bit of time so that you can get better?" When Bella said nothing, Angela grinned and continued. "Go on, get outta here before I change my mind."

Bella looked up at this and grinned. "Just listen to you, one day in charge and now you're kicking me out."

"I can't argue," Angela nodded, "I feel drunk with power."

Alice peered around the doorway and looked at Angela. "Have you told her to go yet?"

"Just did," Angela replied as she stepped towards Bella and took the now-empty cup.

Bella slid down off the bench and began to untie her apron. Sensing movement outside Alice looked out into the store and then gestured to Angela.

"Boss, we're on," she nodded her head towards the front.

"Coming," Angela said and then moved toward to give Bella a quick hug. "We'll be fine. You go home and take a nap, or get a cuddle from your boy. Do whatever it takes to feel better and we'll see you tomorrow."

Bella looked past Angela out to the customers at the counter. "Maybe I could help out first with-,"

"Bella, go. I'm sure there's other things you could be doing."

Gathering her things, Bella pulled on her coat and made her way towards the front of the store. Pausing at the door she looked back at the counter; Alice and Angela looked like they had everything under control. She stepped outside and wrapped her scarf around her neck and began to walk home wondering what Edward was doing, resolving to call him later.

Bella let herself into the apartment, hung up her keys and then dropped her bag onto the armchair as she surveyed the room. It felt good to be back in her own home but compared to the space and light at Edward's everything seemed to be a little darker and smaller. The air was still and so she lit her aromatherapy lamp and added some drops of orange oil and ginger to scent the room. Everything around her was just as she liked it, and yet she was alone. Years of being alone – or keeping herself alone if she was going to be honest – had been just what she had wanted. Now she found herself missing Edward's companionship. Sighing, she walked into the bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed feeling listless. She wanted to call Edward but felt silly for thinking about it. After all, she had only left his apartment a few hours ago. Falling backwards she stared up at the ceiling wondering what Edward was doing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward stashed the dry cleaning ticket in his wallet stepping aside with a polite smile to allow another customer into the store. A gust of cold air whistled down the street making him tug up his coat collar and stuff his hands into his pockets as he walked. A flash of colour and movement caught his eye. Glancing across the street he saw a woman flicking a long red scarf around her neck. The colour made him think of Bella and he wondered how she was feeling. Edward smiled and tucked his chin into his chest as he kept walking. After his run he had reviewed the previous night's work before calling a very surprised Marcus and telling him to expect the completed manuscript within the week. The rest of his morning had been spent running a few errands and now he found himself with a free afternoon. He'd go see his girl. As he crossed the street he felt his phone vibrate in his back pocket and fished it out. Tapping the screen he scanned the message and gave a short laugh before he turned around and broke into a light jog.

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Bella was curled up on the sofa dividing her attention between the magazine on her lap and the chat show on television when she heard the intercom buzz. Pushing the magazine aside she sat up and half walked, half skipped towards the door, hoping that it would be Edward.

"Hello?"

"It's me," Edward's voice crackled through the speaker.

"It's open," Bella hit the button and then unlocked her door before returning to the sofa. She didn't bother with the magazine now; she sat looking at the door unable to hide the silly grin that was spreading across her face. There was the rapid shuffle of feet on the stairs and then the door was pushed open to reveal a flushed and slightly out-of-breath Edward.

"That was fast," she marvelled as he shrugged out of his coat and took off his scarf before making his way over to the sofa.



"I was already downtown," Edward explained as he put his hands on the arm of the sofa and leaned over to give her a long kiss, "so when I got your message I came straight over."

He sat down beside her and pulled her to him, smiling when he realised she was still wearing his shirt. Bella had changed her jeans for a pair of leggings and now she wriggled around to sit on his lap.

"I felt kinda stupid sending that message," Bella admitted as she curled a hand around the nape of Edward's neck.

"Why's that?" Edward was running his hand up Bella's thigh to hold her closer to him, their heads getting closer as they spoke.

"Well," she nipped at his bottom lip, "I was at your place this morning, being apart for just a few hours shouldn't leave me acting like a damn teenager."

"Meh," Edward shrugged.

"Meh?" Bella gave him an incredulous look, "Meh, said the *writer*?"

"Hey," Edward dug his fingers into her sides where he knew she was ticklish to make her squirm, "that's sass, are you sassin' me?"

"Maybe a little," Bella managed as she tried to evade his hands without much success.

"Right then, I guess I'll have to see what we can do about that," Edward growled, grinning as he watched the colour rise in Bella's face while she gasped and squirmed again. She was torturing him as well; the movement on his lap was causing the usual reaction. He knew she had noticed when she stopped moving and regarded him with a slow smile. He raised one of his hands and gently traced the slight smudges beneath her eyes. "How are you feeling?" he asked in a soft voice.

"Tired, but I'll live," she said closing her eyes and leaning into his touch he trailed his fingers down her cheek and onto her neck. "Having yesterday off was actually kinda good," she cracked an eye open to look at Edward, "but don't tell them I said that."

"Your secret is safe with me," he assured her pulling her closer.

"Mmph," she said as she settled against him and rested her head against his chest.

Edward's stubble rasped against Bella's hair as he rubbed his chin against the top of her head in a gentle caress.

"So whatcha been doin'?" he asked.

"Nothin' much," Bella said, almost slurring the words in her relaxed state, "errands, cleaning-," she yawned, "stuff."

"Sounds exciting," Edward observed.

"I know, I'm not much fun," Bella apologised.

"You don't have to be," Edward kissed her hair, "you've been ill."

"Or just over-tired," Bella muttered. "Angela gave me a lecture this morning."

"Just Angela?"

"And Alice," Bella added. "The two of them ganged up on me which is why I'm here," she waved a hand at the TV.

"Maybe they've got a point," Edward pointed out, "it wouldn't hurt to be a bit easier on yourself."

"Any easier and I'd be in a coma," Bella scoffed, "but actually-," she considered, "it's nice being at home during the day. Kinda like skipping out on school or something."

"Did you ever do that?"

"Me? Never," Bella yawned again, "I was always the good girl, you know, the really boring one."

"Oh I don't know, they say it's the quiet ones you have to watch," Edward said in a thoughtful tone. "I bet not many of your classmates ended up in New York."

"No," Bella admitted, and Edward could feel her smile against his chest. "Most of them stayed at home and married the guys and they'd gone steady with in school."

"And you? Could you have done that?" Edward stared at the TV while he listened to Bella, curious as to her answer.

"I had a couple of boyfriends, nothing serious," Bella replied, "anyway, I left town to go to college and then-," she broke off and gave an odd little smile.

"And then what?"

"Jake," Bella admitted after a long pause. "And then there was Jake."

"Right," Edward said after a slight pause of his own.

"And look how that turned out," Bella gave a nervous laugh.

"Yeah, about that," Edward began, "have you heard from him lately?"

A small worry line appeared between Bella's eyebrows and Edward immediately regretted the question.

"I got an email from him last week," Bella focussed on Edward's shirtfront again. "He's seeing someone, it seems to be going okay."

"And are you?" Edward kept running his hand up and down Bella's thigh in a soothing gesture.

"Sure," Bella nodded but didn't lift her gaze. She was biting her lip now, a sign that she was getting uncomfortable.

"Then that's all that matters to me," Edward said as he kissed her forehead.

Bella looked up in surprise. "That's it?"

Now it was Edward's turn to shrug. "I don't see why not. You and Jake had a history, you're still friends but as long as he's not after my girl, it's all good."

Bella's shoulders shook slightly as tension she wasn't aware of carrying began to subside from her shoulders. "That simple, huh?"

"Yup," Edward slapped her rump and leered at her, smiling at her gurgle of laughter, "I'm a simple man." Kissing the side of her neck, he nuzzled her cheek and continued. "It must have been a hell of a shock though."

"Are we going to have this conversation now?" Bella gave him a careful look.

"Not if you don't want to," Edward replied. Edward kept his expression impassive. He didn't want to make her uncomfortable but his natural curiosity kept the subject niggling in his mind.

Bella leaned into his chest and stared unseeingly at the television, "I guess it was going to happen sooner or later." She sighed and closed her eyes as she gathered her thoughts and then hesitantly began to speak. "At first, when we started dating it was good," she remembered with a smile, "Jake helped me get past the shock of losing Charlie and settle back into college, we were really good for each other."

Edward gently began to stroke Bella's hair, saying nothing, just letting her speak.

"Things were okay for a couple of years, I had no idea about the struggle he was going through and then-," she paused and swallowed hard, "then we started to grow apart. Jake was acting distant and I just knew something was wrong." She nestled into Edward's chest a little more unconsciously seeking shelter. "I used to spend so much time worrying about what I'd done, thinking I'd said the wrong thing."

Edward nodded knowing she would feel the gesture, and kept stroking her hair. Bella gave a heavy sigh against his chest.

"One night we were at a party and it was if he could barely stand to be anywhere in the room with me. All my friends were having a great time and it seemed like we were the only two who weren't, so I started drinking."

"Hmmm," Edward tried to imagine Bella deliberately setting out to lose control and failed. "What happened?"

"We got into a huge fight on the way home," Bella snorted, "I guess you could say the truth came out in more ways than one. I accused him of seeing someone else, he didn't deny it, and then I wanted a name."

His shirt felt damp and he ducked his head to see Bella trying to surreptitiously wipe away a slow trickle of tears as she kept talking.

"I got a name alright; Michael. All night I'd been wondering which girl he was seeing behind my back and I couldn't have been more wrong."

"Wow," Edward began and then couldn't think of anything more to say.

"You got it," Bella agreed, "I think I was in shock for the next month."

"What did you do?" Edward pulled her closer and wasn't surprised when she grabbed his shoulders and got more comfortable. It felt like they were both clutching and reassuring one another.

"We broke up, I got tested," Bella knuckled her eyes and blinked at him owlishly. "Jake assured told me that he and Michael hadn't done anything sexual that could affect me, but by that stage I wasn't taking anything for granted."

"Natural reaction," Edward nodded. "How was Emmett?"

Bella gave a fond smile at mention of her protective sibling. "Well, he was ready to beat six types of shit out of Jake when he found out. I think they ended up going out and getting drunk to talk it out."

"Really?" Edward couldn't hide his surprise at this.

"Yeah," Bella sighed, "Jake had been good for me in his time, and Emmett wasn't going to beat him up just because he was gay." She frowned in remembered thought. "Emmett was pretty mad for a long time though and I was a mess, I don't know how Jake was, we weren't talking for a while there, but we all got through it."

"That's a lot of forgiveness," Edward ventured after he considered all that Bella had said.

"You got it," she agreed. "Jake didn't set out to hurt me, but he couldn't deny what he was. I knew he still loved me but he just couldn't see me-," she broke off and waved her hand in an entirely vague gesture, "*that way*."

Edward wrapped his arms around Bella and held her closer as she kept talking. Her voice sounded dreamlike as she spoke from the past.

"So I guess after that, I stopped dating for a long time. Alice and Emmett kept at me to put myself out there, but I just couldn't do it. I just decided that I felt safer being invisible."

Her voice trailed off and they sat together in silence for a long time. Edward tried to imagine the level of hurt and rejection on such a fundamental level and failed. Now he began to remember the way she ducked her head when complimented, and how she always reacted to his attraction to her with pleasure and surprise, and perhaps a little fear, as if she thought it was too good to last.

"Bella," Edward's throat was tight and he had to clear his throat before he continued. "You're not invisible to me."

"I know," Bella nodded, still staring at the television.

"Hey," Edward gave her a slight shake, "look at me."

Bella's gaze moved with painful slowness until she was looking into his eyes. He could see the silvery track marks of her tears on her cheeks as she stared at him in silence.

"You're not invisible to me. You never were, and you never will be."

Bella's lips curled into a slight smile; somehow he always knew what to say. She moved so suddenly Edward was surprised when she sat up and fixed him with a long stare. "And while we're on the subject you have to promise me something."

"I'm listening," Edward said, surprised by the ferocity of her expression.

"You have to tell me if you're ever seeing someone else, or if you ever *want* to. I won't go through that again."

"Okay," Edward nodded.

"Promise?"

Edward nodded again. "I promise."

"Bella," Edward said in a quiet tone, "all I see is you." He leaned forward and gave her the softest of kisses. "Only you."

Bella expression softened as Edward kept peppering her with kisses and she subsided with a laugh, kissing him back until neither of them were capable of speech at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Cat got your tongue?"

Alice was pulled out of her reverie by Jasper's soft voice and she looked up to see him regarding her over the top of his reading glasses. Tonight they were at Jasper's apartment and she had been sitting at the table twirling some hair around a finger while she stared off into space, lost in thought.

"Sorry," she offered up a sheepish grin, "I was miles away."

"I could tell when I asked you what you wanted for dinner and you didn't say anything," Jasper smiled, "that's gotta be a first."

"Mm-hmm," Alice mumbled as she glanced down at her notebook that she had covered in random sketches. Ideas were coming thick and fast this evening and she was trying to get them all down.

"Okay," Jasper hauled himself up off the sofa and tossed the paper he'd been reading onto the coffee table. "History can wait, what's going on?"

"Nothing," Alice said as she flicked the notebook over to a blank page and started to scrawl her initials over and over.

"Right," Jasper paused and glanced down at the page before giving her a sceptical look. "I'll order something."

"Do you ever cook?" Alice asked as she watched him saunter towards the phone and the collection of menus. His 501 jeans were riding low on his hips and she admired the view as he lifted one side of his t-shirt to scratch his ribs. He moved with the kind of careless grace that she envied.

"I've been known to," Jasper nodded, "I'll even cook for you some day."

"Really?" that had Alice putting her pencil down and regarding Jasper with amazement. "And when's that going to happen?"

"When we're celebrating," Jasper replied as he sorted through menus and held one up with a quizzical air. "Tempura?"

"Why not," Alice waved in agreement. "Celebrating what?"

"Guess we'll have to wait and find out," Jasper replied, stopping to drop a kiss on the end of her nose as he carried the phone back to the sofa.

It was too much. Alice got up from the table and followed Jasper, sitting back patiently while he placed an order, leaning forward to put in a request and smiling when he nodded and ordered extra pickled ginger before she could say anything. As soon as he got off the phone she pounced. "What? Celebrate what?" she began to tickle him, giggling as Jasper tucked his legs up into his chest in a bid to fend her off.

"Celebrating you, idiot," he gasped before she let him go.

"Huh?" Alice was shocked into stillness. "What am I going to be doing?"

"What we talked about this morning," Jasper replied, pushing his hair out of his eyes and giving her a look of fond exasperation. "You can pretend you've forgotten about it all you want, but I haven't."

"Well," Alice huffed and began to temporise, "there's a lot to consider and-,"

"And nothing," Jasper interrupted, "you've gotta take a chance on yourself now and then, Sweetheart."

Alice stared at Jasper in amazement. "I wish," she said at last, "that I could see myself the way you do."

Jasper stared back at her for a long moment and then pushed his glasses back up his nose. "You'll need a prescription," he drawled.

Alice gave a hoot of laughter that turned into a shriek when Jasper lunged forward to push her back against the sofa cushions and began to tickle her in retaliation. Gasping with laughter she looked at Jasper's broad smile as he pouted at her in mock sympathy while she writhed and squirmed in a futile bid to get away. She felt as if she was seeing clearly for the first time in her life.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Find anything?" Edward appeared at Bella's shoulder and put a hand on either side of her hips, peering over her shoulder as she chopped some bacon.

"Enough for a Spanish omelette," Bella replied turning her head for a quick kiss before she returned her attention back to the ingredients.

"Nice," Edward said as he nuzzled her neck for another kiss.

"What, the omelette or my neck?" Bella smiled.

"Um, the middle one," Edward muttered as he nibbled her earlobe.

"Good choice," Bella smiled.

Edward sighed and rested his chin on her shoulder, softly grinding his hips against her bottom.

"Thank god you don't do that in the store," Bella said through her smile, "I'd never get anything done." She could feel Edward's lips curl into a tomcat grin against her neck. "Back up there, Babe, I've got to finish this."

"Woman," Edward sighed as he released her, "you've got nerves of steel."

"I wouldn't say that," Bella said, moistening her lips with her tongue as she poured the egg mix into the pan and waiting a moment before adding the other ingredients. She shot a sidelong look at Edward and cleared her throat. If he kept looking at her like that dinner was going to be a burnt offering at best.

Edward strolled back into the living room and occupied himself by checking out Bella's bookshelves. They books were in no apparent order that he could discern, and he found himself smiling as he saw Tudor history interspersed with travel, Spanish poetry beside Tolkein, even true crime beside ... he leaned in closer and turned his head to read the narrow spine.

"*The Teach Your Chicken How to Fly Training Manual*," he read aloud slowly, stepping back and shaking his head. "Bells," he called towards the kitchen, "this chicken book here-,"

"It's from an art exhibition, keep looking, there are some good book titles in that lot."

Grinning he stepped up to the shelves wondering what he was going to find next. Bella didn't disappoint; *How to be a Man*, *Test Your Cat's Creative Intelligence* and bizarrely, *He Died With a Felafel in His Hand*. Laughing now, Edward saw another one *The Tasmanian Babes Fiasco* beside literary essays and short story anthologies. Thinking about his own bookshelves he suddenly felt as if they were lacking, and resolved to get more of his comic books out of storage. Unable to resist, he took down the chicken training manual and began to idly flick through its pages. By the time Bella appeared with a bowl of salad and some plates he was totally absorbed.

"Dinner," Bella announced as she set down the bowl and plates before returning to the kitchen to get the omelette.

"M-kay," Edward murmured, giving the occasional grunt of amusement while he read.

"Find something you like?" Bella said as she sat down.

"Where the hell do you find these?" Edward looked up, his face bright with curiosity.

"Secondhand bookstores, friends, Bear," Bella shrugged.

Edward looked at her bookshelves again. If this was the kind of variety that she liked then no wonder she had been hard pressed to find something to read at his place. An idea niggled at him but he set it aside to discuss later.

"I've gotta go book shopping with you sometime," Edward commented as he put the book aside with slight reluctance and then noticed dinner. "Wow," he nodded at the dinner offerings, "for someone cooking on the fly that looks fantastic."

"Wait until you've tried it," Bella cautioned.

"It'll be great," Edward said as he poised his fork over his plate, and it was.

Bella was relegated to the sofa after dinner while Edward cleared everything away and so she flicked through the cable channels until she found something she wanted to watch. Stretching out on the sofa she stuffed a plump cushion behind her head and gazed at the screen. She could hear Edward moving around in the kitchen and she smiled to herself as she heard him opening various cupboards, muttering quietly as he worked out what went where. He appeared just as the commercial break came to an end.

"What's on?" he asked as he sank down with a sigh and hauled Bella against him.

"*True Blood*," Bella replied as she wrapped an arm around him.

"Which is?" Edward raised an eyebrow at her.

"Vampire porn," Bella replied as she gave him a quick wink.

"You're kidding, right?" Edward looked at her in disbelief as the twangy country theme song started. The room was silent for a few minutes. "Jesus," Edward breathed, "where the hell did you find this?"



"HBO," Bella replied, "now shut up and watch."

"Right," Edward said, his gaze not moving from the screen, "yes Ma'am." And so he watched, and the more he followed the story the more he became aware of the warm, soft body pressed up against his side.

It seemed that Bella wasn't immune to the eroticism on the screen either. Her hand was drawing a lazy pattern on Edward's thigh, slowly spiralling up and down until he began to squirm. Two could play at that game however, and so he very slowly worked his hand up Bella's shirt so that he was gently cupping a breast. Bella arched and shifted so that she was leaning into his touch.

"Is this show on DVD?" Edward breathed into Bella's ear, catching her earlobe between his teeth in a soft nip.

"Uh-huh," Bella squirmed and offered herself up for more.

"Then what the hell are we doing here?" Edward whispered in between open-mouthed kisses on her neck.

"Good point," Bella tried to sit up but only succeeded in falling back against the cushions as Edward scrambled to his feet.

Had he been asked later, Edward would be complete unable to recall how he and Bella transitioned from the sofa to the bedroom. They fell onto the bed in a tangle of limbs, delighting in each other as layers of cotton and denim were discarded. When Bella had turned her back Edward had been arrested by the sight of his surname printed across the shirt, running his hands up and under the cotton as he pulled her closed and kissed everywhere that the letters had been. Licking and kissing her shoulders he had cupped her breasts in his hands and pulled her against his chest. Bella had submitted at first, but her need for friction had her turning and pushing him onto his back, straddling him with a soft growl as she set out to do some exploring of her own.

Edward had squeezed his eyes shut, tangling his fingers in her hair as her tongue swirled around him, lapping and sucking as she had teased him to the brink before stopping and regarding him with a sly smile. Matching her smile Edward wondered where this vixen had come from and grabbed her by the shoulders to pull her up beside him.

"My turn," he had said in a hoarse whisper, pushing a knee between her thighs as he pressed her slight body against the mattress. Bella whimpered and arched her back as Edward's chest hair rasped against her sensitive skin, as he took his time exploring her topography. Frustrated at his leisurely pace, Bella hooked one of her legs around his hips to pull him closer.

"Uh-uh," he shook his head with a smile and then took her slim ankle in a firm grip with one hand while he trailed his other hand over her sternum in a soft, teasing pattern. He twisted and shifted slightly to read the scrolling letters on her ankle. "What does this one mean again, *Suscpio Tripudium*?"

Bella shifted and groaned when Edward held her in pace, giving her a look of quiet patience while he waited for her to answer.

"Receive Joy," she volunteered at last as she reached for him, "please, Edward."

"Can't let my girl down," he murmured as he dipped his head towards her skin again and Bella snatched convulsively at the bed sheet as his tongue dipped inside her and breathed out a keening sigh. Edward lifted his head to regard her for a moment. "Oh I like that sound, let's see if you can do that again."

"Quit ... toying with me, Cullen," Bella said.

But Edward was too busy to say anything for quite some time. When he at last moved up her body and slid into her they were communicating by taste and touch, already knowing each other's sweet spots as they stroked and curled their way towards bliss.

"Only you, Bella," Edward rested his forehead against hers as their bodies moved in unison.

"Only you," she agreed, hooking her other ankle around Edward's hip, giving as much joy as she received.

## **Ch23 Reviews and Bacon**

Edward woke as he felt a tickle start on his chest and cracked his eyes open to see Bella curled up against his side, her fingers curling in sleepy patterns on his bare skin. Turning his head he pressed a soft kiss against her hair and smiled when she shifted to give him a bleary smile before snuggling and closing her eyes again. He wasn't surprised at this reaction. Sunday mornings were Bella's only opportunity to sleep in and she always made the most of it.

