



# The Plan

## QuantumFizzx

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# Summary

Obsessed but unnoticed for over a year, she puts a plan in motion to catch the eye of corner-office Cullen. That's her plan. Fate has another plan entirely. B/E Rated M for a reason. Most chapters are short - it won't feel like 73

# Prologue & Chapter 1 Day 367

I'm going to do something that I think is a little different here.

I'll post every day, at least once a day, until complete. (Not responsible for delays due to any of those fun ff website failures...) It'll wrap before year's end.

Posting in \*Real Time\* - meaning there will be some days with multiple posts.

Some short. Some long. Some really long - those should be fun ones ;)

Rated M for a reason. Until then, enjoy the UST ride.

I own and lay claim to nothing. Not Twilight. Not Mr. Pattinson. The latter being particularly distressing.

~The Plan~

Prologue

Day of Employment: 372..381...maybe 495...something. They all run together.

2:00am

Champagne: I'm covered in it.

Petals: Litter my entire room.

Balcony door: Open.

Room: Effing Freezing.

Nipples: Probably hard enough to puncture this silk camisole.

My heart: Who the Hell knows at this point?

The curtains flutter open. It's not the breeze. It's him. He steps into the room, watching his own feet move. He barely resembles the man who makes grown men cry, who barter lives and livelihoods like wares at a flea market, who I've fantasized about for over a year.

His hair is slick and dark and drips champagne. A single, thick lock escapes, flipping forward as he rakes his fingers through it. His gaze never leaves the floor.

"Just tell me why." He whispers, barely audible over the street below.

Every instinct in me screams to run to him, to wrap my hands around him, lose myself in his touch...in him.

But, I would do just that. Lose myself.

It's all been make-believe.

"You don't know me," I say as softly as I can, as if for the first time I consider that I need to be soft, that he might actually be breakable.

His head snaps up and his eyes - oh, God his eyes! - they swim, an unfocused torment swirls in their depths.

"How can you say that? After all...after everything?"

"This isn't me. I'm not what you think I am."

"You are everything I want." He moves to me. I move twice as far away.

"Edward, I'm not who you think I am. I'm a liar. And I can't be what you want."

~ The Plan ~

Day of Employment: 367

He didn't notice.

Not even a blip on his radar.

Not that I find this shocking.

In the least.

I've been utterly invisible since I started. I wasn't really expecting any acknowledgement of my anniversary.

Officially now, I've crossed that threshold from new hire to old hand with little



fanfare. By

"little" I mean none. I won't even stand out in the crowd as a fresh face now.

So, I'm changing this. I'm changing me.

His radar will no longer be blipless.

Tomorrow, I start over. I don't expect him to notice me today. It's a process. I have a plan.

...

Next Update 6:00am Central Time.

# Chapter 2 Day 368 6:00am

Day of Employment: 368

6:00am

I'm awake. Already.

Thus far: Plan sucks.

Clothes: Laid out night before.

Lunch: Salad. Yay.

My feet hit the cold, hardwood floor and I fight the urge to creep back under my duvet. Sleep is my friend. But, not as faithful a friend as cellulite. It's so loyal. Always there.

The treadmill groans right along with me as it whirls to life. It probably thinks I've sold it to someone who will actually utilize it. Maybe it will miss its life as my coat rack.

It's slow going. I'm walking on an incline. Walking, not running.

It's slow going. That's okay. It's a process. I have a plan.

....

A/N: 3 updates today. The 3rd one is long.

Next update: 7:45am Central

## **Chapter 3 Day 368 7:45am**

Author of 10 Stories Rated: - English - Romance/Humor - Edward & Bella -  
Reviews: - Updated: 12-03-11 - Published: 12-12-10 - Complete - id:6550419

# Chapter 4 Day 368 11:00am

11:00am

"What's the soonest you've got?"

Angela, with a pencil tucked behind her ear and looking not unlike a real bookie, peruses her chart. "Eric Riley has end-of-day...today." She laughs and shakes her head. "Wow, that'd be a record. He's got confidence."

Still peering over her cubicle wall, I evaluate the personal assistant that walked through the doors for the first time approximately twenty-seven hours ago. Tidy, strawberry blonde bun, pencil skirt, grey shirt with top button only undone. All in the positive column. It appears she's managed to read the past assistants' file on Cullen's preferences and brought the right coffee and kept out of his way. She looks perpetually busy and nervous.

All signs indicate that she is going in the long-term column.

I dangle a twenty over the partition. Angela snatches it and huffs in playful exasperation.

"What's your bet?"

I purse my lips as I contemplate. "When did you say the Aifam meeting was?"

"I didn't," Angela half-smiles and looks at me knowingly.

"That's a lunch meeting today," Riley pipes up from across the aisle. "And she already booked Solomon's for the food, but they're understaffed and can't deliver. So, she's picking it up herself." A snort escapes him as he tries to keep his laughter contained.

"Wha-? She's going off-site right during a meeting?" I felt the blood drain from my face. That is a disaster in the making. "I can't watch. Don't you think we should warn her?"

"Oh, Bella," Angela tsks up at me. "You're such a softy."

My heart clenches. Just thinking about the tongue-lashings that I've heard

reverberate through those walls for lesser offenses causes me to cringe. No one deserves the kind of Hellfire that would come from being absent-without-leave during a critical meeting.

And it appears Cullen considers all meetings critical.

Critical. Maybe that's what Cullen meant in ancient Gaelic...

In my estimation, the person that these personal assistants were assisting was not *completely* unreasonable; of course, it's easy to be objective from my safe vantage point.

Cullen is particular and demanding. He is busy and paid to think. The few times I've heard him dress-down someone – and, let's face it, if he is speaking to someone he is insulting them – it's all centered on talk of "impacted productivity" and "wasting" his time.

I've never spoken a word to him, nor has he to me, but I've studied him every day for a year. He has high standards and low tolerance. Very low. Sub-basement low. Everyone knows it. Everyone stays away.

Everyone who can, that is.

I can't look away.

Edward Cullen is the most attractive man I've ever seen. Bar none.

Scientists should break off his cells and use them in electromagnetic experiments. Those tubes that can destroy the earth if the particles align improperly. Or, something along those lines. I'd look that up if I had time. Maybe when I'm researching ancient Gaelic.

When he passes through the lobby on the way to his corner office, it's like looking into the sun – in all the good ways and the bad.

From what I can discern, he's also the most stern and unforgiving individual ever to grace the world with his glorious presence.

He's hard and fierce. There's something both hawk-like and leonine about his features. Predatory. A lightening storm of power, terrifying and beautiful.

Thankfully, most of the office has a fascination with him as well, albeit a different

one, so my fixation doesn't stand out like it might otherwise. Others watch in morbid curiosity to see how long those who work for him last and what they've done wrong to get their asses handed to them. Angela runs the pool for PA terminations. There's a separate pot estimated at around \$400 waiting for the day one gets their pink slip and isn't reduced to tears. Cullen is legendary for cutting to the quick. He made a former Navy SEAL cry.

I have the luxury of distance. I'm certain a few moments behind that thick, cherrywood door and I'd be quite over my little crush. Surely someone who tore through people like so much silt is grating to be around.

He has to be an ass of epic proportions.

He has an epic ass.

*I'll take "What is Irony?" for \$200 Alex.*

I'm using him to motivate myself, for progress. Just once, I'd like to have him notice me, to look appreciatively at me, a chink in his armor of sorts. I want to see if I can coax a human moment from him.

It's a goal. I have a plan.

While I can observe him from a safe vantage point, those poor PA suckers are a different story.

They're the ones in the trenches. I learn from their mistakes. I tell myself it's so that I can play along, place winning bets, supplement my meager income through their misfortune. I know his favorite coffee, its substitute, and the proportions of cream and sweetener. I know he prefers wheat to oat and never, ever rye. There's something he favors about Conference Room C; I suspect it's the projection equipment. For all his perfectionism, he manages to drip on his tie fairly often. He never sends red roses. No one gets the chance to interrupt him twice.

Winning the office pool. That's what I tell myself I watch him for.

I know I'm lying.

Angela waves the green bill in front of my face, breaking my revelry. "So Bella, what am I putting you down for?"

"I just can't let anyone go through that." I start toward her desk.

"If you fix it, I reserve the right to change my bet," Riley says, and bolts out of his chair.

I nod in agreement and smooth my skirt as I approach the PA's desk.

The air crackles thickly the closer I get to her desk, to Cullen's door. Behind her, behind those solid walls, I picture him in his crisp white shirt and pacing while on a conference call.