He was awake now but didn't want to move for fear of disturbing Bella; and so he contented himself by studying the bedroom, his gaze stopping as he studied the large print of Klimt's 'The Kiss'. The gold detail in the picture had been picked out in foil and he watched as the soft light in the bedroom made the picture glow. The room was quiet and still in the early morning light. Bella sighed in her sleep and shifted closer to him; an almost impossible feat given their bodies were already entwined. Glancing across at the window Edward saw that it was snowing outside, and as he watched the snowflakes flutter down outside he felt warm and secure with Bella in his arms, knowing that he wanted more.

An hour later he smiled as he felt a soft kiss against his shoulder and glanced down to see Bella blinking sleepily up at him.

"Hey, you," he smiled.

"Mornin'," Bella yawned and rolled onto her back and arched into a cat-stretch, laughing when Edward swooped down to kiss her belly where her t-shirt had ridden up. "Nice try but your aim's off, get up here," she suggested.

"Yes'm," Edward said obediently before giving her a quick kiss. "Sleep well?"

"Yup," Bella replied as she draped a languid arm around his neck to hold him to her, "but the waking up bit is much better."

"You won't hear me arguing," Edward muttered as he kissed her again, running his tongue along her bottom lip before dipping into her warmth.

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Alice sneezed and slapped away the hand that had been fluttering over her top lip.

"Guh," her voice was muffled as she rolled over and stuffed her face into the pillow to evade Jasper's hand. "Get away from me."

"That's not what you said last night," Jasper rumbled as he hooked a leg over Alice and pulled her against him, "especially when you were about to-,"

"God," Alice pushed herself away and glared up at him, "do you have to be such a morning person?" she snapped before thumping her head back into the pillow.

"Babe," Jasper replied in a mild tone, "I wanna take us out for breakfast."

"Fine," Alice mumbled. "Later."

"It's later now," Jasper objected. He was silent as Alice kept her eyes resolutely closed before he reached out to rub her back. It was time to utter the magic words. "There's gonna be coffee," he said in a wheedling tone.

It worked. Alice huffed and then turned her head to give him a long hard stare.

"Fine," she said at last. "You go shower, I'll be in there soon."

Jasper beamed at her and then threw back the covers to make his way into the bathroom. "Don't be long," he called over his shoulder.

Alice mumbled something into the pillow; it was not 'have a nice day'.

An hour later saw Alice and Jasper waiting to cross the street, wrapped up in coats and scarves. Jasper stamped his feet on the sidewalk a few times to keep warm, as Alice folded her arms over her chest against the morning chill and squinted across the street.

"Where are we going again?"

"Somewhere with bacon and pancakes," Jasper said as he put his arm around Alice's shoulders, pulling her alongside him as the lights changed and they began walking again.

"And coffee," Alice reminded him.

"And coffee," Jasper agreed. "You know, when we met I seem to recall you being really peppy."

"That was in the store. There's *coffee* in the store. *Lots* of coffee," Alice snapped.

"You'll have some soon," Jasper replied.

Alice gave him a quelling look, trying to retain her tired and grumpy mood and failing when he flashed her a grin that revealed his dimples. He seemed to be very pleased with himself.

Jasper chaffed Alice's upper arm with his hand as they walked, humming under his breath. He had a surprise for her this morning and getting her out for breakfast was a means to an end. The previous evening had been a late night for them both, although neither of them had been worrying about that at the time.

"I could've made pancakes at home," Alice grumped.

"There's just no joy in you until you've had a coffee is there?"

"Not when I thought I could have a sleep in," Alice sighed.

"You can nap this afternoon and anyways, I've got a surprise for you," Jasper replied, giving her an enigmatic grin when she looked at him.

"What kind of surprise?" curiosity had her feeling more alert now.

"The kind where you're gonna have to wait and see," Jasper answered, laughing when she stuck her tongue out at him. The distraction had been enough to dissipate her morning grumbles but she wouldn't feel completely human until she had coffee.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward sniffed at the air as he walked into the kitchen pushing his still-wet hair off his face and nuzzled Bella who was getting some coffee cups out.

"Smells good," he said as he planted a quick kiss on the side of her neck.

"I thought you'd like it," Bella smiled at him as she got out the milk, "it's the same blend I use at the store."

"Great," Edward watched as she picked up a small stainless steel jug and began frothing some milk on the home-sized espresso machine. "Don't you get sick of that?"

"What, making coffee?" Bella glanced at him over her shoulder while she worked before returning to attention to the task at hand. "Not at all, not when it gets me my morning heart starter."

"Fair call," Edward agreed, turning around in surprise when the oven timer pinged. "You baked?"

"Nope," Bella grinned, "warming up some muffins that Angela made. I didn't get a chance to try them at the store so I bought some home." She nodded towards the oven mitts on the counter. "Do me a favour and take them out?"

"Sure," Edward carefully took the tray out and rested it on the oven top and then gave the muffins an appreciative sniff. "What are they?"

"Cranberry and orange, with a Demerara sugar crust," Bella answered as she poured the steamed milk into the waiting cups and then spooned on some froth. "Here you go," she said as she passed Edward a cup, "sugar's over there," she jerked her chin to indicate the sugar bowl as she busied herself putting some muffins onto a serving dish. Grabbing her coffee and the plate she carried them out into the small living room, setting the dish down on the coffee table and returning to the kitchen for the butter.

"Okay," Edward searched the bottom shelf of the coffee table to pull out a bundle of papers and magazines, "what have we got?"

"There should be yesterday's *New York Times* and a few copies of *Vanity Fair*," Bella said before she sipped at her coffee. "I'm not sure what else you'll find there."

"Hmmm," Edward scanned the newspaper and realised he'd read most of it already. He thought of the weekend newspapers that would be waiting at his apartment and suppressed a sigh.

"Sorry," Bella interpreted his look and gave him an apologetic smile.

"Huh?" Edward glanced at her and shook his head while he broke off a piece of muffin and spread some butter on it before taking a bite. "No big deal."

Bella reached over for the other half of Edward's muffin that he had buttered and left on the plate, biting into it with relish as he gave her an indignant look.

Edward helped himself to another muffin and settled back on the sofa while Bella switched on the TV and turned to a news channel. "You know," he contemplated the muffin in his hand while he chewed, "these are really good."

"I know," Bella nodded over her cup at him, "she's flexing her muscle a bit in the kitchen, it's good."

"You don't mind?"

Bella looked at him in surprise. "Why would I? Sure I do the cupcakes, but it's great to have some backup now."

"I just thought because the store was yours you'd want things to stay, you know," he shrugged, "exclusive."

Bella gave him a fond look. "It's just baking Edward, not rocket science."

"I know," Edward waved off her amusement, "but given the time you've put into the store I didn't know how protective you'd be."

"Ah," Bella nodded, "now I get where you're coming from. The hallowed recipe book is mostly up here," she tapped a finger against her temple, "and the basic ones are kept in the store."

"Gotcha," Edward nodded, "just checking." He looked down and brushed some crumbs off his t-shirt and then picked up his cup and drained it. When he lowered the cup Bella was regarding him with amusement. "Have I told you how much I love your coffee?"

"Uh-huh," Bella nodded as she chewed.

"Have I told you how much I love you?"

Bella smiled and sipped at her cup. "Uh-huh."

"And," Edward swallowed hard and then continued, "Have I told you that I think we should live together?"

Bella, who had been about to take another bite of muffin, paused and set it back down on the plate. "That bit you've kinda kept quiet," she said as she regarded him with quiet eyes. She didn't surprised at his words, and Edward felt a rush of relief as he looked at her calm expression.

Edward rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "So, uh, how about we talk about it?"

"How about we do that," Bella agreed in a soft voice.

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Jasper smiled his thanks as their coffee order was delivered, and watched Alice as she picked up her cup and sipped at it with reverence.

"So," he began, "I wanted to-," he broke off as Alice held up an imperious hand for silence. When she had consumed half the cup she nodded at him for continue. "You weren't joking," he said in a mild tone.

"When it comes to coffee, I'm never joking," Alice said as she knuckled her eyes and shook her head as if to clear it. "Okay, you can talk now," she instructed.

"Gee, thanks," he said in a dry tone. "Actually I'm going to need something for this conversation, back soon." And with that he got up from their table and approached a waitress for a quiet conversation. Words were exchanged with some nodding, and Alice looked on in amazement as he turned and held up a hand to Alice before slipping out the door. Alice sat watching his departing figure and then blinked in surprise as the waitress approached the table with a smile.

"Your boyfriend said to keep the coffee coming, and he'll be back in two minutes," she explained before waving a hand at Alice's now empty cup. "Same again?"

"Uh, please," Alice nodded, bemused.

"He ordered breakfast on his way out, so what can I get for you?" the waitress continued.

Alice gave her order and sat back as she waited for the coffee to arrive. If Jasper wanted to surprise her today he was succeeding. Shrugging, she realised she was just going to have to wait and see. Jasper would return soon enough and then there would be answers.

\* \* \* \* \*

"When?" Bella asked when Edward had finished talking.

"Um, I'm not sure. Whenever you think you could-," Edward began, stopping when Bella shook her head.

"Not when I could move, I meant when did you have this idea?" She had finished her coffee and was sitting with her legs tucked beneath her, leaning against the sofa back with her head resting on one hand listening quietly to Edward's reasoning.

"A few weeks back," Edward admitted.

"And you didn't say anything back then?"

Edward shook his head. Bella was being very calm about this. He wasn't sure what he had expected but her quiet acceptance made things seem almost too easy.

"I guess it just didn't feel like the right time," he said.

"Mm-hmm," Bella said in a thoughtful tone as her gaze turned inward. Edward would have given everything he had to know what she was thinking in that moment. "I'm going to get us some more coffee and then we're going to continue this conversation."

"Okay," Edward replied, uncertain. She wasn't angry, but she wasn't turning cartwheels of excitement. He didn't know what to make of the situation; was her answer going to be yes or no? He watched Bella as she got up and moved past him to walk into the kitchen with their cups before he gave a quiet sigh. The conversation didn't seem to be going in quite the way that he'd hoped. He was startled therefore, when Bella suddenly reappeared in front of him and straddled his lap to give him a hot and hard kiss.

"And just so you know," she breathed, "my answer is yes, and I'll be right back."

Edward sat blinking on the sofa as Bella disappeared back into the kitchen, a slow smile of delight spreading across his face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice blinked as a newspaper was dropped on the table from behind her, and she looked up to see Jasper grinning down at her as he took a seat and chugged down his now-lukewarm coffee.

"This is the surprise?" she asked as she gestured towards the newspaper with her fork.

"Yep," Jasper nodded as he sat down and waved to get the waitress's attention.

"O-kay," Alice said as she reached out towards it, stopping when Jasper tut-tutted and shook his head. "What?"

"How about we have breakfast first, and then we can have a read?" Jasper suggested as he ordered himself another coffee. Moments later their breakfast order was delivered and Alice stared in amazement at the mound of bacon on top of his pancake stack.

"How on earth are you going to eat all that?"

"Easy," Jasper replied as he scooped up some of the crisp rashers and slid them over on top of her eggs Benedict with a flourish, "you're going to help. You usually do anyway so I figured I'd order some extra."

"Oh," Alice subsided with a mild sigh of disappointment.

"What's wrong?" Now it was Jasper's turn to look surprised.

"Nothin'," Alice shrugged, "it's just that it always tastes better when I steal it."

"It does, huh?" Jasper's chewing slowed as he gave Alice a lazy smirk, "where did you hear that?"

"Some guy told me that once," Alice flicked her hair and ignored the bacon on her plate to reach over and snatch one off Jasper's.

"Must be a smart guy," Jasper observed, putting down his fork to sip at his coffee.

"He has his moments," Alice agreed as she finished her bacon and started on her eggs.

The two of them lingered over breakfast making small talk and exchanging the occasional laugh before it became too much for Alice.

"Enough," she slapped her hand down on the newspaper with enough force to make a woman at the next table jump. "Enough with the mystery, what's the surprise?"

Jasper raised an eyebrow at her as he dabbed his mouth with his napkin before tossing it onto his plate.

"Impatient little thing aren't you," he observed as he reached for the newspaper and unfolded it, curling it away from Alice's reaching hands as he flicked through to the section he was after.

"Jasper," she growled, subsiding as another coffee was delivered and their plates were cleared away.

"Anything else you guys need?" the waitress asked as she paused at the table.

"Maybe an alibi if this guy doesn't fess up soon," Alice muttered under her breath.

"Come again?"



"Nothing, thanks," Alice waved her off with a weak smile as Jasper coughed to hide his amusement.

"Okay Little Miss Impatient," Jasper announced as he pulled out the section we'd been looking for and passed it over to Alice. "Read that and see what you think."

Alice grabbed it scanned the title. "Food & Review," she read aloud, "I don't get it, what am I ... oh!" her eyes widened and she began scanning the pages, flipping through the quickly until she stopped with a short squeal of excitement.

Jasper leaned back in his seat and watched her with an indulgent smile. He already knew what the article had to say, his former colleague had emailed him a draft before it had gone to print.

"Was this you?" Alice gave him a smile of delight when she had finished reading.

"I didn't write it, but-," Jasper began and stopped when Alice got out of her seat to give him a kiss that was 80% exuberance and 20% caffeine. "Wow," he said when he came up for air, "remind me to surprise you more often."

"Let's not get too excited," Alice cautioned him as she took her seat, but despite her words her eyes were dancing with excitement. "I usually only like surprises if I know about them in advance."

"But then it's not a-," Jasper was waved to silence by an impatience Alice.

"Back to the article," she said tapping the page for emphasis. "How did this happen?"

"Don't you remember me buying some cupcakes weeks ago? That's how I got your number."

"Oh yeah," Alice stared off into space with a little smile, "I remember that, but how come it took them so long?"

"Babe, there's more than a few restaurants and cafes in this town, and the writer had to wait until she had the right angle for a cupcake feature."

"Hmm, I see she's reviewed a couple of bakeries," Alice gave a sniff of dismissal as she scanned the section again, "but they're not as good as *ours*," she said proudly.

"She knows her stuff," Jasper replied with a pleased smile.

Alice read the article again, smiling.

*Cupcakes used to be the domain of children's parties but not any more. These miniature works of art have enjoyed a renaissance of popularity and it seems that cupcakes are here to stay. For the cupcake fan, there are bakeries aplenty in New York offering all manner of frosted wares to tempt even the most jaded palate. For the aficionados there are the mainstay bakeries such as Magnolia Bakery (be prepared to queue, this bakery has enjoyed a cultish following since its appearance on Sex and the City), and Cupcake Café that do a nice trade in personalised photo bite-sized masterpieces. Once in a while however, along comes along something special.*

*Take The Cake is a small café bakery in Greenwich Village that charms the visitor as soon as they walk through the door, usually laughing at the Quote of the Day that's prominently featured on the chalkboard outside. Either this store hasn't made up its mind what it wants to be when it grows up, or it has a quirky sense of style designed to bemuse and beguile. I'm going with the latter.*

*The store is an eccentric mix of gallery, bookstore and bakery. The walls are covered with a collection of original art and found objects, there are racks filled with a collection of vintage books and magazines for customers, even an umbrella stand for those unfortunates caught out by the weather. The marble counter, brass fittings and mismatched wooden tables and chairs makes it feel as if you're sitting down in the kitchen of a grandmother you never had. All of this however is only the trailer to the main attraction: the cupcakes themselves.*

*Don't be fooled, some of these cupcakes carry a real sugar punch but oh what a way to go. For those of you that are sweet enough already there are cupcakes that deliver a bite; bitter chocolate and raspberry, chilli chocolate, lemon meringue and even – heaven help me – gin and tonic cupcakes. The names of the cupcakes themselves are just as eye-catching; 'Lemon Afterglow', 'Woodstock After Burn' and even 'Vegan Rehab', all the result of an ongoing war between the baker and barista who try to outsmart each other every morning with their cupcake/quote war. These two have been battling it out for two years now with no end in sight, but the customers are the ultimate winners, and to the victors go the spoils.*

*Take The Cake offers the usual lunch offerings of wraps and bagels, and a delicious Zuma blend coffee that will make your usual filter coffee experience seem like a forgettable one night stand. The service is quick, the cupcakes are bliss and the coffee is hot, so forget what you think you know about children's party snacks and high-end designer bakeries, and Take The Cake.*

"Wow," Alice whispered to herself and then looked up to see Jasper watching her with an intent expression. "You've read this already?"

"Yup," Jasper nodded, "and I believe that," he nodded his head towards the page, "is what we in the industry call a rave review."

"Did you have anything to do with it?" Alice narrowed her eyes as she considered this. If there was any hint of favouritism she was going to find out.

"Nothing beyond taking some cupcakes to the Food Editor and telling her to send someone your way," Jasper explained, "the rest of it was up to you guys."

Alice looked at the article again and traced a gentle finger over the words with a smile.

"Does Bella know?" she asked as the thought occurred to her.

"She will if she gets the weekend paper," Jasper answered.

"I don't think she does," Alice frowned.

"Edward will have it," Jasper assured her.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So how are we going to do this?" Edward asked when Bella reappeared with some fresh coffee.

"Not sure, I'm new to this too," Bella said as she handed him his coffee and then carefully curled up on the sofa beside him. "I'll need to talk to Emmett."

"Why's that?" Edward kept a careful grip on his cup as he rested it on his thigh and watched Bella as she sat twirling some hair around her finger while she thought.

"Well he and I always talk big life stuff through first, plus there's this apartment."

"You own it?" Edward was surprised.

"Kinda," Bella shrugged and sipped at her coffee, "the bank owns it more than I do. Emmett's the money brains in the family and he's the one that insisted I get this a few years back."

"How did you find it?" Edward looked at the apartment with new eyes. Bella was in a good location, and although the apartment was tiny its charm compensated for the lack of space. Apartments like these didn't last long on the market.

"I was renting it when the owner decided to sell, so the day I found out Emmett and I had a long talk and put an offer in that afternoon," Bella explained with a proud smile. "It didn't even hit the market before it was sold."

"I'm impressed," Edward nodded, "but what does that mean if you move to mine?"

"You mean you don't want live here?" Bella gave him a shocked look.

"Uh," Edward hesitated. He certainly liked the atmosphere of Bella's home more than his own, but the apartment was *tiny*.

"Relax," Bella nudged him, "I'm kidding."

"Right," Edward subsided.

"You know," Bella cocked her head and regarded Edward with a thoughtful expression, "you're as nervous about this as I am."

"You're nervous?" Edward laughed now, "I thought you were being really calm."

"Check it," Bella reached across for his hand and held it against her chest so that he could feel her drumming heart.

"I stand corrected," Edward said, rubbing her skin with his thumb.

"I'll talk to Emmett," Bella continued, "and we'll talk it through. I can sublet this and keep it as an investment property." Bella looked around the room with a wistful smile, "I've got too many good memories here to let it go entirely."

"And I wouldn't expect you to," Edward assured her, "we can sort out the details later. Right now, I'm just glad you said yes." He set his cup down and nodded at Bella to do the same. When her hands were free he reached over to pull her onto his lap. "Hey," he breathed, rubbing his nose against hers, "love you."

"Love you too," Bella smiled and gave him a kiss before pulling back and regarding him with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. "So, we're really going to do this?"

"Looks like," Edward nodded.

"It's been a long time since I've done this," Bella mused.

"It's a first for me," Edward confessed, giving Bella rueful smile as she gaped at him. "Yeah, you heard that right."

"Never?"

Edward shook his head.

"Never ever?"

"I guess it was a case of not the right person, not the right time," Edward suggested with a wry smile.

"So what happened to change your mind?" Bella marvelled.

"Simple, I met you," Edward said as he pulled her in for another kiss. "So what do you want to do, call Emmett?"

"Uh," Bella's mind was reeling now. She felt daunted by Edward's impressive show of faith in their relationship. Living together was the next logical step she knew, but it was intimidating for all that she was delighted that Edward was willing to commit to her so much. "How about we get out of here?"

"You want to go out there?" Edward gestured towards the window where they could see a glimpse of grey skies and the occasional flurry of snowflakes.

"Why not," Bella shrugged, "we could always go to yours and start to talk things through some more. It's where we're going to be living after all."

"If that's what you want," Edward replied, a smile tugging at his lips.

Bella looked at Edward, his hair sticking up in damp spikes and whorls, a rumpled t-shirt and his old jeans riding low on his hips. She could feel a pressure expanding in her chest, a bubble that was waiting to burst into pleasure or fear of the unknown, she couldn't tell. She took a deep breath.

"It is, it really is," she smiled, and with that bubble in her chest subsided and the pressure was gone. "Let's get outta here."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Maybe she's at home," Alice suggested as she reached for her phone.

"Or maybe she's not," Jasper said as he glanced at his watch. "It's not even ten yet, any idea if she likes to sleep in?"

"Oh," Alice subsided, "yeah she does." She considered her options before brightening and began to compose a text message. "You're sure Edward gets this paper?"

"Sure I'm sure," Jasper replied and then gave a slight frown, "at least he did while I was writing for them."

"You stopped working there months ago," Alice accused, "what if he's cancelled his subscription?"

"If he has they can go out and get one," Jasper said in a soothing tone, "which they will once they find out the bakery is featured. It'll be okay."

"I hope so," Alice fretted, biting her lip. She wanted Bella to find out *now*. "Oh to hell with it, if she gets mad the worst she can do is fire me," she muttered as she began to dial. She was all but vibrating in her seat as she waited for the call to connect. "Bella? Hey, it's Alice," she frowned, "no I'm fine, listen I'll make this quick in case you were asleep," another pause, "oh good, now get yourself the *New York Chronicle* and check the Food Review section, you won't be sorry." Alice winked at Jasper as she heard Bella's voice go up in query, "Uh-uh, that would be telling," she was laughing now.

Jasper mouthed some words at her and she nodded. "Jasper said to say it's a surprise, and Happy Sunday ... uh-huh ... well you'll just have to find out, gotta go," she snapped the phone shut and gave Jasper a pleased smile.

"Let me see if I've got this straight, you hate surprises being kept from you, but you're happy to keep them from your boss?"

"Well that's different," Alice gave him wide-eyed look.

"How's it different?"

"This time I'm not the one in suspense," Alice said, giving him a 'that's that' nod.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wow," Bella slid her cell phone closed and dropped it into her coat pocket before taking Edward's hand again as they kept walking. She snuggled in closer to Edward's side and he released her hand so that he could put his arm around her waist to hold her close while he looked for a cab.

"Damn it's cold, what the hell were we thinking, leaving your warm apartment?" he tried to grumble, but was feeling too good to even pretend to be complain.

"Don't know," Bella shrugged, "Charlie used to call it a rush of shit to the brain," she added, looking up with a grin as Edward laughed.

"I've got to remember that one," he chuckled and then stopped as he saw a yellow cab approaching. "We're in luck," he added and waved his arm up and down. "Come on," he picked up the pace as the cab approached.

"We're only a few blocks away," Bella protested in a half-hearted voice.