"May I help you?" The PA du jour doesn't bother to look up from her papers.

"Actually, I think I can help you."

This gets her attention. She turns her head and narrows her eyes. "Oh, really? Just what makes you think I need your help?"

*Wow, she's brusque.* I shrug it off. "I can pick up the Solomon's order for you." I force a smile. Her demeanor is so off-putting. I tell myself that anyone would be on edge in her position.

"That won't be necessary," she snaps and spins in her chair.

"Oh," I'm not prepared for this from her at all. "I'd heard that you had to pick it up yourself. It sounds as though you've made other arrangements. Good."

She's so defensive and I can't figure out why. But, she's going to let me know.

"Don't think I didn't notice you Missy." She stands and pokes her long fingernail in my chest before I can shrink back. Her red polish glares up at me from her peep-toe pumps. "You staring over here, salivating. You want this position. You think you can show up with the delivery and take the credit. Well, you're out of luck. I've done my homework on him. I'm not going anywhere."

*Oh, Sweetie. I wouldn't do your job for anything.* I swallow back all the things I'd like to say to this crass and unpleasant woman and give her a simple nod.

It's not really a nod. It's a goodbye.

"Put me down for 2pm. Today," I say to Angela as I pass her desk.

"What?" She and Riley say in unison.

"She doesn't want help." What I don't say is that she's got acrylic nails, is chewing cinnamon gum, wearing open-toed shoes, and no hosiery.

I don't know about her, but I've done *my* homework.

.....

A/N: Next update: Tomorrow 6:00am. No, they won't always be at 6am. I rather enjoy sleep.

Tomorrow's a big day.

Teaser:

"Mr. Cullen, this is Ms. Swan," she steps to the side and exposes me.

He's standing at the window, his back to us. Without turning, he sighs loudly, he gestures toward a chair.

I sit and hear the door click; Rosalie has already abandoned me.

*Coward.*

"Tell me." He continues to look out the wall of windows. His arms are crossed and long fingers drum his sleeve.

I wait for a moment. I wait for him to clarify. His jacket is draped over his riveted leather desk chair. His pants are light gray and I force myself not focus on any portion of them. The slope of his broad shoulders is also not a safe focal point. Light from the window catches golden strands in his hair; that's off-limits, too. I don't know where to look.

I become acutely aware of the silence.

"Pardon me?" I really feel at a loss, as if I've walked into a conversation midstream.

He huffs and continues to stare out the window. "*Tell me* everything. The who, what, when, where, why, how. Who you are. What you think this job entails. When you think your work day ends. Why you took this position. How long you think you'll last."



My throat is a desert. I've already exhausted his patience. It never occurred to me he'd ask me anything about me. I'm an expert at him, not myself.

# Chapter 5 Day 369 6:00am

Day of Employment: 369

6:00am

I'm awake again.

And it still sucks.

Lunch: Salad. Again.

Hair: Flat-ironed into submission.

Clothes: Tan pencil skirt, ivory blouse, flesh stockings, brand spanking new suede taupe pumps courtesy of yesterday's winning bet.

A tearful Miss Strawberry Bun collected her personal effects and left the premises at 2:30pm.

So, I was off about half an hour with my bet, but I still took that money while Riley shook his head. Poor guy got wrangled into taking notes during the meeting. I made sure I was scarce during that time. I can only imagine what that atmosphere was like. It seems that the order took longer than expected and the PA was late getting back. Shocking.

I've shoved my teals, pinks, lavenders, bright blues and all other colors in the Roy G. Biv spectrum to the back of the closet. Even indigo. I'm considering that a unique blue. Levis are indigo...

I'm a big blender full of subdued. So beige, Helen Hunt would be envious. Total corporate drone, all business. Plan Forecast: Nothing but black, navy, beige with scattered grey and a slim chance of red.

.....

A/N: 5 Updates today.

Some/most longer than this one. That's more than there normally will be - today is a big day for our Bella...

Next update at 7:30am Central (90 minutes from this posting.) Update schedule for today: 7:30, 8:20, 12:00pm noon, & 9:00pm.

Thank you so much for the reviews! I've read them and am working on replies.

# Chapter 6 Day 369 7:30am

7:30am

Out the door.

The new shoes feel like walking on air...until about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way to my car when my toes go numb. *Too late to turn back now.* I sigh and look down at them. *Too bad. I do like the way they look.* I make a mental note to see if I can take them back tonight.