"Maybe, but you're cold and tired so we're getting out of this weather," Edward retorted, reaching for the door of the cab as soon as it stopped and raising an eyebrow as another intrepid New Yorker tried to beat him to it before he bundled Bella inside. "Come on sweetheart, let's get you home."

Bella slid across the back seat with a smile at Edward's words and waited for him to climb in beside her. Edward gave the address and the cab took off with a lurch.

"What did Alice want?" Edward asked after he had gotten himself settled.

"I'm not sure, but do you get the paper delivered?"

"Just the weekend edition, it'll be with the doorman," he answered, "why's that?"

"There's something for us to read," Bella said with a puzzled air, "but she wouldn't say what."

"Which paper?" Edward asked, and when Bella told him it was his turn to look thoughtful. "What's where Jasper used to work," he said, and then shrugged. "Sorry, I've got no idea."

"We'll find out soon enough," Bella assured him, "when we get home." She smiled as she said it and then looked out the window and bit her lip. Was she really doing the right thing? Only time would tell, but she found herself needing to talk to Emmett now more than ever. Decision made, she pulled out her phone again.

*Need Bear time x*

She didn't have to wait long before she got a response.

*Everything ok? x*

Bella smiled. She could picture the look of concern on her brother's face.

*Yes. Need my big bro for talk tho x*

Edward gave her a curious look but said nothing.

*Anytime, anywhere x*

Bella was about to reply when another message came in.

*With food x*

She laughed and glanced over at Edward.

"It's Emmett, I told him I wanted to discuss something and I think he's negotiating dinner."

"Would you expect anything less?" Edward smiled.

"Oh hell no," Bella grinned and returned her attention to the phone.

*2day sometime?*

This time there was a longer pause, and Bella realised Emmett may be negotiating something with Rosalie.

*Sure. Call when ur ready. Sure all ok?*

She smiled at his question and sent back some assurance before stowing her phone back in her coat pocket.

"That's got him curious as all hell," she commented as she turned to Edward, "but I'll call him later to arrange a time and tell him then."

"Do you think he'll be okay with it?" Edward asked. He knew how tight the bond was between the two siblings and didn't want to be the cause of any unrest, particularly after the situation between Bella and Jake.

"Sure," Bella glanced at him in surprise, "as long as I'm happy he's fine." Looking at Edward's pensive reaction she leaned in closer. "Relax, Emmett likes you because you make me happy."

"And if I don't?"

"Well then," Bella tried to look solemn, "I guess you've got a problem."

"True, but there's one thing I'm really curious about," Edward mused.

"What's that?"

"What had Alice so excited on a Sunday morning."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella sat on the couch with the paper held loosely in her hands, her face slack with surprise. "I can't believe it, we've been reviewed."

"And it's a good one," Edward added, reading over her shoulder.

"Did you have anything to do with this?" Bella turned her head to look at him, watching as his eyebrows went up in surprise.

"Me? No, it's might have something to do with Whitlock though, that's the paper he used to work at," Edward commented as he scanned the article again, smiling as he read the comment about the cupcake/quote war. "This is really good."

"I know," Bella nodded her head slowly, wondering what the review would mean for business. She had the sudden sensation of things moving and changing around her outside of her control and for the first time she realised what a cloistered life she had created for herself. Emmett would always be there for her, she knew that now, but Edward was an entirely different matter; he had chosen her, worked to get to know her and now she couldn't imagine her life without him.

"I'm going to get us some coffee, you want anything?" Edward said as he got up from the sofa.

"I'm fine," Bella said in an absent tone as she re-read the article.

"Okay," Edward trailed his hand across her shoulder as he walked past her to get to the kitchen and Bella gave him a brief smile at the gesture.

She sat on the couch for a moment and then got up and walked into the bathroom. Her skin felt dry and taunt from the cold outside and she grabbed a facecloth to run under some warm water before scrubbing her face. Looking at her reflection she saw her cheeks were flushed with high spots of colour and her eyes were a little dazed.

It had been an interesting morning. What had started out as a relaxing Sunday had turned into a life-altering conversation about moving into Edward's apartment, and now the store had made a prominent appearance in a widely read newspaper review section. She stared at the bathroom counter, at her spare toothbrush and visualised her perfume bottles sitting there. Turning slowly she took in the rest of her immediate surroundings, looking at the vast expanse of walls and wondering where she would hang her pictures. Leaving the bedroom she walked out into the living room and studied Edward's bookshelves. She had a lot of books too, but there looked like there would be enough space for her collection. She swallowed hard as the realisation hit her; she wasn't just going to be sharing space with someone, she was going to be sharing her life.

"Hey," Edward's soft voice came to her from the other end of the room.

Looking up she saw Edward standing there with two mugs of fresh coffee and she realised that she still hadn't brought him some of her coffee blend from the store. She'd do something about that soon.

"Everything okay?" Edward crossed towards her, pausing to set the cups down on the coffee table before he crossed to her. "You look like you're freaking out a bit."

"I'm fine," Bella said in a voice that only trembled a little, "I think things are just sinking in. Today has been-" she paused and licked her lips, "unexpected."



Edward put his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. "I know," he said as he kissed her hair.

Bella put her arms around him and ran her hands up and under his t-shirt so that she could feel the warm hardness of his back. Edward kept talking and his voice was a soothing rumble in his chest.

"We don't have to do this any faster than you're comfortable with, okay?"

Bella gave a silent nod.

"I want you here Bella, I want to live with you, I want to-," he stopped, realising he had nearly overstepped the mark.

Bella pulled back so that she could look up at him.

"You want to what?"

"Later," Edward promised, "you want to call Emmett?"

"Oh," Bella's eyes widened, "I nearly forgot," she began to pull away to get her phone, stopping when Edward clamped his arms around her.

"Kiss?" he said in a hopeful voice, smiling when she gave a short laugh and gave him a quick peck. He let her go then, watching as she walked over to the hall closet to get her phone out of her coat pocket. This morning had nearly progressed very quickly indeed. "Get Emmett over here if you like," he suggested in an offhand tone.

"You sure?"

"Why not? Maybe we can do something for dinner," Edward shrugged. "I've got a few things here, I'm sure we can come up with something."

"Okay, he'll probably want to bring Rosalie as well," Bella added

"Fine by me," Edward said and then gestured at the phone Bella was holding. "You go do your thing, I'll check my email."

While Bella spoke to her brother Edward fired up his laptop and wasn't surprised to see a number of emails from Marcus. It appeared that his Editor had already gotten to work on the drafts Edward had been sending through, and was now eager to see the final manuscript. Looking over his shoulder Edward saw that Bella was deep in discussion, wandering around the apartment as she spoke and gradually making her way to the bedroom. It looked like she may be a while.

He sat drumming his fingers on the desktop for a moment before opening the manuscript document and scrolling through to re-read the sections that Marcus had raised a few questions about. He could see the other man's point, some sections of it needed revising. Culling, even. Another moment's consideration and then he began to type. He stopped when he heard a whoop of laughter from Bella, and when her conversation resumed he went back to work. Used to working in relative silence, Edward found the murmur of Bella's voice in the

background to be strangely soothing, and he listened to the indistinct one-sided conversation a while before he got back to work.

Edward was frowning at the screening, rubbing his forefinger across his lip as he sat deep in thought, when he was jolted by a touch on his shoulder.

"Sorry," Bella had jumped in fright herself, not expecting Edward's reaction. "I called your name a couple of times but you didn't hear me."

"Mom used to scold me about my habit of switching off," Edward swivelled in his chair and looked at Bella who was standing in front of him, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "How's Em?"

"Good," Bella gave a fond smile, "we've talked it over but he's still keen on being fed," she made a wry face, "no surprises there."

"I thought you were going to catch up so you could talk about it?" Edward was surprised that the matter seemed to have been dealt with already.

"I know, but he made some good suggestions and seems okay with it all," Bella said as she dropped her cell phone onto one of the living room armchairs, making a mental note to see if her own armchair was going to match. Glancing back she could see that Edward had turned back to his laptop and was typing furiously. She stood watching him for a moment wondering what to do, before she padded over to him again and nuzzled his neck. "Hey," she said, "if you want I can go back to my place and leave you in peace."

"What?" Edward pulled his attention away from the manuscript and looked at her in shock, "Hell, no. Shit," he pushed his laptop away from him and stood up to pull Bella towards him. "I'm sorry, I got in the zone again. I'm just used to doing my own thing."

"You know," Bella chewed at her lip, standing in Edward's arms as she looked up at him. "We're going to have to talk about that side of things."

"What, my work?" Edward frowned down at her. "Is it a problem?"

"No, well, not really," Bella amended, "I guess I just don't know what to do around you when you're working. I don't know if I'm intruding, or if you need total silence, or-" she broke off and shook her head. "Maybe I'm over-thinking things, but this apartment has been *your* space for a lot longer than I've been on the scene. I think we're both going to have some adjusting to do."

"We'll get through it," Edward promised her, "as long as we keep talking."

"Hmm," Bella was thoughtful now, feeling as if they had just hit the tip of the iceberg. Somehow she didn't think things were going to be as easy as Edward made out. Casting her mind for something else to say she glanced over at the coffee table. "Our drinks have gone cold, how about I make us something else?"

"Sure," Edward watched Bella as she collected the cups and then looked back at his laptop. He was nearly finished, just a few more minutes and ... he watched Bella's departing back as she walked back into the kitchen and thought about their morning so far. Turning back to the desk he snapped the laptop shut with a decisive

click. Marcus wasn't expecting to hear back from him for a few days and there were other things to discuss. More important things he decided, as he followed Bella. When he got there Bella was sitting up on the counter with her ankles crossed, swinging her legs slowly while she waited for the stovetop coffee pot to brew. "So," Edward said, "is Em coming over for dinner?"

"If you want," Bella gave a tentative nod, which stopped Edward in his tracks.

"If I want?" he repeated, surprised at her phrasing. "What's going on?" He walked towards her and gently uncrossed her ankles so that he could stand between her thighs, cupping her bottom so that he could pull her towards him. Bella gave a slight smile and draped her arms around his neck, her fingers curling on the nape of his neck.

"Dunno," Bella's answer was a mumble this time, "it feels weird is all."

"What, inviting him over? Bells," Edward rested his forehead against hers, "this is going to be your home too."

"But you started working," Bella argued, "I didn't want to interrupt."

"Bella, I work at home anyway," he sighed, realising that they were getting to the crux of the problem, "you don't have to tip-toe around me."

"I guess I just worry about disrupting things," Bella admitted, "you work so hard and-,"

"And so do you," Edward replied, "but you saw how I switched off earlier."

"True," Bella gave a reluctant smile at this, "but you don't do that all the time, surely."

"Wanna bet?" Edward teased, "You give Mom a call. She used to complain that she could have had Whitesnake blaring out of the sound system and I wouldn't have heard a thing."

"Whitesnake?" Bella was shocked, "Esme likes Whitesnake?"

"With a passion," Edward sighed, "why do you think I was so keen to get my own place?"

"Seriously?" Bella smile had turned into a smirk, "I mean c'mon."

"And don't get me started on Dad's Johnny Cash collection."

"Oh god," Bella started giggling as she pictured Edward's academic parents, "and I thought Charlie's Elvis devotion was hard going."

"Why do you think I'm so good at tuning out? It's a survival instinct," Edward growled as he nuzzled her neck. "So here's the thing," Edward said as he pulled back and looked at her, his playful expression fading to something more serious. "When I'm working I tune out noise, but don't ever thinking that I'm ignoring you. My work's important the same way that yours is, but that doesn't mean that you're no less important to me." He

reached up to cup her face, trying to will her to believe the sincerity behind his words, "I love you and I want you here," he said, "I really want this, and I hope that you want it too."

"I want," Bella swallowed, "but I'm not going to lie, it kinda scares me shitless too."

"Living with me scares you?" Edward watched her carefully trying to gauge her reaction.

"No," Bella ran her hands down his shoulders in an attempt to reassure, "not that, I guess it's the part about giving up my apartment," she gave him an anxious look, "you know what it's like when you living alone, everything is just the way you like it, and now we're both going to have to ... compromise." Bella rolled the word around in her mouth as if she was trying to get used to it.

"Yeah I know, but do you see that as good or bad?"

"Neither," Bella said after she had considered the question, "just different."

"Well then, we'll adjust," Edward smiled and hoped she didn't notice that he was just as nervous as he was.

"We'll compromise," Bella agreed.

## **Ch24 White Russian Appreciation**

"Morning, Boss," Alice called out as Bella approached. She had only been waiting a short time but the wind chill was enough to have her hopping from one foot to the other in a bid to keep warm.

"Alice, don't call me Boss," Bella said as she fumbled in her coat pocket with gloved hands for the keys.

"Sorry, Boss. Did you see it? Tell me you saw it," Alice demanded as she helped Bella roll up the security door.

"I saw it," Bella nodded as she unlocked the main door and pushed it open. Stepping aside to let Alice inside she glanced down the block and saw Angela approaching at a quick pace. She raised an arm in a leisurely wave and smiled when Angela acknowledged her, and then went inside.

Alice shuddered as she pulled off her heavy overcoat and struggled with it into the kitchen so that she could hang it up, "Get that coffee going, Boss, I need warming up."

"Yes'm," Bella nodded as she flicked the coffee machine on as she walked past it before following Alice into the kitchen. "Angela is nearly here too."

"Cool," Alice replied, "Did you read it?"

"Sure did," Bella grinned, "we're finally in print."

"Can you believe it?" Alice was glowing with excitement, "Jasper surprised me with it yesterday. Did you know?"

"Kinda," Bella admitted, and then looked up with a smile as Angela walked into the room dropping her bag onto the counter and unwinding her scarf from her neck.

"Hey, guys," Angela smiled, "Anyone here read the paper on the weekend?"

"You read it?" Alice looked up from tying on her apron and gave the other woman an expectant look as Bella brushed past her on her way to the coffee machine.

"After your call? Of course I did. Ben went out and got the paper as soon as I told him. How did you find out?"

"Jasper drove me nuts until we went out for breakfast and he grabbed the paper when we were at the café," Alice explained before glancing at Bella. "How about you, Boss?"

Bella gave her an amused look as she poured the frothed milk into the cups, sliding two cups over to the waiting women before she finished making her own.

"Well, a little bird may have told me that we might be getting reviewed one day," she murmured, her smile erupting into a full-fledged grin at Alice's indignant squeal.

"Jasper told you first?"

"It *is* her store," Angela pointed out in a mild tone.

"Well," Alice subsided at that before continuing. "Okay sure, so she's the Boss-lady, but I'm his-," she floundered at this, waving her hand as she opened and closed her mouth without saying anything. Angela and Bella watched her with interest.

"Girlfriend?" Bella suggested in helpful tone.

"Love of his life?" Angela added.

"Ohh I like that one," Bella commented as she toasted Angela with her cup.

Angela gave a modest nod. "Thanks, I'm quite pleased with that one myself." They both looked at Alice who had the grace to blush.

"Okay, okay," she flapped her hands at them, hoping the colour in her cheeks wasn't too much of a giveaway, "moving on."

"Really?" Bella looked disappointed, "I thought the conversation was just getting interesting."

"Whatever," Alice rolled her eyes as she sipped at her coffee.

"So," Angela leaned against the counter with her hip, "what do you call Jasper?"

To Bella and Angela's mutual delight, Alice squirmed.

"Well," she hedged, "I guess, that is to say-,"

"Oh just tell us already," Angela said with a laugh.

"Alright," Alice chugged back her coffee and set the cup down with a flourish, "I call him my *boyfriend*."

"Well done," Bella burst into applause as Angela swooped on the smaller woman to give her a congratulatory hug.

"What's the big deal?" Alice asked Bella over Angela's shoulder, who was laughing as Angela began to waltz them both around the limited space behind the counter.

"You finally admitted it," Angela sang, "I'm so proud."

"Oh shut up," Alice said as she disengaged herself but she was smiling as she waited for Angela and Bella to finish their coffee before stashing the cups in the dishwasher and getting her piece of chalk.

"She's back to business," Angela observed with a wink to Bella, "I guess that means the fun's over."

"Excuse me," Alice held up the chalk, "but I think we're just getting started. And *you*," she turned to point at Bella, "had better get busy because after that glowing review I think we're going to get slammed today." She turned and stalked over to the chalkboard that was resting against the wall and picked it up with a quiet grunt before laying it across a table so that she could write. When she had finished writing she carried the chalkboard over to the counter to show Bella who read it with a smile.

*Appreciate me now, avoid the rush!*

By the time Alice returned from hanging the chalkboard up outside and brushing the chalk dust off her fingers, the mixer in the kitchen was already going.

Angela watched Alice set to work filling up the glass stoppered jar beside the coffee machine with marshmallows as she started to make up the wraps and bagels for the lunch time crowd. She turned when she heard her name called from the kitchen.

"Yeah, what's up?" Angela said as she peered around the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on a dishcloth which she then slung over her shoulder.

Bella pushed some hair off her face with the back of her hand as she looked up from the mixer.

"I took home some of your muffins for the weekend," Bella said, "and they were so great I was wondering if you could make some more."

"More?" Angela gaped at her. "It was just a recipe that I found online and thought I'd try, are you sure?"

"Yup," Bella said as she added some more flour to the mix, "Edward loved them and they sold well," she gave Angela a quick grin, "so I say go for it. As soon as I've got the cupcakes done the kitchen's all yours."

Angela gaped at Bella as she thought of all the new customers that would be coming into the store today and her grandmother's words echoed in her mind. 'You don't get a second chance at a first impression'. She had been browsing through cupcake blogs and recipe sites one evening when she had found the muffin recipe. Ben enthusiastically reviewed a test batch, and his response had given her the confidence to make some for Bella. Making some for customers somehow felt entirely different.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So how do you feel about it?"

Edward leaned back in his seat and considered Marcus's question. He had gotten up at the same time as Bella so that they could have breakfast together before she went to work. He had looked at the grey weather outside and sighed before deciding against jogging, wondering if he ought to look into gym membership for the colder months. After fortifying himself with another cup of regrettable coffee he sat down in front of his laptop and looked at his revisions from the previous afternoon.

After a couple of hours he realised he had been writing for the sake of it rather than following his established storyline. Cutting and pasting the unnecessary words into a spare document, he had scanned the final chapter and realised with a mild sense of anticlimax that further work was unnecessary.

He blinked as he realised that the manuscript was complete and after a brief hesitation had emailed it to Marcus. Watching the email send he had swivelled in his chair as he stared out the window again and then with a herculean effort got up from his laptop and walked away. It was out of his hands now, and it was time to find something else to do.

Edward had been standing in front of his bookshelves shifting some of the contents around in order to make room for some of Bella's things when the phone rang. It was his Editor, Marcus.

"Edward," Marcus greeted, "I got your email and I have to say I'm surprised."

"You are? What's wrong?" Edward's mind was racing.

"You've finished, and so far I like what I see."

Edward walked over to his desk and sat down, his face slack with surprise.

"How are you feeling about it?" Marcus went on.

"Good," Edward said at least, "I think," he amended. "I finished it earlier than expected so I guess that's a good sign."

"Early for you, but you missed your proposed deadline by four months," Marcus reminded him. "Still, it's good to see you got back on the wagon." Marcus wasn't going to press the issue. Edward's books had generated a vast and loyal readership so there was no question of its marketability.

Edward grunted a non-committal response as he toyed with a pen on his desk. His months of writer's block were a painful but thankfully receding memory. He looked at his email screen again as to reassure himself that the final manuscript had finally left his hands.

"Listen," he began, "I agreed with some of your recommendations you made on the earlier draft, but not all. I changed what I thought suited the text and the rest I've left with your mark-up comments so let me know what you think when you get to it."

"I'll be reading it this week," Marcus assured him. When Edward had advised that the manuscript would be arriving, he had breathed a quiet prayer of thanks and cleared his schedule as much as possible for the week, "so you'll be hearing from me soon."

"When has that ever changed?" Edward smiled.

Marcus sat up straighter in his office chair as he grinned, looking out the window of his high-rise office. He was enjoying this conversation more than he was prepared to admit. "Just playing to my strengths, Edward. You write, I pester."

"And you do it very well," Edward replied.

"Finishing your work obviously agrees with you. Is this a good time to talk about what you might be working on next?" Marcus picked up his pen and began to doodle on the pad in front of him. He wrote Edward's name and put a question mark next to it as he spoke.

"Give me a break," Edward protested, "I've just finished the last one. Anyway, I've got a few things to organise here before I can start writing again."

"Another project?"

"No, it's to do with Bella," Edward admitted, "you know, the one you met on the phone."

Sitting alone in his office, Marcus cringed.

"Oh, *Bella*," he said, "right, we've met."

"Yes you have, although you'll get a chance to meet her in person when the book comes out."

"Based on what I've been reading, I look forward to it," Marcus replied, "she sounds like an incredible woman."



\* \* \* \* \*

"How are my girls going?" Bella stuck her head out of the kitchen long enough to see how Angela and Alice were coping with the morning rush.

"We might need you out here soon, Boss," Alice called over her shoulder as she kept making coffees with her usual brisk efficiency, "things are getting busy. How are you truckin' in there?"

"The next batch is almost done, I'll be right out," Bella answered as she ducked back into the kitchen and picked up the piping bag to finish frosting.

Alice's predictions about the review had been right; the increase in business so far had been steady and showed no signs of slowing down. Angela had been coaxed into the kitchen to make a lot of her cranberry and orange muffins which seemed to be walking out the door with accompanying takeaway coffee just as much as the cupcakes usually did. Bella finished icing the latest batch of cupcakes and set the frosting back aside, pausing to roll her neck and work out some kinks.

"Boss," Angela called, "we've got people wanting to know what your answer to the quote is."

"Coming," Bella answered back as she carefully hefted the tray of cupcakes and carried them out into the store, "Alice, assume the position."

"Gotcha," Alice answered as she snatched up the chalkboard and a piece of chalk.

"Okay," Bella began, pitching her voice a little louder so that the waiting customers could hear, "in response to the delightful Alice here," she grinned as Alice bobbed a curtsy, "we have *No Time Like The Present* White Russian cupcakes with a cherry garnish." Bella gave Alice an expectant smile. "Get it? Russian, as in rush?"

"That one was too easy," Alice commented as Bella put the cupcakes into the display cabinet and stood back as Angela promptly sold one.

"Maybe you're getting soft," Bella said as she patted her shoulder. "How about I spot you here," she nodded at the coffee machine.

"Would you?" Alice shot her a relieved smile "I've got a few jobs that need doing before we get too busy."

"Get going," Bella urged her, "I'll do this. How about you Angela, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Angela sang as she handed over some change with a smile.

Alice darted out from behind the counter to collect some empty cups and wipe down the tables that had been vacated. There was enough of a lull in customers for Angela to finish making the bagels and Bella to rearrange the display cabinet stock.