I scratch through the note just as quickly. These shoes look like hers. Example B.

I've seen Edward Cullen with two women. Company picnic. Christmas party.

Example B (name unknown) wore similar shoes. No hair out of place. Everything about her was subdued. Colors. Manner. Refined.

Company picnic chick was so similar. She wore capris and a blouse but somehow they looked like a power suit. Immaculate hair. Unaffected by humidity. Grace personified.

My plan might've benefited from a stint at finishing school.

I picture myself balancing books on my head as I slip in to the car.

Incoming text.

**My office asap - Rosalie**

Weird.

I know this is the sort of thing that sends others into a tizzy. Rosalie might come off like a bitch, but she's really just assertive. Her praise is usually in the form of silence. I know she values me and she knows that I do my job, do it right, and never question anything. The only time I've ever feared her was when I went to her about starting night classes. But, she appreciated my full disclosure. She seems to trust me even more since then. She knows this isn't my forever.

In no time, I sit in Rosalie's office and listen to her explain what's happened and

what she wants me to do.

"I think there's been some sort of mistake."

"Your reaction doesn't surprise me," Rosalie says, leans over her desk and straightens a stack of files. Perpendicular angles everywhere. Without sparing an upward glance, she continues, "But, try to see the genius in it. This is the plan. Adjust...and don't embarrass this department. Here's the itinerary." She hands a stack of papers to me, which I nearly drop when I see the look she's leveled at me. She is terrified. Rosalie. Terrified. I may soil myself.

"This department has a lot riding on you. And by this department, I mean me." She clears her throat and manages to assume something close to her normal chilly demeanor. The cracks in the ice are still there.

"Bella, you've been here long enough to know how this shakes out. No one expects you, or anyone, to last long. Every Cullen PA is really a temp position. Make it through the trip and I'll give you a raise when you get sent back here. Make it a month and you'll come back to a promotion."

I want to say something about her lack of confidence in me, but I know it's moot. No one does last as his assistant for long and I should know. Watching the unbroken string of broken assistants leave his employ has been my hobby for a solid year.

They'd always screw up. Wrong coffee. Wrong outfit. Right outfit, wrong day. Misdirected memos. Wheat bread instead of Oat. Flirting. Tardy. Speaking. Being in the bathroom at just the wrong moment.

Jane had tapped her fake nails on the desk.

Leah was personable and professional. Misplaced trust in Spell Check had her gone in two weeks.

Carl shut his phone off at night.

After the infamous Indianapolis Incident, during which three PA's had revolving-doored their way to the unemployment line in under a week, a secret back-up assistant had been at-the-ready ever since.

"What about the back-up? Why me?"

"Jessica is on bed rest as of Monday. High risk pregnancy."

"What about my intersession class? I was going to use vacation days. I-I don't think I can miss classes for a week for this trip." I get the words out, but I can hear my voice begin to stammer.

"Bella, this deal he's setting up means well over a thousand jobs in this community. We really can't afford to gamble." I feel a wave of guilt mix with my trepidation. Rosalie must sense it, too. She softens and places her hand on mine. "I've called your school. I hope you don't mind. They stand to benefit from this deal, too. They'll video the lectures and email you urls."

I know I must be gaping at her.

"Bella, I need a pro in there. We can't afford any mistakes and Cullen needs to be able to focus. You have proven communication skills, a degree in writing, an impeccable performance record, professional demeanor, and, frankly, your obsession with him makes you far and away the best-prepared for the job."

"Rosalie!" My knees give and I sit down gracelessly. "I'm not obsessed. If anything, it's a gambling problem." I clasp my hands to hide the shaking. *How obvious have I been?*

She laughs softly then says things that make me glad I'm already sitting down. "Bella, I consider you a friend and, more importantly, a colleague. A trusted colleague.

I don't know if you realize, but I would have you as my right-hand if it were possible. But, you're too good for that job. Hell, you're definitely too good for a PA position...and that is *precisely* why I'm entrusting you with it. You see everything. You know when to speak up and when to keep your mouth shut." She hands me the itinerary that has slipped out of my hand and drifted to the floor.

Kneeling in front of me, in her closed office, Rosalie looks up at me. I can't help but notice where she's placed herself. "Bella, please. So much is riding on this deal."