"Do you think we'll have enough?" Angela said as she slid another tray of turkey and ham wraps into the cabinet, nodding towards the cupcakes. "They're the star attraction after all."

"We'll find out soon enough, just keep an eye on things and let me know if I need to make more," Bella advised. She held up an empty cup and at Angela's enthusiastic nod began to make them all another coffee.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward finished his conversation with Marcus and set the phone down, spying his empty coffee cup as he did so. Picking it up he carried it into the kitchen, setting it down on the sink as he opened the dishwasher and began to unstack the dinner plates from the previous night. True to form, Emmett had arrived with Rosalie, a healthy appetite for someone else's cooking, and plenty of questions. Fortunately there had been enough provisions in the refrigerator for Edward to make a big pot of chilli, and when told what dinner would be Emmett and offered to bring the corn chips and sour cream.

Rosalie and Bella had fallen into their usual easy conversation which had been triggered by an admiring comment over Rosalie's boots as soon as they had arrived. Bella had poured two glasses of wine in short order and the women had retired to the sofa to keep chattering. Emmett had remained in the kitchen and hoisted himself up onto the bench top where he sat and peppered Edward with questions about the forthcoming living arrangements.

"You know I won't let her sell the apartment, right?" Emmett had asked before taking a swig of his beer.

"I wouldn't expect her to," Edward had pointed out in a mild voice as he stirred the chilli and tapped the wooden spoon on the rim of the pot before setting it down on the chopping board, "but if she ever wants to it's her decision."

"Ours," Emmett clarified, "we're both investors in the property." He regarded Edward for a moment before continuing. "Listen, man, I'm not trying to be the bad guy here, but she's my little sister. I've gotta know she's going to be okay."

"She will be," Edward said as he sipped at his beer, "she and I have talked it through, and she's talked to you. What else do you need to know?"

"Nothin'," Emmett admitted as he rubbed the back of his neck and surprised Edward with a sheepish grin. "Sorry, I guess I've always looked out for her and it's kinda hard to let that go."

"No problem," Edward shrugged, "sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to have a brother or sister to relate to the way you guys do."

"Wasn't always easy," Emmett confessed with a rueful smile, "we've had our moments. But once Charlie and Renee were gone we suddenly realised we were all we had." His expression became pensive for a moment. "For a while there I figured she and Jake would-," he broke off with a sigh and then looked at Edward, "but we all know how that turned out."

"Was it that bad?" Edward risked the question. He hadn't wanted to pry but with Emmett in an expansive mood he couldn't resist the opportunity.

"How much as she told you?" Emmett gave him a shrewd look.

"She told me how he came out, how it all happened."

"Man," Emmett stared down the neck of his beer bottle and shook his head before having another swig. "Yeah, it was bad. She just retreated into herself for a long time."

Emmett thought back to the months after Jake had come out. Bella had put on a brave face when she was in public, letting her guard down only in the presence of Emmett and friends whose discretion she trusted. She had thrown herself into her studies and withdrawn from socialising. Emmett hadn't realised what had been happening until one of her friends had emailed him to give him the basics of the situation. When he had phoned Bella that night he had been shocked at the lifeless tone of her voice. He had flown her to New York for a weekend, and she had seized at the opportunity to escape.

The pair of them had drowned Bella's sorrows in a frenzy of sight-seeing, take-out meals and late night conversations. By the time she returned to college she still felt vulnerable but strengthened by her brother's reassurance presence in her life. Mercifully, Jake maintained a low profile; respecting his friendship with Bella enough not to flaunt his newfound lifestyle in front of her.

Emmett had watched as his sister forged a new life for herself, throwing herself into the endless variety that New York had to offer, but all the while maintaining a careful distance between herself and anyone that got too close. Watching her as the years progressed, Emmett had lamented Renee's passing anew, wishing that Bella had someone to talk to. When Edward came on the scene, Emmett had watched his sister slowly blossom, for that alone he was grateful for Edward's presence in Bella's life.

"Still," the big man continued, "everyone moves on, and the store has been really good for her." He gave Edward a meaningful look. "I've watched her go from strength to strength so if she's ready for what you're offering then more power to her."

The chilli bubbled in the pot again and Edward turned to give it a quick stir before glancing at his watch; dinner would be ready soon.

"Thanks, Em," Edward said, "she means the world to me."

"Likewise," Emmett said holding up his beer bottle in a silent toast.

Edward grinned and clinked his bottle against it before pitching his voice loud enough for the women in the next room to hear.

"Bells," he called, "dinner's nearly ready."

"So are we," Bella called back and then appeared seconds later with Rosalie in tow. She opened the cupboard and pulled out some bowls and cutlery before looking up to see Edward regarding her with a slight smile. "What?"

"Nothin," Edward said as he gave her a quick kiss, "just admiring the view."

"Oh hush," Bella smiled. "I think they're having a moment," she said in a stage whisper to Rosalie as she walked past.

"I think so," Rosalie nodded in agreement, "there seems to be a bit of bromance in the air."

"Hey," Emmett objected, "we were having a serious conversation here."

"So were we," Rosalie said as she gave him a kiss.

"Really?" Emmett leaned in for another kiss, "what were you talking about?"

"What were *you* guys talking about?" Rosalie said with a teasing smile as she stared into his eyes.

Emmett was the first to blink. "Okay," he said as he looked at Edward, "time for chilli?"

"Sure," Edward said as he pulled the pot off the heat. "Get the corn chips, and there's some fresh guacamole in the fridge."

"Outstanding," Emmett said, glancing over at Rosalie as he busied himself with his allotted tasks. "How's this, Babe? Is the distraction working?"

"Like a charm," Rosalie said as she gave him a light slap on the rump, "I can't remember what I asked you at all."

Emmett gave Edward a hopeful look. "How do you think that went?"

"Smooth, Em," Edward said with a laugh as he carried the pot over to the table, "really smooth."

The evening hadn't been late, but it had been very good. The conversation had been punctuated with teasing comments and laughter, and Edward felt the warmth of a genuine friendship growing between himself and Emmett, and knew that Bella felt the same way about Rosalie. It felt good, and it felt like family.

Edward smiled to himself as he remembered Emmett's cautious line of questioning last night; Bella's brother took his role of protector quite seriously in a way that was loving but not intrusive.

He finished stacking the dishwasher and then walked around the apartment giving it a once-over. He found that he was looking at his home in a new light now that he knew he was going to be sharing it with someone else. He was pleased to note that there was plenty of blank wall space, so Bella would have fun finding places to hang her numerous pictures and curios. His mother had helped him furnish the apartment and they had kept things to a neutral colour scheme. No doubt Bella would be adding a lot of colour, and he grinned at the thought. He couldn't wait.

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"I'm cleaning up while we've got a moment, I don't think we can afford to way on stuff like that today." Alice darted out from behind the counter to collect some empty cups and wipe down the tables that had been vacated. There was enough of a lull in customers for Angela to finish making the bagels and Bella to rearrange the display cabinet stock.

"Do you think we'll have enough?" Angela said as she slid another tray of turkey and ham wraps into the cabinet.

"I guess there's only one way to find out," Bella shrugged, "we're heading into the great unknown now, but it'll be fun."

"I think so," Angela agreed.

"Speaking of which," Bella went on in a deceptively mild tone, "Edward and I decided that we're going to live together."

"Sorry," Angela put her knife down and stared at Bella who was focussing her attention on the coffee that was trickling into the cups. "Could you say that again?"

"Say what again?" Alice paused on her way to the dishwasher, fully laden plastic tub balanced on her hip. "What'd I miss?"

"I think the Boss Lady here," Angela gestured to Bella who was starting to froth the milk and hide her grin, "said something about living arrangements."

"Oh?" Alice's eyes were wide with curiosity now. She set the tub down on the workbench with a thump and served a customer while Bella finished making their coffees. "One more, Boss, tall latte."

"Right," Bella said. She banged out the filter and filled it with fresh coffee that she set to percolate as she got the milk out again. Working seamlessly with Alice the order was filled and the customer departed with their muffin and coffee.

Angela had gone back to work clearing up the workbench where she had been making the bagels and wraps, putting the cover back on the tubs of meat and fillings that she then moved into the refrigerator. As soon as the customer had departed she and Alice both pounced back onto the conversation with Bella.

"Tell," Angela commanded as Bella handed her a coffee, "what's going on?"

"And when did this happen?" Alice chimed in as she accepted her cup from Bella with a smile.

"Yesterday morning," Bella smiled. "We're still working things out but it's definitely happening."

"Good," Angela commented as she sipped at her coffee before setting her cup down with a smile and attending to another customer. It seemed their days of being able to relax for a coffee and leisurely chat, were behind them.

"You don't think we're rushing?" Bella asked, curious.

"Nope," Angela said as she put returned to the conversation. "It's a natural progression and you guys are good together. Of course," she went on, "it makes me feel better about telling you that Ben and I have been talking about it too."

The two women turned and looked at Alice.

"We haven't talked about it," Alice answered the unspoken question, biting the inside of her lip. It was true. She and Jasper hadn't discussed living together. They had, however, discussed marriage.

"So you and Ben," Bella said with a speculative glint. "You're going to have to tell us more."

"I could," Angela agreed with a nod, "or I could get back to work," she said as she swigged down her coffee as another customer approached.

"She got out of that easily enough," Alice commented as Angela greeted her customer with a smile and got to work.

"Sure did," Bella replied, nodding as Angela called out the coffee order. She grabbed a takeaway cup and set the coffee to percolating. "There's something else we need to talk about too."

"Which is?" Alice gave Bella a wary look.

"Our Christmas party," Bella answered as she poured some milk into the stainless steel jug and began to froth it.

"Ohh," Alice's face lit up, "have you thought of anything?" As far as Alice was concerned it was a welcome distraction. She avoided the topic of her relationship with Jasper as much as possible, not wanting to label of possibly jinx what she had going on with him.

"I've been looking around at some bars we could go to," Bella said as she poured the milk into the cup and spooned on some milk froth before covering it with a plastic lid and handing it over to Angela, "and some restaurants nearby."

"Right," Alice nodded, "guess it won't be as small as last year's get together, either."

"You're right there, for one thing there's Angela and Ben," Bella smiled.

"And Jasper and Edward," Alice added.

"And Emmett and Rosalie," Bella went on, "and maybe Jake if he wants to come along. He's dating someone and it sounds like it could be going well."

"Really?" Alice was surprised at this, "You've heard from him?" Since Jake and Bella had what Alice now referred to as 'The Talk' he had been missing in action for a few weeks.

"Not often, but we've been emailing," Bella shrugged, "and he calls from time to time. This new guy sounds ... nice."

Alice watched Bella's expression turn thoughtful. "Is that nice in a good or bad way?"

"Huh?" Bella glanced at Alice as she put the milk in the fridge. "Oh it's good, definitely good. Jake was actually sounding relaxed when we spoke. I think he might actually be settling down."

"Sounds like everybody's doing it," Alice commented as she picked up a dishcloth and gave the counter a quick wipe, "maybe relationships have gone viral this year." She grinned as Bella laughed. "But back to the main topic, what ideas have you had?"

"Actually," Bella stepped away from the coffee machine and leaned against the bench behind her as she folded her arms, "I was thinking about maybe having the party here."

"Here?" Alice looked sceptical.

"What's here?" Angela appeared at Alice's elbow looking curious.

"The Boss is thinking of having the Christmas party here," Alice explained.

"We get a Christmas party?" Angela looked excited, "That's so cool."

"It's nothing huge," Bella explained, "but I was thinking that we could have it here after hours. Think about it-," she pushed herself away from the workbench and rounded the coffee machine to gesture out to the shop front area. "We can move some of the tables aside, do it all by candlelight with some great music."

"And we can make some good food," Angela supplied.

"Oh to hell with that," Bella turned back to the two women with a grin, "I'm getting it catered. I don't want us working in the kitchen if it's our party. Plus if we have it here we can kick our shoes off and have a really great time."

"You know," Alice said slowly as she warmed to the idea "I think you might be on to something."

"Really?" Bella looked pleased.

"Sure." Alice glanced at the counter and then out into the store. Things seemed to be slowing down a little and for the moment they didn't have any customers to serve. She strolled into the store and waved a hand at the front windows. "We don't have any blinds there, but I know where I can get some cheap fabric to hang up some sheers to dress the windows up, and we've got plenty of vases and jars we can use for the candles. The images grew in her mind's eye and her face took on a dreamy expression. "With all the wood and brass fittings in here this place will look stunning by candlelight." A thought occurred to her and she spun around to point at Bella and Angela in turn. "We'll have to work out what you two are going to wear, of course."

"I didn't think it would take you long to get to that," Angela laughed. "I suppose you already have something in mind?"

"I may have one or two ideas," Alice said with a gracious nod.

"Ideas?" Bella prodded.

"Preliminary sketches," Alice clarified, "along with some fabric swatches."

"You started designing what we were going to wear to the Christmas party?" Angela asked in a faint voice. Alice's forward planning could be a little intimidating at times.

"Not really," Alice admitted, "but I found some great fabric vintage pieces that I bought for a song and knew they would work for you two. Why not kill two birds with one stone?"

"You're on," Bella said with a decisive nod, "but I'm paying you for them."

"Like hell you are," Alice snorted, "they're my Christmas present to you guys."

"Alice," Bella walked towards her and put a friendly arm around her shoulders for a gentle shake, "I'm paying you for my outfit one way or another, so just get used to the idea."

"I won't take the money," Alice said as she put her hands on her hips.

"Tough," Bella replied in a voice that was just as stubborn. "Everyone that knows you figures it's only a matter of time before you're selling your stunning creations, so you might as well get used to the idea."

Alice looked up into Bella's warm regard. "What, you don't want me here?"

"Are you nuts?" Bella scoffed, "you will always have a job here, but I think we both know that toting coffee isn't your real passion. We're all just waiting for you to take the leap and do it."

"Huh?"

"Okay," Bella rubbed her forehead with her free hand and then gently pushed Alice towards a free table, "this is going to take a couple of minutes. Angela, are you okay for a while?"

"Yup," Angela nodded, "go do your thing."

Bella turned back to Alice. "Sit," she pointed at a chair, and Alice sat down. Bella took the seat opposite her and leaned forward with her elbows on the table. "Alice, I've watched your design style get better and better, you've *got* to do something about it."

"Have you been talking to Jasper?" Alice asked with slightly narrowed eyes.

"No, but it's good to know he and I are of the same opinion," Bella replied. "Alice I believe with my whole heart that you are destined for greater things, and what I'm trying to say here is that I'm going to support you however you want to do it."

Alice opened her mouth to protest and then subsided. "What do you think I should do?"



"I think we both know I don't know enough about fashion to advise, but maybe you could talk to Emmett about the financial side of things. As for getting it all made, you can cut your hours back here so you've got more time to work at home."

"Cut my hours? But you're just getting busy now that you've been reviewed."

"Then I'll hire another worker," Bella shrugged, "and you can help screen whoever it is, unless you know another Angela." Bella smiled at Alice's dumbfounded look. "You don't have to decide now, take your time and let me know when you think you might feel brave enough to do it." Bella stood up from the table and walked around it to give Alice a quick kiss on the cheek. "In the meantime, let's get the Christmas party organised."

Alice gave Bella a grateful smile. "You know, you're a great boss."

"Alice," Bella grinned, "don't call me Boss."

"Sorry, Boss."

Alice sat at the table a moment longer and then looked up as some customers began to filter into the store. Glancing up at the wall clock she saw that it was nearly lunchtime, and she had a feeling they were going to be very busy indeed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jasper looked at his wristwatch as he waited to cross the street. It was the end of the day and he was on his way to meet Alice at the bakery to walk her back to his place. He got out his cell phone and sent her a text.

*Nearly there. C U in 5 x*

He kept his phone in his hand until he heard a quiet cheep and checked the screen.

*day. Look for the tired zombie x*

Jasper grinned at her choice of phrase and stuffed his phone back into his coat pocket as he quickened his pace. A few minutes later he rounded the block and peered ahead; he could see Alice bundled up and leaning against the window, her chin tucked into her scarf as she tried to keep warm.

"Hey," Alice greeted Jasper with a tired smile as he approached.

"Sweetheart," Jasper wrapped his arms around her to give her a kiss and then draped his arm around her shoulder to propel her in the direction of home. "You look beat."

"I am," Alice sighed, "today was nuts."

"You knew it would be," Jasper commented. "Did you guys cope okay?"

"Yeah," Alice yawned, "I didn't feel too tired until we closed and then it just seemed to hit all of us."

Jasper peered over her shoulder and into the store. "Have the others left?"

"Yeah," Alice yawned, "they were exhausted so we bailed as soon as we could."

"Sorry I'm late but some students held me up. How about I take my poor, tired girl home?"

"Sounds good," Alice said as she leaned into Jasper's side a little more as they walked. He tightened his grip around her shoulders, holding her close as he negotiated them both through traffic back to his apartment. The weather was getting colder and he glanced down as Alice shivered and moved closer. "Have you got a warmer coat?"

"I have," Alice yawned, "I've got a big goose-down one at home."

"Maybe we should go back to yours and get it," he commented with a frown, "you don't look like you're warm enough."

"I'm okay," Alice shook her head and shot him a grin, "you can keep me warm."

"If you insist," he growled and wagged his eyebrows at her. They walked on in silence until he felt Alice shiver again. "Enough," Jasper said, bringing them to a halt.

"What?" Alice gave him a puzzled look as Jasper unwound his scarf.

"Here," he said as he wrapped it around her neck, stuffing it down the front of her coat to keep her chest warm. Alice stood still and allowed his ministrations. When he was done he put his hands on her shoulders and smiled into her eyes. "Better?"

"Much," she wrinkled her nose fondly at him, tucking her hand through his arm as they continued on their way. It was true, she was feeling much warmer, but it wasn't from the scarf.

They had gotten home to Jasper's apartment where he had made them a quick dinner while Alice luxuriated under a warm shower. The meal was enjoyed on the sofa in front of the television, and Jasper had leaned back and flicked through cable channels as Alice gathered their dishes and gave them a quick wash. Retrieving some notes from his satchel he began to flick through some session plans, listening to a news station with half an ear. Twenty minutes later he realised that Alice was pacing aimlessly around his apartment.

"You okay, sweetheart?" he asked as he looked over the back of the sofa.

"Hmm? Yeah, I'm fine," Alice replied in an absent tone as she flicked through the newspaper. "I just feeling like doing something is all."

"I thought you were going to have an early night?" Jasper commented from his position on the sofa. He was a little surprised to see her looking so alert. She had all but sleepwalked home under his guidance but now that she had eaten she seemed to have a new rush of energy.

"So did I," Alice said in an absent voice as she read the local cinema offerings, "but I feel too wired to sleep. Let's go see a movie."

"O-kay," Jasper said in a dubious tone. "Whatever you want is fine by me."

"Well what do you feel like seeing?" Alice said, her gaze not moving from the screen.

"Whatever you feel like," Jasper shrugged as he scratched his chest through his t-shirt and went back to his session plan for the rest of the week.

"C'mon, there must be something you want to see."

"Nope, I'm easy," Jasper said as he kept reading.

"Look, just pick one and we'll go," Alice said in exasperation.

"And I've already told you, I don't care what we see," looking up to see Alice standing in front of the table casually flicking through the movie listing.

"Jasper," Alice stamped her foot, "I'm telling you to pick one," she thrust the newspaper into his lap and headed into the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" Jasper called after her.

"I'm getting ready to go out," she called back, "assuming you make a decision."

Jasper watched her go with a slight smile. He honestly wasn't bothered which movie they went to see, but it amused him to see her so bothered by his easy-going approach to the situation. For someone that was used to being in control she didn't respond to uncertainty very well at all, but she needed to relax a bit. He pushed his glasses up his nose and looked at the movie offerings again.

"Okay," he said as he pitched his voice so that she would be able to hear him from the bathroom, "we'll go see the French one."

"Fine," Alice said, "but I'm choosing the snacks."

"Done," Jasper answered. He got to his feet and pushed his glasses up his nose while he looked around for some shoes. "Walk or cab?"

"You're just not able to make decisions today are you," Alice said as she breezed past him and reappeared holding his Doc Martin boots, "here," she handed them over along with a pair of socks.

"How did you know I wanted those?" Jasper said as he accepted the boots.

"Because I know you better than you think I do, and don't think," she tapped a finger on his chest, "that I don't know that you're pushing my buttons."

"Aw c'mon," Jasper tried to protest but his grin gave him away.

"I knew it," Alice threw her hands up in disgust and went to collect her coat and scarf while Jasper pulled on his boots. "Just tell me why?"

"Because," Jasper finished lacing up and then strolled over to accept the coat that Alice held waiting, "it does you good to get all riled up sometimes."

"Can't think why," Alice muttered as she pulled her scarf on and round her neck with quick angry movements.

"Well for one thing," Jasper stepped closer so that he could slide his hands around her waist and pull her back against his hips, "you're really hot when you're mad."

"Am not," Alice retorted as she ducked her chin to hide her smile.

"Yes you are," Jasper breathed, giving her earlobe a gentle nip, before sliding his hands up to cup her breasts, "you are the sexiest, most exasperating woman I've ever met."

Alice's eyes fluttered closed and she wavered between annoyance and arousal.

"Damn you, Whitlock," she growled, "get your coat and let's get out of here before we miss the movie."

"Yes'm," Jasper grinned before he made a soft growling noise and sank his teeth into her neck, backing away with a laugh as Alice wriggled and squirmed out of his grasp.

"That's just cost you some Junior Mints, smart guy," Alice said, although the smile on her face completely undermined her threat.

"Totally worth it," Jasper said with an unrepentant grin as he finished pulling on his coat and followed Alice towards the door. He looked at her clothing and realised that they were going to have to pay a visit to her apartment soon to retrieve some more clothes. They clumped down the stairs together hand in hand and Jasper held the door open for her as she stepped outside with a wince into the cold night air.

"Oh," Alice turned to Jasper suddenly and put a hand on his chest, "I can't believe I didn't tell you the news."

"Which is?" he asked, amused at the delighted smile on her face.

"Edward and Bella are going to live together," she grinned.

"Really?" Jasper's eyebrows went up at this. Edward hadn't mentioned it to him, although he knew that Edward had been keen to finish his manuscript as soon as possible. The weather had kept them both from jogging and he immediately made a mental note to call his friend soon to catch up. "Sounds like things are getting serious."

"Has he gotten serious like this before?" Alice asked as they walked and Jasper scanned the traffic for a vacant cab.

"Not that I recall," Jasper said, "although the opportunity has certainly been there." He glanced down at Alice. "How about Bella?"

"Dunno," she shrugged. "I don't think she's lived with another guy since Jake."