"Fine." I hear myself say.

She closes both of her hands over mine and squeezes warmly, a shake of sorts. She opens her mouth to say something just as the sound of her door opening behind me stops her.

"I'm still waiting on that report." Cullen's voice scrapes along the walls of the room. I feel it wrap around my spine. Rosalie's eyes go wide but she covers quickly

and stands. Wordlessly, she grabs a file from her desk and hands it over my shoulder where I assume he takes it from her. A pause. Rosalie narrows her eyes. The door shuts.

A gust of air leaves my lungs. I didn't realize I'd forgotten to breathe.

This does not bode well. Surely oxygen will play an important part in performing my new job satisfactorily.

She manages to wipe the confused look from her face and sits on the edge of her desk. "Go gather up what you need at your new desk and meet me back here in twenty. I'll introduce you then."

...

A/N: Next update: 8:20am Central

Thanks for reading & the reviews!

This is update 2 of 5 for today

# Chapter 7 Day 369 8:20am

8:20am

Hair: Pinned back.

Buttons: Top only undone.

Bladder: Empty.

Shoes: Killing feet slowly.

This was not my plan. I'm not under the radar at all now. Plan has changed from generating a blip to being directly in his sights.

"Ready?" Rosalie asks as we approach Cullen's door.

"No." *I wanna hurl.*

She laughs and knocks once.

"Come in." His deep voice pierces the door. The last of the free air fills my lungs.

Rosalie walks ahead into his office as if a 2x4 is strapped to her spine. I stay behind her, plotting how to use her as a human shield.

"Mr. Cullen, this is Ms. Swan," she steps to the side and exposes me. "Your new assistant."

He's standing at the window, his back to us. Without turning, he sighs loudly, he gestures toward a chair.

I sit and hear the door click; Rosalie has already abandoned me.

*Coward.*

"Tell me." He continues to look out the wall of windows. His arms are crossed and long fingers drum his sleeve.

I wait for a moment. I wait for him to clarify. His jacket is draped over his riveted



leather desk chair. His pants are light gray and I force myself not to focus on any portion of them. The slope of his broad shoulders is also not a safe focal point. Light from the window catches golden strands in his hair; that's off-limits, too. I don't know where to look.

I become acutely aware of the silence.

"Pardon me?" I really feel at a loss, as if I've walked into a conversation midstream.

He huffs and continues to stare out the window. "*Tell me everything.* The who, what, when, where, why, how. Who you are. What you think this job entails. When you think your work day ends. Why you took this position. How long you think you'll last."

My throat is a desert. I've already exhausted his patience. It never occurred to me he'd ask me anything about me. I'm an expert at him, not myself.

I launch into a dissertation on my education and credentials. Masters in English. Intern and job experience. Scholarships. I omit any mention of my current law school scholarship or enrollment. I doubt he'd be receptive to divided priorities. I make sure all this takes no longer than thirty seconds. I skip right over anything that relates to why I think I can do this job - I don't think I can pull off confidence.

"The job expectation is that I make you available to perform your job at optimum level. I need to learn and anticipate your needs in order to ensure this. Any distraction or delay has a negative impact.

"My work day began when I walked into this room and it will end when I leave your employ." I keep talking, but I notice a shift in his demeanor. His fingers still. A few moments later, he moves to his desk chair. I know I'm in. Maybe I've even impressed him.

Words continue to spill from my mouth. I explain that I've been here for a year. I'm flexible and a good observer. Performance stats.

"Finally, Mr. Cullen, I understand that there is a critical contract on the line and there is no time to prep a new employee. I bring to the table a solid understanding of this company and am committed to its success."

My speech has taken under two minutes. Brevity. I feel good about it. My face is hot, but I'm still breathing. The win column gets a tick.

"Ms. Swan, I've no illusions about my reputation. That being said, I am fair. I neither expect miracles nor do I tolerate mistakes." He leans back in his chair and levels his gaze at me. His eyes are a grey-green. If he ever blinks, I miss it. I'm caught in their pull.

"It's my understanding that there is a CYA file on me. Read it."

My eyes are probably bugging out. *He knows about the file?*

He misinterprets my surprise for bewilderment and explains further. "Cover Your Ass. A cheat-sheet," he seethes. He thinks I'm playing dumb.

"The COYA file?" The words are out before I can think better of it.

One corner of his mouth turns up. It might be a burgeoning smile. It might be irritation.

He gives me a look that tells me he wants an explanation. I want to show him I get non-verbal communication. I want to show him I am honest. I want to show him my matching bra and panty set. I sure as Hell don't want to tell him what COYA stands for.

There's no escape.

"Cullen Owns Your Ass."

He blinks. Finally.

I hasten to add, "I feel it's important to point out that I did not name the file, Sir."

Without looking away, he writes on a paper and walks around his desk to hand it to me. "My number. Call me so I have your cell." He pauses for a moment, his face unreadable. This is unsettling. I thought I knew him better. His gaze falls to my shoes. I can't understand why as they are completely nondescript. "Check the calendar and itinerary. Leave at noon to prepare for tomorrow." I know I look surprised and it doesn't get past him.

"Bella, I'm aware that this is all short notice. You'll need to make arrangements. I'll handle the bulk of my own this time. Get yourself ready. An ill-prepared assistant will be a distraction and an embarrassment."

A flick of his wrist dismisses me. Immediately before I open the door, I hear his

voice behind me.

"I won't let you embarrass me."

...

A/N: Next update Noon Central

This was update 3 of 5 today

# Chapter 8 Day 369 12:00pm

12:00pm

Files: Downloaded.

Calendar: Set.

Desk: Conspicuously free of my personal belongings.

Riley: Sufficiently guilt-tripped for getting spotted slipping a bet to Angela.

Shoes: Pooled with the blood of my innocent toes.

"I'm off, Ang. See you later, right?"

She pats my back reassuringly. "Of course! I'll be by with everything you asked to borrow. Call if you think of anything else."

I do my best to smile at her but can't help feeling like I'm off to meet the noose.

One last item of business before I head out remains incomplete. I've procrastinated over calling him. Now, I can call him and check in before I leave without facing him again. This is pointless craziness because I will be neck-deep in Edward Cullen for the next seven days. Just one less encounter.

I program the digits into my phone then shred the paper so no one can stumble across his private number.

He answers on the second ring. "Cullen."

"Hello Mr. Cullen. This is Ms. Swan. You said to call."

"Yes."

Cue awkward pause.

"Let us hope you endeavor to perform future tasks more promptly."

*Oh....he wanted my number right away? Even when I was still in the office? Okay.*

*Noted. Do everything right away whether it makes sense to me or not.*

"If there's nothing else Mr. Cullen..."

"The car will pick you up at four."

*Four? As in 4:00am? Oh, holy...*

"Four o'clock," I confirm and the line clicks.

I hope he ended the call. I contemplate calling him back to check, but decide against it. I'd call back anyone else; it's my nature. Mr. Edward Cullen would call back if I'd cut him off.

But, he'd definitely be pissed if I interrupted him needlessly.

...

A/N - Next update at 9:00pm Central

This was update 4 of 5

# Chapter 9 Day 369 9:00pm

9:00pm

Skin: Buffed.

Nails: Filed to nubs. Clear coat.

Credit card: Dangerously close to limit.

Kitchen Table: Covered in supplies for every occasion.

Suitcases: Packed. Everything from Angela's best suit to my roommate's cocktail dresses.

Wardrobe: Looks like I've robbed a stranger.

Feet: Raw. Stupid shoes.

Roommate: Bouncing off walls.

"Alice. Calm down."

"Bella. Calm up."

"That doesn't even make sense."

Alice, my roommate of two years and best friend of two decades, zips around the kitchen. "Here's a bag of meds and one for late night emergencies," she says, tossing bags in with the other items.

"Eagle Scouts are less prepared." I roll my eyes at her. "Alice, I appreciate all of this, I really do."

"Are you going to eat the rest of that stir-fry?" She's rummaging in the refrigerator, tiny ass in the air.

"Nope," I say, "help yourself." Then, unbidden, melancholy hits.

This isn't what I dreamed about at all. I wanted him to notice me. Just be kind. See

a light in his eyes. Or a smile on his lips. A moment of kindness or appreciation - or, just maybe, flirtation -from the consummate S.O.B.

It's a sick need. I get it. I know it.

I still wanted it.

And I feel that dream die.

I had a process. I had a plan.

...

A/N: This is update 5 of 5 today

Thanks so much for reading & reviewing!