"Ah," Jasper gave a sage nod. Alice had filled him in on that aspect of Bella's history. "Interesting."

"You could say that," Alice replied after they had walked on in a thoughtful silence. "Do you think they can do it?"

"Why not?" Now it was Jasper's turn to shrug. "They've got as much chance as anyone." He gave her a sidelong look. "Even us."

"Yeah, right," Alice scoffed, and then looked up to see that Jasper was still regarding her with a thoughtful air. "You're serious?"

"Sure, you know we've talked about this."

"Well, yeah," Alice floundered now. She had gone from introducing what she thought was a hot new piece of gossip to finding herself in uncharted territory. She had mapped out her life well enough so far but found when it came to matters of the heart she was completely lost.

"And?" Jasper gently guided her back to the conversation, "what's your snappy comeback this time?"

"I can't believe we're talking about this again," Alice muttered. She withdrew her hand from Jasper's arm and stuffed her hands into her coat pockets, hunching her shoulders against the chill.

"C'mon," Jasper cajoled as he put an affectionate arm around her shoulders.

"I've told you before," Alice huffed in irritation, "I grew up getting told not to get married and not to have kids, and here I am."

"Mmm," Jasper nodded. The subject of her childhood was a touchy subject, "and you know I'm not going to push *but*," he paused to make sure he had her attention, "I'm not going anywhere."

"So I see," Alice replied as her hand crept out of its pocket to reach out for Jasper's. He immediately clasped her hand in his own and gave it a gentle squeeze. The remainder of the conversation remained unspoken and yet they walked on in perfect understanding.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I just don't get it," Bella sighed as she flopped onto the bed and gazed at Edward as he shucked off his jeans and pulled on a pair of track pants.

She felt exhausted; every muscle in her body ached and she felt a hundred years old and yet now that she was home all she could think of was how much she had to do. That and how good Edward looked of course. She was distracted from her thoughts of packing as she admired the play of muscles in Edward's legs as he pulled on his change of clothes. She had called him to suggest they meet at her apartment, but instead he had surprised her by arriving at the bakery not long after closing time in a cab that he had kept waiting with the meter running until she was ready to go. She had bundled up the day's takings that had exceeded her expectations and stashed them in the store safe before locking up and stumbling into the cab and Edward's open arms.

"You don't get what?" he walked over to the bed and crawled towards her.

"How I can have regular culls and yet *still* end up with so much stuff that has to move." She rolled onto her side and propped herself up on one elbow. "I'm having my doubts, Cullen."

"About moving?" Edward frowned as he turned his head to gaze at her.

"Not about moving," she assured him, and he managed to hide his relief, "just the logistics. I mean-," she waved her free hand at the room. "I work six days a week, I just don't see how I'm going to get this done."

"Well," Edward stared up at the ceiling for a moment gathering his thoughts before looking back at Bella, "I know one thing you could deal with so that you don't have to take it with you."

"Oh?" Bella was miles away as she tried to think of where she could get some more packing boxes, "what's that?"

"The elephant in the room," Edward said simply, and held his breath as she turned to look at him. "I've finished the manuscript, why won't you read it?"

Edward held her gaze until she blinked and looked away. The silence stretched between them and he found himself counting their breaths, wondering about the argon flowing between them. Such a simple thing; an inert gas that was used in fluorescent lighting, and yet it had been there in the vows and sighs of ancient lovers and the battle cries of Waterloo. Now it was floating between himself and Bella and he watched her take a deep breath as she blinked and looked at him with worried eyes.

"What if," she licked her lips and started again. "I'm scared that-," she blinked and cleared her throat. "It's just that," her hands twisted the hem of her shirt until Edward reached over and covered her hand with his. The warmth of his hand seeped into her skin and soothed her.

"Say it," he urged her.

And suddenly it was that easy.

"I'm scared that I won't like it," she confessed.

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"There," Alice said as she dropped down into her seat and set her soda down in the cupholder, "that wasn't so hard was it."

"No," Jasper sighed as he sank down into his seat. He stowed his soda and rested his candy on his lap before reaching over to pull Alice closer. She took the opportunity to snuggle against him and open his box of Junior Mints at the same time.

"So," Alice began in an off-hand tone, "Bella sat me down and told me that I need to start doing something about my fashion."

"Really?" Jasper glanced down at Alice, who kept her gaze firmly on the screen. "What did she say?"

"Just that I ought to take a chance and make something of it," Alice shrugged, holding the box of candy to Jasper who shook some into his hand.

"Like I've been saying," Jasper commented.

"Yup," Alice nodded. "She had some good ideas."

Jasper waited but it seemed she wasn't going to elaborate unless prodded.

"And?" he prompted, "What sort of ideas?"

"About how I could go part-time so that I'd have time to design, you know, supportive stuff like that."

"How did you feel about it?"

"I don't know," Alice admitted, "flattered, scared, all that stuff." She frowned, "but I don't know if I can afford to go part-time. Until I start selling my income can't really take a hit, not with rent to pay."

"You know we've talked about that," Jasper said as he nudged squeezed her shoulder.

"I know," Alice looked up at him and wrinkled her nose. "I just-," she broke off and sighed, "it's a lot to take in. Can you give a girl time to think things through?"

"Sure," Jasper nodded.

Alice blinked up at him for a moment and then offered a hesitant smile. "So, this could all be really happening?"

"If you let it," Jasper smiled.

"Wow," Alice blinked as a wave of excitement and fatigue washed over her. Rousing herself she reached over and plucked a Junior Mint out of Jasper's hand and popped it into her mouth. "Mmm," she said as the chocolate began to melt on her tongue, "now I'm starting to feel relaxed."

"Right," Jasper said with amusement, "we just had to go outside into the freezing cold to catch a cab downtown to a cinema so you could tell me your big news of the day and I could buy you exorbitantly priced candy."

"But it's making me feel better," Alice said in a small voice.

Jasper looked down to see Alice peering up at him from where she had her head resting on his shoulder, and sighed.

"Then it's a good thing," he said in a gentle voice, and Alice smiled before snuggling against him with a quiet sigh as Jasper rubbed his hand up and down her shoulder in a soothing rhythm.

The lights dimmed as the trailers began to screen, and Alice was asleep before the film's opening credits had even finished. Jasper noticed this with a mild sigh and shifted slightly to get comfortable before resigning himself to watching a movie that he knew nothing about while his girl slept soundly against his shoulder.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward blinked at Bella and felt himself relax. At last they were finally talking about the subject that they had been skirting for months, and it wasn't as bad as he thought it would be.

"That's what had you worried all this time?" he reached out and brushed some hair off Bella's face with a gentle hand.

Bella sighed and leaned into his touch before blinking sleepily at him.

"Well," she gave him a wry smile, "that and the fact that Marcus told me a bit of what you were writing about."

"Right," Edward's lips tightened.

"Are you mad that I found out that way?" Bella ventured as she watched his expression.

"Yeah, a little," Edward admitted. "I wanted to show you myself without someone blurting it out, but somehow it just never happened. I wanted to," he went on, wanting to reassure her now, "I never wanted to hide it, but I was just waiting for the right time and for some reason it just never came."

"Life's funny like that," Bella nodded. "Charlie used to tell Emmett and I not to wait because life isn't a dress rehearsal."

"Good advice," Edward nodded, "he was a smart man."

"He never thought so," Bella's smile was sleepier now, "he always said it was common sense, but have you ever noticed that common sense isn't common?"

Edward nodded as he ran his hand down Bella's arm and settled it on her hip as he pulled himself closer to her.



"Hmm," he ran his nose along Bella's jaw and nuzzled her neck, making her give a slow but delighted squirm.

"So," Bella ventured after they had exchanged a soft kiss, "how much am I in there?"

"A lot," Edward admitted, "but there are a lot of other characters too." He pulled back so that he could look into her eyes. "I didn't use your name, but there's enough in there for you to recognise as being you."

"Right," Bella considered this and nodded. She hadn't been able to work out what it was Edward had been writing. Of course, she could have spared herself the angst and taken him up on his offer months ago, but for some reason she had shied away. The notion that she wasn't featuring as some sort of biographical character gave a measure of reassurance that she hadn't realised she needed. "When does it come out?"

"The book?" Edward blinked at her change of tack. "Not for a while, there's a lot of work to be done, it could be anything from six months to a year."

"So long?" Not it was Bella's turn to blink in surprise. "What on earth do they have to do?"

"Well," Edward took a breath and then glanced at her, "do you really want the technical details?"

"Bring it on," Bella nodded.

"Well for starters Marcus will read it and send the manuscript back with his comments for revision. I might agree with some, all or none, but it's a point for negotiation."

"But you said you'd already sent some to him," Bella pointed out.

"I did," Edward nodded, "that was what I wanted him to get a sense of what I'd been working on, but he hasn't read the whole thing."

"Gotcha," Bella snuggled a little closer to him, nudging him until he rolled onto his back and opened his arms so that she could snuggle against him with her head on his chest, "go on."

"When I've made the revisions the manuscript goes to a Copy Editor, and they check every word, the continuity, fact checking queries if needed, and they sent it back to the Editor. Marcus then checks the comments and sends it back to me so that I can answer the copy edit manuscript."

"Mm-hmm," Bella's eyes fluttered closed. Edward felt nice and warm and his voice was a reassuring rumble in his chest. He may not realise he was doing it, but he was running his hand in lazy circles over her back and occasionally combing her hair with his fingers.

"So once that's done, the Production Department gets involved. They choose a typeface, and the typesetter prepares an original cast-off which is when we know how many pages the book is going to be." Edward paused as he thought about this. "That's when I usually freak out."

"Why's that?" Bella asked.

"I guess it's one thing to write the damn thing, but finding out it's going to be anything from four hundred to seven hundred pages is kinda daunting." Some of Edward's books weren't known for their brevity. "Then they come up with the cover art which I have nothing to do with," Edward pulled a face which Bella couldn't see. Sometimes he liked the cover art, other times he wondered if anyone in the Department had taken the time to actually read the book, but it was out of his hands. "After that, I get a big fat package in the post, and that's the galley proof."

"Sounds like a pirate police line-up," Bella commented, startling a rumble of laughter from Edward that set her head to bouncing up and down on his chest until he subsided. Bella sighed and slid her arm around his waist as he kept talking.

"The galley proof is the typeset, unbound copy of the book, and if it's all okay then they go into production. Then Marketing gets involved and they send off advance copies to everyone they can think of. Book reviews are usually arranged anything up to six months in advance, so Marcus has been kinda ticked."

"Why's that?" Bella lifted her head to peer at Edward.

"That damn writer's block," he smiled at her indignant expression, protective of a book she hadn't even read yet. "It threw the whole schedule out, but they're working on a new timeline now to get things up to speed."

"Well that wasn't your fault," Bella huffed as she settled back against Edward's shoulder, "you didn't know you were going to get writer's block."

"True," Edward agreed, "but I have to say that the cure for it has been amazing and life changing."

"What was it?"

"You," Edward smiled at her look of surprise. "It was always you, Bella. I just didn't know that until I found you."

## **Ch25 Fashionable Phases of Life**

"I think that's the last of it," Emmett said as he shifted the stacked boxes off the moving trolley and stood wiping his face with the hem of his t-shirt.

"Oh you're such a good brother," Bella said as she emerged from the bedroom to collect another box from the ones Emmett had piled up in the living room.

"I'm your favourite brother, right?" Emmett gave her a hopeful look.

"You're my bestest, most favourite brother," she assured him.

"That's what I thought," Emmett grinned.

"And the fact that I'm going to be cooking for you for the next year to thank you for helping me move has nothing to do with it," Bella went on.

"Well it doesn't have to be a whole year," Emmett said after a ruminative pause, "but regular cupcake offerings will certainly be highly regarded in terms of paying off this massive debt of thanks you owe me."

"How massive are we talking about here?" Bella called as she hefted a box and carried it over to set down in front of the bookshelves.

"Oh I'm thinking at least once a month," Emmett suggested with a grin. He peered at the boxes in the pile and read Bella's handwritten label on the top. Seeing they were full of books he gave a quiet sigh and eased them back onto the trolley so that he could wheel them over to Bella. "How about I just set these ones here and you can unpack when you're ready."

"Thanks," Bella said in an absent voice as she stuffed a handful of books onto an empty shelf.

Emmett watched her efforts with mild interest as he took the opportunity for a break.

"Aren't you going to put them into some sort of order?" It hadn't escaped his notice that Edward's bookshelves were alphabetised.

"Nope," Bella said, "I like having them in random order. It means I have to go looking and then sometimes I find books I forgot I had." She gave him an impish grin, "plus it's going to freak Edward out."

"If that's what you want," Emmett said with a low chuckle.

"I figure it can't hurt for him to get a little ruffled on occasion," Bella went on, completely unaware that Edward had entered the apartment and was silently creeping up behind her.

"Like that is it?" Edward said in a low voice beside Bella's ear, laughing and stepping back when she gave a shriek of surprise.

"Edward," Bella turned and swatted his arm as he ducked away with a grin and set down the box he was carrying. "And you," she turned and pointed at Emmett who was wearing a matching smile, "thanks for your backup there."

"Hey," Emmett spread his hands in a gesture of surrender, "I'm not getting involved."

"Right," Bella scoffed as she reached for another handful of books. Edward watched as she studied the spines for a moment and then set them on the shelf, shoving them against the other books already there and holding them steady as she reached for more.

"I hadn't actually thought of it like that," Edward commented, and went on when Bella looked up at him, "the random order I mean. I think I like it."

"Try it sometime and see what you think," Bella offered. "And it's not so random; I usually remember where they all are. My books are all like old friends to me."

"And soon you'll have a new one right, Babycakes?" Emmett commented as he reappeared from the kitchen having fetched a glass of water.

"Let's hope so," Edward answered. "Em, I'm getting another box, see you down there?"

"Sure, let me just finish this," Emmett held up his glass and Edward nodded before leaving the apartment. "So," he turned to Bella as soon as Edward had gone, "he's told you more about the book?"

"A bit," Bella nodded as she reached for more books. "We had a talk about it a couple of weeks back."

"And you're telling me now?" Emmett looked affronted.

Bella emptied the box and set it aside to reach for the next one. She would go back and sort through the books later, but for now she just wanted to get rid of the packing boxes. As it was the apartment looked like a war zone, and although there was more than enough space in the apartment Bella found it unsettling to see her surroundings in such a state of upheaval.

"Yup," Bella nodded.

"So how much do you know?" Emmett chugged down his water and set the glass down on one of the boxes.

"Enough to wait until it comes out," Bella replied as she gave him what she knew was an infuriating smile.

"Aw c'mon," Emmett protested as she knew he would. "You've gotta give me more than that."

"Nuh-uh," Bella shook her head as she picked up a box labelled 'Kitchen', "I want to be as surprised as everyone else."

"How surprised?" Emmett narrowed his eyes as he watched her reaction. He was fishing for clues, however small.

"*Good* surprised," Bella confirmed and then turned to walk towards the kitchen. "You'd better not leave Edward waiting."

"Right," Emmett muttered as she ran his hands through his close-cropped hair. "Good surprised, okay, I can work with that." He headed out of the apartment sure he had heard a muffled laugh as the door closed behind him. He got downstairs to see Edward leaning against the truck.

It had taken Bella two weeks and a few mornings off work to get her things packed up. There were a few choice pieces of furniture that she would be taking with her; Renee's armchairs, Charlie's barometer, the coffee table from the family home, but for the most part her furniture was not something she had a deep sentimental attachment to. Her books on the other hand, were an entirely different story. Her bookshelves had been

lovingly packed away, and along with her art collection were amongst the first items to be moved. Emmett and Edward had provided the muscle, and Emmett had procured a truck from work to help out.

"Sorry, man," he apologised as reached the street and jogged towards the truck as he fished out his keys, "Bells and I got talkin'."

"No worries," Edward waved off the apology. "Everything okay?"

"Sure," Emmett grinned, "she was telling me about the book."

"Really?" Edward's eyebrows went up at that, "So she told you about-," Edward broke off and considered Emmett who did his best to look unconcerned. "Wait, she didn't tell you anything."

"Dammit," Emmett groused as he tossed back the tarpaulin cover and started to an armchair towards him, "I thought I had you there."

"You nearly did," Edward admitted as he helped lift the chair, "but Bella told me how you guys used to play your folks against each other when you wanted something."

"Dammit," Emmett grunted as they lifted the chair off the back, "two against one, that ain't fair."

"Sure isn't," Edward agreed with a grin as they shuffled through the front door of the building and towards the service elevator. Edward hit the call button with his elbow and when the elevator doors opened they carried the door inside and set it down. Watching Emmett as he punched the button Edward cleared his throat and straightened up. It was now or never. "Em, there's something I've been wanting to talk to you about," he began.

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"Morning, Boss."

"Alice, don't call me Boss."

"Sorry, Boss," Alice beamed. "So, how was the big move, are you all done?"

"Mostly," Bella nodded as she unlocked the security grill and rolled it up.

"What does that mean?" Alice asked as she watched Bella unlock the front door, "are you in or not?"

"I'm in," Bella replied, "but I've still got to go back to my place and finish cleaning it to get it ready to let out."

"Sounds like fun," Alice commented as she followed Bella inside.

Bella flicked on the coffee machine and kept going into the kitchen to wrestle out of her goose down coat.

"So how was last night?" Alice asked as she followed suit.

"Quiet," Bella laughed, "by the time we had everything moved we were beat. Lucky for us Rosalie turned up with enough pizza to sink a battleship."

Bella smiled to herself as she slipped her apron on and tied it up at the back thinking about the evening before.

The moving process had progressed well enough but it wasn't until everyone sat down to relax that the efforts of the day had caught up with them; Bella had been so tired she had barely been able to string a sentence together. Emmett was working his way through what seemed to be a small lake's worth of water when the intercom had buzzed. Edward had staggered over to answer it and after a brief conversation had pressed the door release button, unlocked the apartment door and made his way back to the sofa with a tired grin.

"Em, you've got a good one," he announced as he sat down on the sofa with a soft groan and leaned curled up to rest his head on Bella's lap.

"My poor, tired guy," Bella cooed as she brushed back his hair.

"Damn right," Edward grunted. "Carrying boxes and furniture is very different to jogging."

Emmett finished chugging his water with an explosive sigh and looked up as the apartment door opened and a beaming Rosalie appeared with a pile of pizza boxes in one hand and a six-pack of beers in the other. Emmett gazed at his girl as if seeing a wondrous vision and walked towards her with his arms out-stretched.

"Holy hell," he greeted as he relieved her of the pizza, "I think I've died and gone to heaven."

"He says that every time I appear with food," Rosalie commented to Edward and Bella who were still sprawled on the sofa, "hey guys."

"Hey," Bella offered a tired wave, "I'd get up but," she indicated Edward who was showing no signs of getting up anytime soon.

"Stay there, I'll come to you," Rosalie smiled. "Plates or box?"

"Box," Edward and Bella said together.

Emmett stood with the pizza boxes looking around for somewhere to set them down until Edward jerked a thumb at the coffee table. The pizza boxes were set down and Emmett gave a beseeching look to Rosalie who was in the process of handing out some beers. "Babe, could you sit here?" he indicated an armchair with a nod of his head as he pulled a slice of pizza out of the top box.

"Uh, sure," Rosalie said with a mystified look as she sat down.

"Ahhh," Emmett gave a hearty sigh as he sat down on floor so that he was sitting between Rosalie's legs with the pizza right in front of him.

Rosalie gave a short laugh and passed a beer down which he accepted with alacrity. He popped off the cap and took a long swig before reaching for his pizza slice and took a big bite, chewing it with every sign of enjoyment.

Edward pushed himself up into a sitting position and passed the pizza box to Bella, taking a slice when she had helped herself to one and then leaned back on the sofa. "You okay there, big guy?" he asked Emmett who seemed determined to eat more pizza before he fell asleep where he was sitting.

"Never better," he assured Edward. "It's the end of a long day and I've got my girl, I've got food, I've got family, what more could a guy want?"

"Actually I can't think of anything," Edward admitted after a considered pause.

"And I'm just glad he named those items in that order," Rosalie chimed in. She reached forward to snag a slice of pizza, smiling as Emmett turned his head to give her a lusty kiss on the cheek.

The sound of the refrigerator door closing jolted Bella back to the task at hand, namely getting the morning coffees going as Alice had thoughtfully grabbed the milk out and set it on the bench as a prompt.

"So after dinner," she resumed the conversation about the night before, "I don't think any of us were capable of doing much."

"Then what?" Alice asked as she followed Bella out to the storefront.

"Not much," Bella shrugged as she got out some cups, "we ate and talked for a while, Emmett and Rosalie left and we called it a night."

"I see," Alice gave a hopeful leer at Bella who looked at her for a moment before pushing her hair off her face.

"No you don't," Bella gave a tired chuckle. "We slept like the dead, and when I got up this morning I had to try to remember where I'd put everything."

"Really?" Alice looked disappointed, "I thought you guys would have been celebrating."

"Oh we've been celebrating," Bella assured her, "just not yesterday."

"Gotcha," Alice nodded and then looked up with a smile as Angela pushed the door open and stepped in, her cheeks pink with cold, "Hey girl."

"Hey," Angela greeted as she breezed past to hang up her coat, "get that coffee ready Boss, it's *cold* out there."

"Comin' right up," Bella assured her and then looked at Alice with a raised eyebrow, "milk?"

"What do you think that is?" Alice nodded at the milk container she had set down on the counter earlier.

"I didn't even see you do that," Bella said as she reached for it, "Alice, you're *good*."

"That's what you pay me for," Alice said with a complacent sigh.

Angela reappeared and the three women got to talking about their weekend, Bella's move and important fashion advice from Alice.

"Dresses are fine, but I'm saying you're going to want a heavier fabric this time of year," Alice instructed as she sipped at her coffee in between tasks. "I've got a gorgeous wool blend print that is going to lend itself beautifully to what I have in store for you," she went on as she gestured at Bella with her cup.

"Ohh, what plans are those?" Bella looked up from her order forms.

"Let's just say it'll be a masterful blend of Diane von Furstberg and my devious mind," Alice said in a satisfied tone.

Bella tapped her pen against the clipboard as she considered Alice's words.

"Did you understand any of that?" she asked Angela.

"Not a word," Angela assured her, "let me know when she comes out with the English language version."

"Guys," Alice huffed, "all you need to know is that you're going to love it."

"Then that's all we need to know."

"Oh, and that you need to get boots," Alice added as an afterthought.

"What sort?" Angela asked as she looked up from her inventory of the freshly chopped ingredients she had assembled on the counter.

"Knee-high," Alice began as she ticked off the salient points on her fingers, "black or brown, you can get either but let me know which colour you go with, and the heel I'll leave up to you."

"Generous of her," Angela muttered in an amused undertone to Bella who gave a quiet snort.

"I heard that," Alice snapped, "now pay attention, I'm only going to say this once. No accessory shopping."

"Huh?" Bella looked surprised at this.

"You heard me," Alice replied, "I'll talk to your boys, they should have some input into this given you'll be wearing my dresses to our Christmas party."

"What sort of input do we have?" Angela objected.

Alice gave her a pitying look. "Didn't I just tell you that you could buy boots?"

"Is that it?" Angela stared at her.



"That's it," Alice nodded, "Now if you two have finished asking questions time's a-wasting. Get back to work." She waved an indulgent hand before winking and sailing out into the store to check the condiment supplies on the tables and once satisfied they were all right she went to get the chalkboard.

"Wow. When she's on a mission she gets drunk with power," Bella commented in a stage whisper to Angela.

"I can't deny it," Alice sang back, "it's like a drug." Alice grabbed the chalkboard and carried it over to the counter where Bella stood waiting. Alice held out her hand, "Chalk me," she instructed, grinning when Angela passed the stub of chalk over with all the efficiency of a surgical nurse. "Here goes," she said and wrote quickly.

"Any clues?" Angela said as she leaned over the counter to get a look.

"No clues needed, I'm done," Alice quipped. She dropped the chalk into its waiting cup and then swivelled the chalkboard so that the other two women could read it.

*Lead me not into temptation, I can find it myself.*

"I love it," Bella laughed, "but you're getting soft Alice, what's up with that?"

"Let's just call it an early Christmas present," Alice shrugged, "and I had a hankering for what I thought you might make when you saw this."

"Right," Bella nodded, "you better hope I have some," she said as she walked into the kitchen.

"Are you two talking in some kind of code?" Angela asked.

"Kinda," Alice conceded, "but you'll get the hang of it soon enough." She looked up as Bella reappeared in the doorway.

"You're in luck," Bella smiled before she disappeared again.

"I love it when a plan comes together," Alice said as Angela gave her a measuring stare. "What?"

"You know, you're the only one that seems to know what's going on around here today," Angela said as she paused, bagel in hand.

"Yeah," Alice couldn't conceal her satisfied snicker, "it's great."

"Right," Angela went back to work, thinking about the situation while Alice strolled to the stereo and put some more music in. "So," she ventured after a considered pause, "I'm thinking maybe you could share some of the goods."

"Huh?" Alice had strolled over to the mini hi-fi to put on some music.

"Well, you know what we're up to these days, how about what's up with you?" Angela ventured. She kept making up the bagels and wraps with her usual efficiency, but a brief glance upwards showed that Alice had paused in the act of flipping through the folder of cds that Bella kept in the store.

"Oh you know," Alice commented in a perhaps too casual tone, "the usual."

"Ah, so you're talking about moving in together then?" Angela added.

"Who told you?" Alice whipped around to face Angela with a startled look on her face.

"No-one," Angela grinned, "but you just did."

"Shhh," Alice frantically waved her hands in a shushing gesture. She opened the folder and grabbed a disk to put into the stereo and pushed play. As soon as the Black Eyed Peas were pumping out of the speakers she started talking again. "We're only," she waved a hand in a vague motion, "you know, talking."

"That's generally how these things start," Angela noted with a droll smile, "but what brought it on?"

"We went shopping on the weekend," Alice shrugged as she began filling the water jugs. The mixer started up in the kitchen and Alice relaxed slightly knowing that she wasn't about to be put under the radar just yet. "I got excited over some vintage clothes, we started talking about my fashion and he wanted to talk more about Bella's offer."

"It's a good offer," Angela replied, "you know we love you here but, Honey," Angela downed tools to give Alice her full attention, "you've got such a talent, why don't you see where you can take it?"

"You sound like Jasper," Alice gave her an amused smile as she dropped slices of fresh orange into the jugs before hefting them to carry them over to the small table where they would sit for customers to help themselves, "he keeps telling me the same thing."

"Maybe we're right," Angela commented. "We'll always want you here babe, but just ask yourself this," she paused and looked at Alice, "do you still want to be here in ten year's time, or do you want to be doing something different?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward took a few steps back as he inspected his handiwork and grinned to the thought of how different his life had become over the last few months. Gone were the mornings of museum like quiet in his apartment. Now he woke to the sounds of cohabitation: quiet singing in the shower, the rustling of clothes and clinking of plates and cups in the kitchen. Power tools shattered today's peace and quiet, and he found he couldn't be happier about it. Bella's move had gone smoother than anyone had expected, although Emmett hadn't been surprised.

"C'mon, man," he had said to Edward when he and Rosalie had been making their farewells the night before, "if she can get up at an ugly hour every day and still manage to smile about it, what *can't* she do?"

The next morning he had woken to the sound of a soft curse, and had cracked his eyes open to see Bella looking blearily at the time on her bedside clock before she had subsided back into his arms with a quiet sigh. The pair of them had stayed in bed tangled around each other as the minutes ticked by before Bella had nuzzled his neck and moved with regretful smile.

"Stay?" he had asked in a hopeful voice. The weekend had been a rush of boxes and unpacking and he was still looking forward to the notion of waking up without either of them having to go anywhere.

"Want to, can't," she had replied in their sleepy morning shorthand as she hauled herself into a sitting position and sat there for a moment as she tried to wake up. Edward reached up and ran his hand lightly down her back before cupping his hand on her hip. Bella turned her head to look over her shoulder at him. "You're not helping."

"Sorry," he mumbled into his pillow, but he really wasn't. His lips curled into a smile as she leaned over and brushed kiss against his cheek, squirming away as he reached for her again.

He had dozed in bed until Bella had left for work and after a quick breakfast had retrieved the supplies he had stashed under the bed where he had hoped Bella wouldn't find them. A couple of hours later Edward frowned and climbed up the ladder to jiggle what he had just fixed to the wall to ensure that it was sturdy. Satisfied he climbed down again and packed away the drill and stepladder before returning to sweep up after himself. He glanced at the walls again with a slight grin; Bella was going to love it. He glanced at the items that had been left stacked along the bookshelves and hesitated over them for a long moment. It had been his plan to have the project finished for when Bella got home, but now that he stood so near completion he realised the pleasure should be hers. He stepped away with some reluctance and began to pack away the drill instead.

He couldn't wait to see her reaction, but for now he was going to have to wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Now?"

"Not yet," Bella called back in answer to Alice's plaintive question.

There was a very brief pause. "Okay, how about now?"

Bella choked back a laugh as she finished garnishing the cupcakes on the tray and then stepped back with a nod of satisfaction. Alice had timed it well as the batch was ready, but she still got a kick out of making her wait. She turned towards the sink and washed and dried her hands before picking up the tray and walking out of the kitchen.

"Here they are," she announced as she appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Finally," Alice turned and put her hands on her hips as she watched Bella walk towards the display cabinet.

"You just can't handle suspense at all can you," Bella commented with a short laugh as she set down the tray.

"Not when I'm hungry," Alice quipped as she got three cups off the shelf and set them down next to the coffee machine with an expectant smile, "and I just know one of those will go great with a coffee."

"Do you now," Bella drawled, "well I guess we're lucky there's good coffee available."

"Damn right," Alice nodded as she fished out her piece of chalk. "Okay, Boss, what are these ones called?"

"I'm calling these ones *Original Temptation*, Apple Crumble Cupcakes," Bella announced as Alice scribbled furiously.

"Nice," Alice nodded as she propped up the chalkboard on the waiting easel, "they'll go well today."

Moments later two customers stepped up to the counter and ordered coffee and temptation cupcakes to go.

"There's just no resisting those," one of the customers grinned.

"Preachin' to the choir," Alice smiled as she reached into the display cabinet with the tongs.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mom, you're not telling me anything I don't already know," Edward laughed as his mother huffed at him down the phone line.

"Oh really, that sure of yourself are you?"

"Uh," Edward sobered at that. His parents had called to see how the big move over the weekend had gone and Edward was filling them in on the details. "Well no, not entirely. I don't know that I'd ever think of it as a fait accompli."

"Good," Edward was startled to hear his father's voice on the line, "but it sounds like you have things well in hand."

"Dad?"

"Morning, Son," Carlisle greeted. "I heard the tone in your mother's voice and knew who she was talking to so I picked up the extension."

"Oh now there's a comment that's going to get you places," Esme retorted.

"Now I'm the one in trouble?" Carlisle objected, "How did that happen?"

"Well you-," Esme began but broke off as Edward interrupted.

"Guys, do I need to be here for this discussion?"

"Sorry honey," Esme soothed, "your father gets these ideas in his head sometimes."

"It's called independent thought," his father chipped in with a dry rebuttal.

"And any other comments like that are called 'you're getting your own dinner'," Esme retorted, making Edward laugh.

"Thanks guys, you're making me feel really good about this."

"So what's it like, living with Bella?" his father asked.

"She only moved in yesterday," Edward pointed out, "but all signs point to pretty damn good so far."

"Good to hear," his father praised, "just remember to agree to everything and you'll be fine."

"Wait a minute, I don't remember you using that tactic with me," Esme pointed out.

"Uh, Son, a little help?"

"I'm not getting involved," Edward vowed.

"That's my boy," Esme said in a fond tone, "taking your mother's side. Well done."

"Who said he was taking your side?" Carlisle objected, making Edward grin. For a smart man his father really managed to dig himself into a hole at times.

"I did," Esme replied, "don't you think that's the right thing for a good son to do?"

"Yes, Dear," Carlisle sighed after a heavy pause.

The conversation degenerated into a babble of explanations and laughter. By the time Edward got off the phone he was none the wiser about the best approach to take although he felt more convinced that he was doing the right thing.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So have you worked out what you're going to do?" Alice asked as Bella rinsed the coffee filter before clicking it back into place.

"Yup," Bella replied and looked out at the activity in the store before turning towards the notebook she kept on the workbench beside the phone, "and you've just reminded me I have to make some calls to confirm the details."

"When do we get told?" Alice asked, her eyes bright with curiosity.

"As soon as I've confirmed things, I'll tell you guys straightaway. You're going to like it so just calm down."

"Okay," Alice grumbled as she turned to the counter where a customer stood waiting. "Can you believe she won't tell me anything?" she asked the customer, jerking her thumb over her shoulder to indicate Bella's departing back.

"Tell you what?" the customer said, distracted from their eager perusal of the lushly sugared wares in the cabinet.

"I don't know," Alice shrugged, "but I wanna know. Now, what can I get you?" Alice beamed.

"You know you're driving her nuts," Angela commented as she sidled past Bella having cleared the tables of cups and plates.

"That's the plan," Bella replied in an absent tone as she reached for the phone. She glanced over at the door as more customers came in. The front door was kept closed in the cold weather and Alice had switched on the overhead gas heaters which kept the room cosy without being oppressively hot. "Are you guys okay to deal with them while I make some calls."

"Go ahead," Angela assured her, "if we need help I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Babe," Bella flashed her a grateful smile before picking up the phone handset and going into the kitchen to finalise some details.

The trickle of customers became a rush and Bella was pressed back into service. The three of them were rushed off their feet for the next few hours until the lunchtime rush had slowed enough for them to take a short break.

"Damn," Angela grabbed a tissue and dabbed at her forehead and the back of her neck, "where did everyone come from?"

"That review has really boosted trade," Alice agreed as she leaned forward with her elbows on the countertop and gave a long sigh.

"I don't know about you guys, but I need something to eat," Bella commented as she paused to untie her hair and pull it back into a fresh ponytail. Maybe she'd get a haircut soon she thought, glancing over at Angela's smart bob. "What have we got that's good?"

"Everything's good," Angela said, "how about you go take a seat and I'll bring you something."

"What about you?" Bella's forehead wrinkled with concern, "are you going to get something to eat?"

"Listen," Alice butted in, "we've actually got a quiet moment. How about you two sit and eat, I'll make us some coffee, and then the Boss here can tell us what we're going for our party."

"Deal," Angela nodded, "now you," she nodded at Bella, "go sit."

"Done," Bella turned and headed for the nearest table and sank down into the chair with a sigh of relief. A few minutes later Angela carried over two plates bearing chilli chicken wraps and set them down before taking a seat. "Thanks," Bella gave a grateful smile and then picked one up and took a bite. "God these are good."

Angela took a bite of her own and stared at the display cabinet while she chewed thoughtfully. Stocks were holding well, and she took a moment to admire the latest offerings. Bella had been expanding her repertoire on an exponential basis and Angela gave a quiet sigh as she looked at the blueberry and pear tarts that had been artfully dusted with powdered sugar and slivered almonds; one day she'd be able to bake things like that.

Alice made the coffees and served another customer before making her way over to the table and taking a seat herself, although she sat facing the door so that she could see any new customers.

"You're not eating?" Bella looked up from her plate with surprise.

"I'll grab a protein shake later," Alice shrugged, "or a bagel if there's one going."

"Any reason for the lack of appetite?" Angela raised an eyebrow and laughed when Alice gave her an indignant look.

"Yeah," Alice said after giving them both a very pointed look, "it's because Jasper insisted on cooking an enormous breakfast, so don't go getting any ideas." She sipped at her coffee and then set it down and looking at Bella. "So c'mon, Boss, spill."

"Okay," Bella finished her mouthful and sipped at her coffee before beginning to speak. "I've booked some *great* catering, seriously guys, you're going to love it, and Edward said that he and Jasper are going to arrange the drinks. Emmett and Rosalie are going to come, and I think Jacob is going to stop by, so if there's anyone else you want to invite just let me know."

"Music?" Alice asked after a ruminative pause.

"Whatever you want," Bella shrugged, "just remember we're going for an intimate kinda gathering."

"Right," Alice nodded, her mind ticking over with ideas. "What did you think of the window idea?"

"The sheers?" Bella squinted over at the windows, "I think it could work but," she gave Alice a hesitant look, "I really want to avoid you guys going to any trouble. The party is my thank-you to you both so how about we come up with something else?"

"Stars," Angela said suddenly, blinking as Bella and Alice turned to look at her. "Sorry."

"Care to elaborate?" Alice smiled over the rim of her cup.

"We've got to get the Christmas decorations finished," Angela went on, "I was thinking we could just get some metallic paper and cut out all different size stars and hang them on different lengths of ribbon." Angela took a sip of her coffee, "It's simple enough."

"And a nice classic look," Alice mused. "I like it."

"You do?" Angela was surprised and flattered at their resident style guru's acceptance of her simple suggestion.

"Sure," Alice nodded. "We can do that this week. It'll be fun."

"Do you always get excited over the prospect of extra work?" Bella grinned at her.

"When it's creative stuff it never feels like work so-," Alice broke off as she remembered Jasper's comments from a few weeks ago. "Anyway," she went on, "I'll take care of it." She finished off her coffee and stood up to get back to work.

"Interesting," Angela mused as they both watched Alice put away her cup and turn towards a new customer with a bright smile.

"Very," Bella commented before taking another bite of her lunch.

In the end the three women only managed to grab twenty minutes apiece for lunch and even that was disrupted by the occasional order. Bella was thinking about this as she locked up and began to head towards home. Ten minutes later she realised with a start that she was heading in the direction of her old apartment and changed direction at the next intersection with an inward sigh. She was going to be late. Shoving her hands deeper into her pockets she walked on.

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Edward flicked the catch on the front door and walked back into the kitchen to give dinner another stir. A few moments later he heard the door closed and walked into the living room to see Bella standing in the hallway shedding her overcoat.

"Hey," he greeted as he gave her a soft kiss, "you okay?"

"I'm fine," Bella grumbled before subsiding against his chest with a sigh, "I took the wrong way home, and then forgot my key."

"So that's why I had to buzz you in, I thought you were going all formal on me," Edward said with a teasing smile.

Bella gave a tired laugh against his chest and then lifted her head as she gave an appreciative sniff. "Do I smell dinner?"

"Porcini mushroom risotto," Edward said with a pleased smile at her look of delight. "You go unwind, I'll finish up and then I've got a surprise for you."

"Which is?" Bella gave him a hopeful look.



"Not telling until you've shed your day," Edward said as he turned her in the direction of the bedroom and gave her a gentle push. "Go."

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Bella put down her fork with a sigh of satisfaction and smiled at Edward across the kitchen bench. By the time she had showered off her day and changed into some old sweats and a t-shirt Edward was dishing up dinner. It had all smelled so good that she had relaxed her usual rule and enjoyed a glass of red wine with the meal. Now she sat back in her seat and watched as Edward gathered up the plates and put them in the dishwasher.

"That was fantastic," she said as she swirled the wine in her glass admiring the colour of the wine in the light.

"Let's see if you're saying that in a few day's time, I made enough of it to feed an army," Edward commented. "Mom gave me the recipe this morning but she didn't think to scale back the quantities." He turned and saw Bella gazing thoughtfully into her glass. "Ready for your surprise?"

Bella perked up at that. "I'd forgotten," she admitted with a smile, "but hell yeah."

"C'mon," Edward held out a hand and pulled Bella to her feet, "you can bring your drink," he offered as he began to lead her back out into the living room. "It's nothing much," he admitted, "but it's something I know we're going to get a lot of use out of." He gestured to the walls of the room and Bella gave him a puzzled look before looking at where he was pointing.

"Is that," she took a step towards the wall as she peered up at the ceiling, "picture rails?" she gave him a look of delight before turning and following the tracks that Edward had installed on every wall. "It just keeps going, how much did you put up?"

"I've done the whole living room, a wall in the kitchen and the whole bedroom," Edward grinned at her. "C'mon, I know how many pictures you've got and you know we're going to keep getting more."

"You don't mind?" Bella stepped towards him and then remembered she was still holding her wine glass. She turned and set it down on his desk before wrapping her arms around his waist. "I was worried that you'd feel a bit overwhelmed."

"Is that why you didn't hang anything on the weekend?" Edward pulled her closer.

"Maybe," she admitted to his shirtfront. "I mean, your apartment is gorgeous and I didn't want to cramp your style too much."

"Bella I'm a guy," Edward sighed, "style isn't something I chart my life by, but I want you to feel like this is your home now."

"Okay," Bella offered him a shy smile that became wider as she glanced around at the wide expanse of living room walls. Oh she was going to have *fun*.

\* \* \* \* \*

The days went by in a blur of activity and baking. Since the review business had been building at a steady rate which had lead Bella to wondering if she needed to find another new employee.

"I don't know if I lightning can strike a third time," she said to Edward over breakfast on the day of the party. "I mean, first Alice then Angela, what do you think the chances are finding someone else that will fit in?"

"All you can do is try," Edward shrugged as he spread some butter on his raspberry muffin and bit into it with a satisfied groan.

Edward could appreciate Bella's concern but at the same time he couldn't help but reflect on how good life was being to them. He got up and began to make himself another latte; Bella had been a very patient teacher and although it was going to be a long time before he could consider himself a barista to Alice's exacting standards, he could make a decent coffee for himself. Carrying his cup back to his seat at the kitchen bench he sipped at it as he studied the long expense of the apartment.

Bella had taken his advice to heart and set about making the apartment homey. Edward's framed vintage movie posters were now interspersed with Bella's collection of prints and found objects that made for a riot of colour on the walls. Bella's latest interest was butterflies and she had somehow acquired some framed specimens that floated on the wall beside some Indian shadow puppets and Edward's 1960s Modesty Blaise poster. It was a collection that logically made no sense at all, and yet somehow it all seemed to work.

"So what time do you want me there today?" Edward asked before biting in to his muffin again.

"Has Jasper called you about the wine?" Bella looked up from the notebook in front of her where she was ticking items off a list.

"Sure," Edward finished chewing, "he and I made a list of wines we're getting, so we'll deliver that to the store before you guys close for the afternoon. Anything else?"

"I don't think so," Bella tapped her pen against the pages as she thought. "The decorations are all up, Angela's bringing the candles, Alice is bringing our dresses to work this morning." Bella paused and gave a short laugh. "I still can't believe she won't let us see them until tonight. Do you know anything?"

"Nope, only that she told me what I was allowed to buy," Edward said as he gave her a satisfied smirk.

"Fine," Bella sighed, "be like that that then."

"Okay," Edward grinned at her as he licked some residual crumbs off his fingers and followed it with his coffee.

Bella stood up with some reluctant and rounded the bench to stand between Edward's knees with her arms around his neck.

"Guess this is the part where I leave for the day," Bella murmured as she gave him a soft kiss.

Edward ran his hands up her sides and around her waist so that he could pull her closer. "Something like that," he agreed as he kissed her again. Bella smiled against his lips and he took the opportunity to dip his tongue into

her sweetness. It was so nice that he went back for more. By the time Bella managed to lean back her eyes were heavy and dilated.

"Wow," she managed, "what was I doing?"

"I have no idea," Edward said as he pulled her back, "but I can think of a few things." He slid his hand up and under her shirt to feel her smooth warm skin beneath his fingertips. Bella moved closer still and he felt his stomach clench as she tangled her fingers in his hair to hold his face to hers as they kissed. He'd been thinking about getting another haircut soon, but the feel of her fingers in his hair had him re-thinking his options.

"So those things you were thinking about," Bella ventured when they broke apart, "I don't suppose you could give me a general idea?"

"I believe I could," Edward said as he tried to look thoughtful before giving up and cupping her bottom with his hands and squeezing gently, "but it might take some time. I know you've got a busy day ahead and-," he stopped when Bella kissed him again.

"I'm ahead of schedule," she said in between kisses as Edward got up from his seat and began to walk her towards the bedroom, "and Angela has a key."

After love, Bella had to shower and get ready for work all over again which was probably a good thing as Edward had left her with a spectacular case of sex hair. She was late enough that Edward insisted on calling her a cab and joining her for the ride, kissing her all the way so that she entered the store pink and flustered but with a smile that would last the whole morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Don't tell me," Alice deadpanned as Bella swept past them with a sheepish grin to hang up her coat in the kitchen, "something came up?"

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a response," Bella called back after a snuffle of laughter.

"Just means I'm right," Alice retaliated as she got a cup to make Bella a coffee.

Bella was tying on her apron when she saw two zipped up garment bags hanging on one of the coat hooks in the kitchen. "Are these in here what I think they are?"

"No peeking," Alice hollered back before fixing Angela with a beady stare, "and that means you too."

"Gotcha," Angela nodded with a smile. Angela was feeling quite pleased with herself this morning. Although she hadn't beaten Alice to work – and suspected that she never would – she had arrived at the store earlier than usual to get a better head start on the day. It was Saturday, two days before Christmas, and they were all looking forward to the party that night. Angela had quickly set about making more cranberry muffins while Alice had made up some of their lunch bagels and wraps. The two of them had agreed a few days ago to get a head start on the day and so far it seemed to be working well.

Bella stood at the counter sipping her coffee and gazing around the store with approval. True to her word, Alice had cut out dozens of gold and silver stars in different colours and suspended them from the ceiling and windows with red metallic ribbon. The stars bobbed and danced in the air and added a distinctive festive touch to the store. There were boxes of beeswax pillar candles waiting to be arrayed throughout the store that evening for the party, and Bella could already tell that it was going to be a very enjoyable evening, especially if the morning had been anything to go by. She sipped at her coffee to hide her blush and satisfied smile.

"So, Alice," Bella said as she finished her coffee, "last quote before Christmas. Bring it on, Baby."

"Oh you're going *down*," Alice said with an evil grin as she grabbed the chalkboard and began writing. And kept writing. After a long moment Bella and Angela exchanged a look of concern.

"Uh, you're not writing your life story there are you?" Angela ventured.

"Hush," Alice scolded as she kept writing. Finally she held up the board and the two women gaped at the board in unison.

*The Four Phases of Life:*

*You believe in Santa Clause*

*You don't believe in Santa Clause*

*You are Santa Clause*

*You look like Santa Clause.*

Bella stared at the board for a long time and then walked into the kitchen. Alice hung up the board and walked back inside to get herself another coffee. Ten minutes later the kitchen was still silent. Alice and Angela glanced at each other and then peered around the doorway to see something that they never thought they'd see: Bella flicking furiously through her recipe notebook looking frustrated. Aware of their scrutiny Bella looked up at them and offered Alice a wry smile.

"Damn, woman, I think you've got me."

"Are you shitting me?" Alice gaped at her and then looked at Angela in wonderment. "Do you have any idea how long I've been working towards this moment?"

"Yeah," Bella sighed and shook her head, "I guess it had to happen sometime."

"Wow," Alice was still stunned, "I mean-," she stopped as Bella pushed herself away from the bench and walked towards one of the smaller cupboards and then dropped to her knees to forage towards the back of the lowest shelf. "Boss, what*are* you doing?"

"Getting your trophy," Bella's reply was muffled but she emerged triumphant and got to her feet to walk towards Alice and hand over what she had been looking for.

"Ohhh," Alice's eyes were like saucers as Bella handed her a bottle of Bollinger champagne, "for me?"

"You've totally earned it," Bella grinned and then gave her a huge hug, "I'm so proud of you." She was startled therefore, when Alice handed the bottle back to her.

"Put this in to chill," Alice advised, "we're having it tonight."

"What? No, that's yours, you earned it," Bella protested.

"C'mon, Boss, I couldn't have done it without you providing the competition. Besides, it'll get the party off to a great start don't you think?"

"If you say so," Bella said as she accepted the bottle, "but while we're in such a giving mood I'd like to give you two your Christmas presents."

"What?" Angela squeaked, "you can't, I've got yours at home."

"That's fine, but I want my gifts to you to be opened when it's just the three of us," Bella explained. She went to her bag and pulled out the two embossed envelopes that she had arranged while she was out dropping off the day's takings at the bank. She walked back to Alice and Angela with a broad smile and handed them each an envelope.

Alice and Angela paused to glance at each other for a moment before Alice shrugged. "The hell with waiting," she said, "I'm going in."

Angela turned the heavy envelope over in her hands and noted the gold seal before she carefully opened it and removed the gold embossed card inside. As she read it carefully she felt her mouth drop open with surprise.

"Holy sh-," she began just as Alice stepped forward and threw her arms around Bella.

"I love it, but it's too much," Alice protested.

Angela glanced at the card and had to agree. Bella had purchased them each 'The Ultimate' treatment at the Tribeca Beauty Spa; a day of pampering and indulgence that didn't come cheap.

"Guys," Bella disentangled herself from Alice and submitted to an equally fervent hug from Angela. "You totally deserve it. You two work so hard here, and my appreciation wasn't something that could be wrapped up in some sorta ornament." She gave them both a fond look, "I wanted to give you something really special, so I figured the gift of time that's just for *you* would be perfect."

"And it is," Angela breathed as she re-read the card. "I've never had anything like this."

"Which is why I did it," Bella went on. "Over the years a lot of gifts just become *stuff*, so I wanted to get you an experience." She looked down and picked at an imaginary thread on her apron as she kept talking. "I couldn't do any of this," she waved a hand to indicate the store, "without the kind of help I get from you guys, so this is just-," she looked up and gave them a watery smile.

Angela and Alice stepped forward as one and the three women wrapped each other up in a group hug that ended up with sniffles and laughter the coffee machine gave a loud beep to indicate it was ready for work. Bella set to making their coffees before disappearing into the kitchen to make some Christmas themed 'Charlie's Favourite' cupcakes.

It was going to be a good day, and an even better party. She just knew it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're sure there's nothing else you need?" Edward called over his shoulder as he walked into the living room tucking his dress shirt into his trousers.

"I'm as sure as I can be," Bella answered from the bathroom as she finished her makeup. "Jasper delivered the wine, you dropped off the extras, Emmett is bringing some music, the girls just have to bring themselves, and we're getting there early to meet the caterers and set up. Have I missed anything?"

Edward ran through a mental checklist: food, drink, music, friends. He slipped on his jacket and patted the pocket to make sure it was still there. Alice had given him instructions on what he was allowed to buy to match whatever it was Bella was going to be wearing, and he had taken her advice to heart.

"I think we're good," he called back.

"Okay then," he heard Bella reply as there came the sound of a long zip being opened. Bella had arrived home toting a garment bag that Alice wouldn't let her look at while she was still at the store. "Wow," Bella said at last.

"What? Can I see?"

"Not yet, let me get it on," Bella answered.

"Whatever it is, I bet it'll look great on the floor later tonight," Edward called back with a huge grin.

There was an amused pause. "And you're a *writer*?" Bella retorted, making him laugh.

Moments later when she appeared in the doorway, he was definitely lost for words.

The dress was simplicity itself; a wrap dress in a grey wool/jersey blend offset by a black cherry blossom print and jet beat detailing, and the dress hugged Bella's curves before falling in soft waves to mid calf. Bella had teamed it with knee-high black leather boots and she stood there a little uncertainly before Edward's silent scrutiny.

"You like?" she asked with a shy smile.

Edward licked his lips before replying. "Parts of me are already applauding."

Bella gave a delighted smile and walked towards him for a kiss, which he was only too happy to oblige. Edward ran his hands up her sides and then held her out at arm's length, cocking his head this way and that as he studied her. "It needs something though," he said at last.

"Ah," Bella nodded, this would be the accessorising part that Alice had told her about.

Edward reached into his jacket pocket and produced a small box that he handed over with a smile. Bella looked into his eyes before lifting the lid, her lips forming a 'O' of surprise. It was a vintage marcasite necklace, the polished jet and pyrite detail glinting as she removed it from the box to admire it.

"Allow me," Edward took it gently from her hands and moved to stand behind her so that he could fasten it around her neck where it swung to rest between her breasts, and the dress off-set it beautifully. Edward's breath was warm against her neck as he nuzzled her for a kiss. "You like?"

"I love it," Bella turned to smile at him and was surprised at the nervous look on his face.

"There's something else that would look good on you too," Edward ventured. He dipped into his pocket again and this time the box was smaller.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice looked excitedly out the window of the cab as it pulled up outside the store.

"I don't think I've ever seen you so excited to get to work," Jasper commented with a soft laugh as she scrambled out.

"I want to see how the girls look," Alice said as she stood and waited for Jasper to settle the fare and follow her to the door.

The store looked warm and festive against the winter chill that was howling down the street. Bella had arrived early as promised and the candles were all lit and glowing on various surfaces around the store, glinting off the dozens of stars the casting festive shadows on the walls as Michael Buble's latest album crooned out of the speakers. Some of the tables and chairs had been moved to give them room to mingle, and the caterers were ensconced in the kitchen with all manner of enticing smells were wafting out into the store.

"I knew you'd be the first one here," Bella called with a smile as she looked up from where she and Edward had been having a quiet conversation at one of the tables.

"Stand up, let me look" Alice commanded as Edward and Jasper exchanged greetings. Bella dutifully got to her feet and did a slow twirl for her inspection. Alice felt very pleased with herself. "What did Edward get you?" Bella tipped her chin back to set off the necklace and Alice stepped forward to look at it. "Oh it's gorgeous, I love it," she dimpled her approval at Edward who inclined his head in a gracious nod. He was sporting a beaming smile, one that seemed out of proportion to her compliment and she squinted at him in puzzlement before turning back to Bella and giving her the same look. Bella contrived to look innocent but a matching smile kept breaking through.

"What else did he-," Alice began and then her eyes widened as she grabbed at Bella's hand. "Oh my god," she squealed as she wrapped her arms around Bella for the second time that day.

"How did it go?" Jasper asked Edward in a quiet voice as the women exchanged hugs and kisses of delight.

"Just like I hoped," Edward said with a smile. "You?"

"Soon," Jasper commented, "but not yet."

"You'll know when," Edward assured him, and they both turned their attention back to the women they loved.

Angela and Ben soon followed Alice and Jasper's arrival at the store. Like Bella, Angela had to offer herself up for inspection and approval, which was of course duly forthcoming by the designer. Angela was wearing a periwinkle blue tunic over black leggings, teamed with what looked to be a vintage cardigan, and of course like Bella she had followed Alice's footwear suggestion. Angela had been eager to open her garment bag when she got home, and had spent a long time pouring over the hidden details that Alice had included. The cardigan buttons had been replaced with black and white crystal creations that resembled snowflakes, and Angela had been delighted to discover the same buttons on the tunic's pockets and in a row down the back where Ben had to fasten her into the dress instead of zipping her up.

"You like?" Alice said after inspecting her with a proprietary air.

"Love it," Angela confirmed. She glanced at Ben and seeing he was exchanging slightly star struck greetings with Edward stepped closer. "It's comfortable and sexy, and it does wonders for my confidence," she added with a grin. "I've never seen anything like it," she added in a slightly louder voice.

"You will soon," Jasper had turned at Angela's pronouncement and draped an arm around Alice's shoulders with a smile.

"Really?" Bella hadn't missed that comment and her face lit up. "Wonderful!"

Any other comment she had been about to make was drowned out by Emmett's booming welcome as he entered the store with Rosalie, his gaze seeking out Edward's almost immediately. When he saw Edward's triumphant smile he let out a war whoop of delight and lunged for his sister in a way that *really* got the party started.

Alice darted into the kitchen and a few minutes later reappeared with the catering waitress who bore a tray of champagne glasses as Alice bore aloft the bottle of Bollinger.

"See?" she crowed to Bella, "Definitely time to celebrate," she grinned as she handed the bottle to Jasper for him to open.

"You knew?" Bella asked, jumping with the cork was removed with a loud 'pop'.

"About that?" Alice gestured to Bella's hand, "Not at all, but I just knew this party was going to be one to remember."



"Big occasion?" the waitress asked as Jasper began to pour the champagne into the waiting glasses.

"Pretty big," he nodded with a grin. "The owner there," he indicated Bella with a nod, "and my best friend," another nod, "just got engaged, plus it's the store's Christmas party."

"Oh that's wonderful," she enthused as she watched the wine bubble into the delicate glasses. "This looks like a great place, they must have a lot of fun," she observed in a wistful tone.

"They sure do," Jasper smiled.

The glasses were dispensed and held high for a toast of congratulations and wishes for the holiday season. Bella gave a gracious speech conceding victory to Alice, who in return offered her heartfelt congratulations to Bella and Edward as Jasper stood by her side stroking her back. The store was warm against the chill outside, and the joy everyone felt just made everything seem warmer. Food began to circulate into the store from the kitchen, the music got turned up and the party began in earnest.

A couple of hours later Bella looked up as Edward leaned down to kiss her neck and whisper in her ear. The door was opening and Jacob stepped inside with a smile. Bella blinked at him trying to work out what was different and then realised what it was. He was fashionably dressed as always, but this time his smile of greeting seemed more authentic. There was no showman style greeting, no flamboyant expressions, just Jacob looking at her with a warm smile that reached his eyes and he walked towards her holding someone's hand.

"Bells," Jacob greeted, "hey girl," he released his partner's hand to wrap his arms around her for a hug. Stepping back, he reached out and pulled his date to his side. "I'd like you to met Stephan."

"It's a pleasure," Bella smiled as she shook Stephan's warm and calloused hand. "Jake, I'm so happy you could make it, things wouldn't have seemed the same without you here." Bella looked around to see that Edward was already arranging drinks for the new arrivals, and she beamed at Edward as he appeared at her elbow with two more glasses.

"Jake," Edward smiled as he handed over the glasses, "it's been a while, how the hell are you?"

Bella watched as both men fell into an easy conversation. She sometimes doubted that Edward and Jake would ever enjoy a true friendship; Jacob still got territorial from time to time in a 'I was here first' kind of way, which Edward matched with an unspoken 'finders keepers'. Fortunately they were both able to recognise that their common bond was love and protectiveness for the woman that connected their lives.

"He was nervous you know," Stephan mentioned in an undertone to Bella as Emmett greeted Jake with the kind of cheer that indicated a major headache would be forthcoming the following day.

"Really? Why?" Bella looked at Stephan in surprise. They hadn't been talking for long but Bella had taken to him immediately. Stephan was a furniture restorer whose quiet, deliberate manner seemed to soften Jake's edges and bring a measure of peace to her friend. Watching the two of them together she could see that Jake was genuinely happy in a way that made him relax at long last. It seemed that everyone had found a measure of completion to his or her lives that had already seemed happy and full.

"It still bothers him," Stephan went on, "you know, the history with you and the way he came out."

"I don't see why, things are fine now," Bella said as she sipped at her drink and accepted another canapé from the circulating tray.

"They are," Stephan agreed, "but now that he's happy," he gave a self-effacing laugh, "sorry I'm not trying to talk myself up here," he explained.

"S'okay, go on," Bella waved for him to continue as she chewed.

"Being happy now makes him realise how long he wasn't, happy I mean. I think he worries that he took it out on you, or held you back some."

"I think it's safe to say that things have moved on," Bella answered, and had Stephan's questioning look held up her hand so that he could see the ring.

"Is that what I think it is?" Jake appeared at her side, "Emmett just told me." He wrapped his arms around Bella for another squeeze. "Sweet girl, I'm so happy for you," he murmured into her ear.

"Thanks, Babe," Bella whispered as Stephan silently relieved her of her glass so that she could wrap her arms around Jake. She looked over his shoulder to see Stephan approach Edward and shake his hand as he offered his congratulations. "Looks like we all got our happy this year." They released each other and Jake stepped back and looked at his feet as he cleared his throat and then called for another drink. "I've just gone one problem," Jacob announced as he accepted a glass.

"What's that?" Bella looked at him with concern.

"The music," Jacob sighed, "let me guess, Bear?"

"Some of it," Bella agreed, "not up to your standards?"

Jacob gave her a pitying look. "Oh, Honey, we can do so much better, which is why I came prepared." He threw back his drink and went over to the small pile of disks Stephan had set down on one of the tables beside their keys and made for the stereo. The music was changed, the volume turned up and then the evening just kept getting better.

Sometime later, Bella made her way over to where Ben and Angela were laughing and chatting with Bear. Rosalie had zeroed in on Alice as soon as she had discovered who had been behind the outfits and Bella and Angela were wearing. Now the two women were having a long conversation about the flea markets and consignment boutiques, Alice peppering Rosalie with questions who seemed only to happy to tell her everything that she knew.

"So, Ben," Bella began, smiling when she felt Edward's arm snake around her waist. They had been in constant contact with each other all night as their delight in each other seemed to grow. "Angela tells me that you knew about Edward here long before the rest of us."

"Sure," Ben nodded with a grin. He had been a little star struck when first introduced to Edward but the two men had talked about mutual authors of interest and Ben's work in the store. When he had heard that Edward's

book was entering the production phase soon he had scored a minor coup for his workplace with Edward agreeing to appear for a book signing and literary luncheon event.

"Ben, I think we might need to do something about this, do you think she needs to know what she's marrying?" Edward teased as he kissed Bella simply because he could.

"Back catalogue?" Ben guessed.

"Sounds good," Bella replied as she grinned at Edward, "I guess I've got some reading to do."

"I'd better get in on that," Emmett appeared between them and put his arms around their shoulders, "given he's about to become family and all." He gave a theatrical sigh. "It's not often a new family member comes with study obligations."

"Sorry to cause all the extra paperwork," Edward laughed.

"I'll live," Emmett sighed and then grinned at Bella as he released them both and reached for her hand. "Nice," he gave a low whistle as he looked at the ring. "You know you're giving Rosalie all sorts of ideas, right?"

"Rosalie?" Bella challenged him.

"Okay, me," he conceded. "I was hoping he'd ask you soon, the suspense has been killing me."

"You knew?" Bella looked in surprise at Edward who nodded and took her glass to go get a refill. "Don't tell me he asked you for my hand in marriage."

"Oh hell no," Emmett shook his head, "and besides, you're not mine to give away, it's your choice entirely. Edward just wanted to make sure I'd be okay with it."

"Really?" Bella was looking puzzled now. Jasper had been standing nearby and hearing their conversation stepped forward after seeing Edward had been collared by Alice and Rosalie.

"Think about it. He's an only child of two academics. He didn't want for love, but his whole social interactions were very different. He grew up on college campuses, surrounded by adults. Combine that with a career that he got into unexpectedly, and such an introspective at that," Jasper went on, "He's never been one to get around with his heart on his sleeve but you've loosened him up more than anyone has." Jasper looked at his oldest friend and smiled. "I think you'll find he surprises you with how he goes about some things, but never doubt his sincerity."

"I don't," Bella vowed, her words brushing past Jasper and flowing towards Edward who took a breath as he turned to her and smiled.

Edward looked at Bella enjoying herself surrounded by people she loved. The walls of the bakery shimmered in the golden candlelight as laughter bubbled around the room. Another bottle of champagne popped and was cheered by those nearby before it was poured into the waiting glasses. Words bubbled in the air flowing from one person to the next, the argon tying them all irrevocably together for eternity. Words began whispering in

the back of Edward's mind and he returned to Bella's side to give her another kiss. The words were gathering momentum now, growing louder in his head but they were tied to such a happy moment in his life that he knew he would be able to recall them with ease when the time came to begin writing again. He'd never felt more content.

## **Epilogue: Beginnings, Endings and the Eternal Breath**

Bella darted out of the kitchen to peer up at the wall clock in the store and then returned to the kitchen with a sigh where she picked up her piping bag and got back to work.

"You okay, Boss?" Lauren paused in the doorway and looked at Bella with concern.

"I'm fine," Bella assured her, "just waiting for something."

"Oh," Lauren half turned back to the storefront before stopping and looking at Bella, "so long as you're okay."

"Sure," Bella nodded at her again and poised the piping bag over the waiting cupcake. It was true; she felt perfectly okay although she wasn't sure she could say the same about Edward.

The store phone rang and Bella re-appeared from the kitchen to snatch up the receiver before Lauren or Angela could react; and they could tell from Bella's smile that it was Edward on the line. The conversation was brief and ended with 'I love you' before Bella hung up and turned to face them with a grimace.

"Tomorrow," she sighed. "There's been a hold up and Edward will get his advance copy tomorrow."

"What's this?" Lauren looked up from drying cups from the dishwasher and stacking them on top of the coffee machine.

"Edward's book," Angela explained.

"It's out?" Lauren looked excited at the news, "fantastic, I'll get a copy on the way home," she beamed at Bella. "I love his books, I can't believe you guys are married." She shook her head at the memory, amazed that she had been there the night one of her favourite authors had announced his engagement at a private party she happened to be working at.

"Sorry, Lauren, you'll have to wait a few more days, but Edward gets a copy ahead of the stores."

"Figures," Lauren shrugged, "He wrote it after all. What do you think of his others?"

"Can you believe Bella hasn't read any of his books yet?" Angela nodded towards Bella who glanced at the wall clock and then took down three cups to make them a mid-morning coffee. Bella's reading habits – or lack

thereof when it came to Edward's body of work - had been a recurring joke over the last few months but Bella had stuck to her guns.

"You haven't?" Lauren was amazed. "But what about the one with-,"

"Nope," Bella shook her head. "I figured I'd start with the latest one when it's out and then work my way backwards from there."

"Oh, I see," Lauren replied although she wasn't sure she understood at all. Bella seemed easy going about it all but she was bound to have her reasons. "Well, I'm sure you'll love it when it arrives."

"It just better arrive soon, that's all I'm sayin'," Bella muttered as she got back to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day Edward stood in the apartment doorway signing for the special delivery package with a hand that was remarkably steady. Closing the door he carried the parcel to the sofa and sat down to unwrap it. Discarding the wrapping paper he sat turning the book over and over in his hands and then after huffing out a long sigh, leaned back onto the cushions and began to read. Two chapters later he remembered himself and snatched up his cell phone to send Bella a message.

*It's here. Reading now x*

He picked up the book again and looked back at his phone when it chirped a few minutes later.

*Cant wait. See you 2nite. B x*

Bella let herself into the apartment with a sigh of relief. After getting Edward's message the hours had crawled by. Angela had finally snapped late afternoon and told her to go home. Kicking off her shoes and leaving them by the door she walked into the living room.

"Hey," she greeted Edward who was sprawled on the couch with a book on his chest. "Is that it?"

"Sure is," Edward gave her a tired smile.

"Have you been reading it?" Bella crossed the room towards him and gave him an inquiring smile.

"All day," Edward admitted, "I finished it about half an hour ago."

"But I thought you already knew what it was all about," Bella commented as she nudged his legs on the sofa so that he could make room for her to sit down. She sat and picked up the paperback so that she could run her hands over the embossed cover.

"It wasn't a book when it left me," Edward shrugged as he sat up and scissored his legs around her waist to anchor her against him as he nuzzled at her neck making her squirm as his stubbled rasped against her skin.

"So what's your verdict of the finished product?" Bella asked as she set gently set the book down on the coffee table in front of them and wriggled around so that she was curled up in his lap.

"I think I like it," Edward admitted, "but I'll feel better after you've read it."

"I'll start it tonight," she promised, "can't have you suffering any longer."

"I'm relieved and terrified all at once," Edward admitted and then gave a short bark of laughter. "And all these years I thought hearing back from Marcus was the hardest part."

"I'll be gentle," Bella assured him.

"You always are," he smiled back and ran his hands up her neck and into her hair. "Hey, wife."

"Hey, husband," Bella smiled before dipping in for a kiss.

True to her word, Bella read late into the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward rolled over onto his side and buried his head in the pillow, blinking against the light that was flooding into the bedroom. He lifted his head and peered over Bella's shoulder towards the bedside clock; blinking until the displayed time could register.

"Baby," he gave Bella's shoulder a gentle shake, "Bella," he said a little louder this time, "you're going to be late."

"Not gonna," Bella mumbled as she rolled over and buried her head against his chest, frowning as she tried not to wake up.

"Yeah you will," Edward swallowed a laugh as Bella shook her head again and curled herself tightly around him.

"Day off," Bella mumbled. She was waking up now, and rubbed her cheek against his bare chest as she began to rub her instep up and down his calf.

"Really?" Edward glanced at the clock and then down at his wife. Well that just changed everything. "What for?"

"She told me that I had some reading to do, but I can think of a few things we could do first," Bella replied as she began to dust kisses across Edward's chest, swirling her tongue on his skin and nipping in a way that made him give an involuntary squirm. She offered him an impish smile as she began to wriggle around in the bed, working her way downwards with her hands and hips and smiling at Edward as his face lit up with a delighted smile of understanding.

"If that's the way you feel," Edward murmured, his words ending in a soft gasp as Bella's hands and tongue swirled lower still.

"Oh I'm feeling quite a few things," Bella said with a muffled laugh as her head disappeared beneath the sheets. Soon she was quite incapable of speech but then again so was Edward, so it all worked out rather well.

An hour later Bella was freshly showered and dressed. She walked out into the living room in time to see Edward padding towards her with a cup in his hand.

"What's this?" she asked as Edward handed her the cup and gave her a kiss.

"The start of breakfast," Edward said as he turned to go back to the kitchen. "Where do you want it?"

"Uh, I'll have it in the kitchen," Bella blinked at his departing back and then sipped at the coffee. She followed him slowly and arrived to see him scooping the last pancake onto the short stack he'd made before spooning mixed berries and powdered sugar over the lot.

"Wow," Bella was impressed, "what brought this on?"

Edward looked up with a slight smile. "Can't a guy make breakfast for his wife?"

"Every morning as far as I'm concerned," Bella agreed and then waved a hand at the small feast he had created, "but this looks pretty special."

"I figured you need your strength for all the reading you've got ahead of you today," Edward rounded the bench and guided Bella to her seat. Bella sank into the chair and picked up the small jug of maple syrup Edward had set beside the plate. A moment later she looked up at Edward with round eyes as she chewed and gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up.

"Good?" Edward smiled and leaned down. It was meant to be a short kiss, but the sweetness of her answering smile and the maple syrup on her lips rapidly turned it into something more. "Whoa," he breathed and stepped back licking his lips.

"Oh I don't know about that, c'mere," Bella reached towards him with a gleam but Edward stepped back, neatly evading her grab at his shirt.

"Breakfast, then reading," he admonished.

"Spoilsport," Bella grumbled, but she was smiling again as she returned her attention to her pancakes. She looked up in surprise minutes later when Edward reappeared wearing his running gear. "You're going out?"

"I need to run off some steam," he explained. He had been full of nervous energy ever since the book had arrived. The manuscript had been a ghost in their lives throughout their relationship. Now that it was published its potential impact on their lives had become all the more real. He couldn't wait for Bella to read it but that didn't mean he wanted to be there when she did.

"Okay," Bella sipped at her coffee and nodded, "you go have fun, I'll see you when you get back."

"See you soon," Edward walked up behind her to kiss her neck before snatching up his eyes and walking towards the door.

Bella watched him go with resigned amusement and then returned her attention to breakfast.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward paused in the foyer downstairs to do some quick stretches and then broke into a light jog as soon as he hit the pavement. He started by counting his steps and then the number of pedestrians he had to jog around as he steadily increased his pace and then settled for counting his breaths. By the time he got to Washington Square Park and saw Jasper pacing in a slow circle he was warmed up and ready to go. Jasper looked up and saw him and then started to jog along one of the paths.

"Hey," Edward greeted as he caught up and matched Jasper's pace.

"Dude," Jasper nodded, "so she has a copy?"

"Yup, got it yesterday," Edward nodded.

They jogged on in a companionable silence for a while.

"You okay?" Jasper ventured.

Edward shot him a sidelong look. "Fine. She was just about to start reading again when I left."

"Ah," Jasper gave a sage nod, "so that's why you wanted to get out this morning."

"I figured it'd be better for her if I wasn't pacing the apartment all day watching her turn the pages."

"Good call," Jasper nodded. He studied Edward as they jogged, noting with amusement that he hadn't seen Edward this nervous since his and Bella's wedding day. The day had been kept as low-key as humanly possible, and still Edward had been a roiling mass of nerves until he had seen Bella enter the room laughing with Esme. Over the past six months he had watched his friend reach a level of peace and contentment in his life that he had never known before. Jasper hoped it would be the same for him, which was something he looked forward to discovering in the very near future.

"What time do you have to get to work?" Edward grunted as they rounded another curve of the trail.

"Late," Jasper replied. "Juggled my schedule with one the faculty so I could keep you company for a while."

"Yeah?" Edward looked surprised.

"Yeah, and get over it Cullen," Jasper jogged closer so that he could nudge Edward hard enough to send him staggering off the path. "We all know what you're like at times like this, I'm just doing my bit for misery control."



They jogged on in silence while Edward processed Jasper's words.

"Thanks, man," he said at last.

"No charge," Jasper replied with a placid smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"... and there's your change," Lauren dimpled at her customer as she handed over some coins and a takeout coffee cup before turning to Angela. "Do you think Bella will come in today?"

"Doubt it," Alice commented on her way past, "Edward's books are *huge* so if she can read his latest in a day I'll be surprised."

Angela had called an emergency summit meeting of the troops when she had discovered the publication date of Edward's book. She, Alice and Lauren had banded together to tell Bella her services would not be required on the coming Wednesday; a decision Bella received with mild shock.

"But what about the store?"

"Hello," Alice chimed in, "have we burnt it down on any other day that you haven't been here?"

"Well no, but things are so busy lately," Bella began, stopping when Angela waved her down. The store had been reviewed again, this time by the New York Times and trade continued to increase as a result.

"Enough," Angela said, "the three of us will be fine, and I have a cunning plan."

"How cunning?" Bella regarded her with a slight smile, touched at the girls' concern for her.

"So cunning you could put a tail on it and call it a weasel," Angela deadpanned before continuing, "The lovely Lauren here has a Barista friend who can come help out at short notice," she indicated Lauren who bobbed a quick curtsy. Lauren and Alice had the same slight build and, it seemed, the same hummingbird energy level. "We'll be fine, which is why you need to stay at home and read."

Angela leaned against the workbench and surveyed the store. Business was going well, and she was delighted to see that her cupcakes for the day had been well received by the customers.

"Hey, Lauren," Angela said, "how about you call your friend and ask if she can work here for a few days. "I think Bella's going to be busy for longer than she thinks."

"Will do," Lauren nodded and went into the kitchen to get her cell phone out of her bag.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward fished his cell phone out of his pocket and checked the screen again. No calls. He sighed and put it away as he kept walking aimlessly. It was now Friday afternoon and Bella had nearly finished the book. By unspoken agreement there had been no discussion about what Bella had read so far; they both wanted to wait until she had completed it so that they could discuss the story in full, but the nervous anticipation was killing him. Hours later he was reaching breaking point; walking out of yet another store after realising he was doing little but staring sightlessly at the merchandise. He snatched at his pocket as he felt his phone begin to vibrate.

*All done. Come home x B*

Edward put the phone away and then looked at the traffic around him. There were no cabs in sight and so he broke into a run. Arriving home Edward fumbled with the keys, cursing under his breath when he dropped them in his haste. As soon as he was inside he was looking for Bella.

"I'm in here," he heard her call and headed for the bedroom, stopping dead in his tracks when he saw her.

Bella was curled up against the pillows, a pile of crumpled tissues beside the now completed book.

"Hey," she gave him a tremulous smile.

"Bells," Edward paused and swallowed hard as he walked towards her and stopped at the foot of the bed.

"You're too far away," Bella held up her arms, "I need you here."

Edward shrugged off his jacket and kicked off his shoes before crawling across the bed to take her in his arms. Bella turned into his embrace with a sigh, and he only realised she was crying when he felt the damp warmth on his chest.

"Hey," he kissed the top of her head, "hey now," he reached to and gently tipped her face up so that he could look at her. Her eyes were pink and puffy from crying, and her bottom lip trembled as she looked at him. "Is it really that bad?"

"Edward," Bella reached for him and he was surprised at the intensity of her kiss.

"I guess you liked it," he offered her a crooked smile as she hiccupped.

"I love it," Bella nodded, "really, Edward. I love it."

"Then I'm glad," he answered as he pushed her hair off her face with gentle fingers. He felt his whole body relax as Bella smiled and settled herself against him and wrapping her arms around his waist.

"He lived," Bella said after a moment of peaceful quiet. Edward's hand stilled on her hair and she propped her chin on Edward's chest to look up at him. "Charlie lived, in your book."

Edward resumed stroking her hair. "Is that okay?"

"Better than," she confirmed and then snuggled on his chest again. "It was perfect." She thought back over the story and gave a sad smile. Edward had been truthful; there was enough characterisations and anecdotes in the book for Bella to recognise herself, but done in such a way that her privacy remained intact. Charlie was in there too, alive and well on the printed page along with Emmett and Renee. There were even shadows of Angela, Alice and Jasper that she had smiled over. They weren't lifelike portraits but after knowing the 'real thing' she had recognised each of them when they had ghosted across the pages. Edward pulled Bella closer and kissed her again feeling more relief than he had imagined possible.

"I sent Emmett a copy," Bella offered after a contemplative silence had descended over the room again.

"You did? I thought you'd been here all day," Edward said, surprised.

"I called Marcus and got him to send Bear a copy. He's reading it now," Bella explained. She patted his chest with a reassuring hand. "He'll love it too."

"You called Marcus?" Edward's surprise was growing. "I'm surprised he agreed to do that."

"Well it came at a cost," Bella admitted.

"Ah," Edward nodded, "which was-," he raised an eyebrow and smiled as Bella's shoulders shook with silent laughter.

"Oreo cupcakes," she replied. "He wants some this week."

"He's a pushy bastard," Edward sighed.

"Yeah, he told me that too." Bella pushed herself up into a sitting position and looked at Edward after knuckling her tired eyes. "I figured I'd make some over the weekend and we can take them into his office on Monday."

"Sounds like a plan," Edward nodded, "it's probably about time you two met each other."

"That's what I thought," Bella nodded. She looked at him for a moment and then shifted herself so that she was straddling Edward, rocking herself gently against him. Edward reached up and grabbed her hips out of sheer reflex.

"Anything else you're thinking?" he asked as Bella settled herself comfortably against his core and then reached up to pull off her shirt in one fluid gesture.

"One or two ideas come to mind," she offered with a smile, "shall I tell you about them?"

"Words can be over-rated," Edward gave an elaborately casual shrug, "how about you show me instead."

"If you insist," Bella murmured, and then bent her head to kiss him.

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"Morning, Boss," Angela greeted as Bella breezed into the store the next morning.

"Angela, don't call me Boss."

"Sorry, Boss," Angela gave a delighted laugh. "I can't tell you how weird it is to be a part of that routine."

"What routine's that?" Bella asked as she rounded the bench to go and collect her apron from the kitchen.

"The Alice routine you guys always had going," Angela explained. "First the cupcakes and quotes and now the morning greeting. It felt strange at first but on the days Alice isn't here it still feels like she is, you know?"

"I do," Bella stopped and gave a fond smile.

Alice was following her dream and the promise her talent had always foreshadowed at the store was at last coming to fruition. She had worked with Rosalie on getting a stand at the Flea Markets and within weeks had established herself. Rosalie had reported back to Bella that Alice's fashions were generating a lot of buzz and she was acquiring herself an as-yet small but devoted following. She was still working at the store and thoroughly enjoying herself, but everyone involved knew that it was only a matter of time before Alice's fashions would be able to keep her financially self sufficient.

Yielding to the inevitable Alice had moved in with Jasper before Easter and although the stress of sharing her life with someone on such a permanent basis had created some memorable fireworks, Bella had never seen her happier. Edward and Emmett had helped with the move, and Edward had watched as Jasper had lugged boxes upstairs with the tired but happy smile of a man who held a winning ticket.

Angela and Ben's relationship remained as steady as ever, and it had been bolstered further after Ben had at last met Edward at the Christmas party. Ben had been quick to secure Edward's presence for a special literary event at the bookstore which had been well publicised in the weeks leading up to the book's release. In literary circles, the opportunity to meet the somewhat reclusive Edward Cullen had made it one of the hottest tickets in town. Bella had avoided the event, as she hadn't wanted it to spoil any surprises before she read the book for herself, but Angela had made sure she was there at Ben's side. Listening to Edward's voice as he read an excerpt from the book, Angela had reached out to find Ben's hand already seeking out her own. They had stood there hand in hand, spellbound at the words Edward wove around them.

"Bella," Angela had told her the next day, "when that book comes out you are going to drop everything. You are going to do *nothing* until you have read it. Have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal," Bella had nodded and then after a pause, "so, it's good?"

"I'm not saying another word about it," Angela pointed an admonishing finger at Bella, "now you make the coffee and I'll get the chalk."

"So," Bella looked up as Angela got down some cups and slid them over to Bella, "Now that you've had a chance to read it, what did you think?"

"Oh," Bella blinked at the coffee machine in front of her and then gathered herself to start making coffee, "Well, it was ... unexpected."

"Unexpected how?"

Bella moved as if to speak and settled for frothing the milk instead. When the coffees were made the conversation resumed.

"Unexpected in a sad and beautiful way," Bella said after a long pause. "It made me laugh, cry," she paused and sipped at her coffee again, "it made me think." Another pause as she gave the book some more thought and then offered a short laugh. "I don't know that I'll ever look at fluorescent lighting in the same way again."

"Huh?" Angela looked blank.

"The argon," Bella clarified.

"Oh, right," Angela gave a knowing nod, "Edward read that part out at the store."

"What did *you* think?" Bella was the curious one this time.

"Beautiful," Angela sighed, "that part really-," she waved a hand, "I mean I've always admired writers and artists and all their creations over the centuries. Now I realise that I'm connected to them. Even if it's only on a cellular level it's all connected. What did Edward call it?"

"The eternal breath," Bella said quietly as her throat tightened, remembering how Charlie and Renee had often had wistful discussions about going on holiday to some exotic destination. Now they would traverse the globe together.

"Yeah," Angela sighed, "that's it."

"Beautiful," Bella added, and both women nodded in thoughtful silence.

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"Oh my god," Marcus's eyes all but rolled up in his head as he took another bite, "Beautiful, incredible," he licked crumbs off his lips and then called out for his Assistant. "Jessica, could you take some of these to Robyn with my compliments."

True to her word Bella had baked a batch of cupcakes for Edward's Editor over the weekend and he had escorted her to the office for the delivery and introductions.

"Will do," Jessica nodded as she scooped the proffered cupcakes onto a small plate and disappeared.

"Robyn?" Edward raised an eyebrow.

"Food Editor," Marcus clarified as he licked some frosting off his fingers. "Seriously Bella, if you weren't already a married woman-," he began, breaking off when Edward gave a low growl and reached out to interlace his fingers with Bella's.

"She's taken," Edward stated.

"Quite taken," Bella affirmed as she gave her husband a fond smile. They had been married for five months now, and the novelty had yet to off. They were still exchanging small talk when a smartly dressed woman appeared in the doorway.

"Marcus, where did-," she stopped when she saw that he had company, "I'm sorry, I didn't realise you were with someone."

"Robyn," Marcus leaned back in his chair and waved her in with a proprietary grin, "I'd like you to meet Edward Cullen and his wife, Bella."

"It's a pleasure," Robyn nodded and shook their hands, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but, Marcus, where did you get those cupcakes?"

"Bella here brought some in for me as a thank-you," Marcus smiled. "She has a bakery in the Village that you might be interested in."

"I am," she nodded, "especially if there are more where these came from."

"Plenty," Edward confirmed with a pleased nod, "Bella's becoming famous for them."

"Really," Robyn looked thoughtful now. "Ever thought of publishing?"

"Huh?" Bella blinked at Robyn and then looked over at Edward. This was an unexpected development. "Well, uh-," she floundered and then looked at Edward again. "Help," she peeped.

"Maybe it's best if you pay the store a visit sometime," Edward suggested, "see where these creations come from. I can tell you now," he went on with a proud grin, "they just keep getting better."

"Good to hear," Robyn nodded. "Let me get you my card and we'll arrange a time."

"Okay," Bella nodded, "sounds good."

The three of them watched Robyn depart and then Edward caught Marcus looking very pleased with himself.

"You knew what you were doing," he accused.

"What?" Marcus tried to look surprised.

"Getting Bella in here with cupcakes, sending some to Robyn. What's going on in that head of yours?"

"Just the next phase of something that could be very exciting," Marcus said, and then looked disappointed. "Of course, it'd be even more exciting if you told me you have another story in the works."

"Oh give me a break," Edward subsided in his seat with a tone of exasperation that made Bella laugh. "Can't this book keep you occupied for at least a few more days before you start hounding me again?"

"Don't worry," Marcus waved him off, "once that book hits the stores my phone is going to be running hot. I'll be kept busy for a while, just don't get too relaxed."

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"Bells," Emmett was saying as Bella paced around the apartment with the phone, "I read it before I went to work, I read it on my breaks, I wanna get off the phone to read it now." There was a pause as he replayed his words in his head, "not that I don't wanna talk to my baby sister," he added hastily.

"It's okay, Bear," Bella assured him as she tried not to laugh, "I've read it, I was the same way."

"They're in there, Bells," Emmett went on in a quiet voice, "Mom and Dad, they're there. They're alive and they're together."

"I know," Bella swallowed hard.

"Hey, you remember the time Mom decided she wanted the family to go camping?"

Bella gave a whoop of laughter at the memory. "Oh my god, and you ate so many s'mores you nearly threw up. What about the time when you-," the conversation between brother and sister went on late into the night punctuated with tears and laughter on both sides. Edward appeared at her side from time to time with a fresh drink or a quick kiss, but he left the siblings alone with their memories, grateful that he had in some small part been the medium to encourage it.

It was late when Bella finally got off the phone, and her expression was peaceful when she strolled out of the bathroom to see Edward turning down the bed for the night.

"All good?" he asked as he got into bed and watched Bella finish her bedtime ritual; she plumped her pillows and brushed her hair before getting into bed and nodding at him to lift up his arm so that she curl up beside him.

"Better than good," she assured him. "Emmett and Rosalie are getting *real* serious," she said with a smile.

"How serious?" Edward looked down at her, curious.

"He's got-a-ring-type-serious," Bella confirmed. "Now that he's finished reading he's going over there to propose tonight."

"Now?" Edward was astonished, "but it's ten o'clock at night."

"He said there was no time like the present, and now he's got the ring he wants to start spending the rest of his life with her as soon as possible."

"Good man," Edward nodded, "and I know the feeling."

"Now that you mention it, is there something else that you know?" Bella peered up at him.

"I don't know," Edward yawned, "name your subject and we'll take it from there."

"Marcus and Robyn," Bella stated, "anything going on there that you want to tell me about?"

"I have my suspicions," Edward admitted, "but how about we hold off until Robyn pays you a visit?"

"Guess I won't have long to wait," Bella said as she settled down again, "she's coming into the store tomorrow."

"She works fast," Edward nodded, "I can see why Marcus speaks so highly of her."

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The next day Bella was serving a customer when she looked up and saw Robyn pausing in the doorway, her eyes darting everywhere to try to take in everything at once.

"Honey," she called out. Edward looked up from his laptop and nodded when he saw Robyn. To Bella's surprise and delight, Edward had offered to visit the store and keep her company when Robyn arrived.

"Not for any negotiating," Edward said, "I know you can look after yourself and the store is your baby, but can I just be there to watch it happen?"

"Watch what happen?" Bella gave him a suspicious look. What did he know?"

"I dunno," he shrugged, "but I think it's going to be something good."

"Sure, why not?" Bella nodded. "It'd be kinda fun to have you there."

"Done," Edward nodded.

"Is this the part where we spit on our palms and shake hands?" Bella asked as she wrinkled up her nose.

"If that's how you want to play it," Edward had said looking dubious at the prospect, "how about we kiss instead?"

"So long as that isn't how you close all your deals," Bella said with a smile as she submitted.

Now Bella stood waiting by the coffee machine as Robyn approached. The woman strolled through the store looking entirely unhurried; stopping to look at the artwork, smiling at the children's books stacked on a low shelf and then stopping dead in her tracks when she saw the display cabinet.

"God," Robyn's jaw dropped as she gazed at the sugary temptations in wonderment, "tell me you made these."



"Sure did," Bella nodded.

"And the quote outside?" Robyn waved a hand to indicate the chalkboard by the door.

"Ah, that's the work of Alice today, sometimes Angela, sometimes Lauren."

"I see," Robyn was looking thoughtful now. She stood and turned in a slow circle as she looked at the store again. "Okay," she said as she reached a decision. "You got a moment?"

Bella glanced over at Alice who gave her an encouraging nod. "Sure, coffee?"

"Please," Robyn nodded and walked the table where Edward was sitting. "Edward," she nodded as she sat down. "Working on something?"

"Just a few notes," he smiled.

"Anything for me to tell Marcus about?" she said with an inquiring gleam in her eye.

"Not yet," he answered, "but when it is I'd like to be the one to tell him if you don't mind."

"Point taken," she gave a gracious nod and then beamed at Alice as a coffee was set down in front of her. "Smells good," she said as she picked up her cup, and then her eyes widened as Bella set down a plate with the cupcake of the day before her, "and *that* looks even better."

"So, Robyn," Bella handed Edward a fresh coffee and took a seat with a cup of her own, "to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Well going on what I tasted yesterday you clearly know what you're doing," Robyn began, "and the style I see here in the shop tells me a lot more."

"More about what?" Bella asked as she sipped at her coffee.

"Enough to know that if you agree to publish a book with us, it'll be the kind of cupcake book that no-one has ever seen before," Robyn said as she leaned forward in her chair. She hesitated and then unable to resist any longer picked up the cupcake and took a bite.

Bella and Edward sat and watched as Robyn chewed and swallowed, before setting the cake back down on its plate and giving Bella a particularly intense stare. She had done her research overnight and had read both newspaper reviews. The store had delivered on its promise; the coffee was the best she'd tasted in a long time, and the cupcake had exceeded her every expectation. Even better, the display cabinet held an array of tarts and almond petit fours that showed Bella was more than a one-trick pony.

"Bella, just say yes, and I promise you it will be a book that changes your life," Robyn said as she sipped at her coffee with an inward sigh of pleasure.

"Oh I don't know about that," Bella said as she gave Edward a loving smile, "the books I've come across lately have all been pretty life-changing."

"Well then," Edward replied and heedless of Robyn's presence leaned forward to give her a kiss, "I guess we'll just have to see if we can make the next one even better."

"You've got yourself a deal," Bella smiled.

"Is that to me, or Edward?" Robyn inquired as she leaned forward again.

Bella looked from her soon-to-be Editor and then back at her husband.

"Both," she replied, "let's get to work."

~fin~