Next update at 12:23am Central. Then again at 3:00am, 3:58am, 5:20am...etc  
(Bella must not be having a very good night...) Couple more after that tomorrow.

# Chapter 10 Day 370 12:23am

Author of 10 Stories Rated: - English - Romance/Humor - Edward & Bella -  
Reviews: - Updated: 12-03-11 - Published: 12-12-10 - Complete - id:6550419



# Chapter 11 Day 370 3:00am

Author of 10 Stories Rated: - English - Romance/Humor - Edward & Bella -  
Reviews: - Updated: 12-03-11 - Published: 12-12-10 - Complete - id:6550419

# Chapter 12 Day 370 3:58am

3:58am

Luggage: One large, rolling suitcase

Carry-on Contents: Travel documents for myself and one Edward Masen Cullen. Motion-sickness meds, just in case. Gum. Mints. Purse. Laptop. Magazines and new book by favorite author of new boss. Miscellaneous.

Hair: Stick-straight, clipped back.

Clothes: Grey pantsuit. Grey pumps. Grey everything.

Mood: Grey. Natch.

A black E Class pulls up, sloshing through the overnight moisture. It waits silently.

I heave the suitcase into the trunk. The empty trunk. *What the fuck?*

The driver offers no immediate explanation. A fender bender on the highway slows traffic to a crawl for several minutes. He takes an exit off the route to the airport and appears to do some winding around in an impromptu route. The rocking motion threatens to lull me to sleep.

In a neighborhood so affluent all that can be seen are wrought iron gates and ten-foot hedgerows, the car glides to a stop outside one such gate. He punches in a code and we meander up the lane. Cullen is outside, suited in deep charcoal. Three-button. Some ridiculous, cool-tone paisley tie that only he could make look as imposing as Hell. He walks to the car while punching the keys of his phone.

I note that the driver actually puts Cullen's bags in the trunk.

Cullen sits next to me in the seat now, never taking his eyes off the screen.

"When I give you a time to be ready, it's not an approximation."

My mouth drops open. Do I defend myself in these situations? I was on time.

"Sir," the driver proves himself un-mute, "there was a wreck on the turnpike. It

was necessary to double-back through the Hammond district."

Beside me, his jaw tightens but he never stops typing.

"Are you paid to arrive at a certain time?"

"Yes, Mr. Cullen, I am."

Cullen slides his phone into a pocket and looks out the window. "Wrong. You were."

I study the reports I've been pretending to read for all I'm worth. I don't hold my breath for an apology.

....

A/N: This is update 3 of 6 for today.

Next one at 5:20am

Thank you to everyone for reading & reviewing

# Chapter 13 Day 370 5:20am

5:20am

"Your ticket, Mr. Cullen."

He's standing near a pillar at our gate. He's been standing there, still, robotic, since he finished the coffee for which I'd had to sprint to the far end of the terminal. Sprint. In heels. Try it sometime.

He takes the ticket from my hand and I'm glad I move quickly or I'd have a Guinness-worthy series of paper cuts.

We've checked our bags, but there is still his briefcase, laptop and my carry-ons to contend with. Priority boarding is called and it looks like I'm meant to carry his things, too. He walks away with a hand in his pocket, suit jacket slung over his arm.

*Please, don't break a sweat or anything, Mister.*

He throws a glance my way. "Today." He lays on the last syllable as if the sarcasm might've escaped me otherwise.

Faked grace gets me and fifty pounds of junk down the breezeway without banging his hoity-toity briefcase against the walls. Leather. Probably from the pelts of newborn puppies. Or a giant panda. *Anyone seen Ling-Ling lately?*

Our seats are in the very front of the plane. I've heard this isn't the safest place to sit. But, it occurs to me that Cullen would simply tell the plane it could not crash and it would begin to flap its wings like a great metal bird.

He sits nearest the window and utilizes a final few minutes on his phone. I don't think he even realizes I'm here.

I wrestle most of our items into the overhead bin while trying to not block the path for every single person who comes on board. Because we're sitting right up front. Have I mentioned that?

It's a weird angle. To reach up into the bin, but keep my ass out of the aisle, I feel like a question mark.

My shirt has come untucked and I'm hyper aware of the strip of skin at my waist that is now meeting cool air. I slide in my laptop bag and feel a shove from behind and, suddenly, I'm no longer stable. I teeter for all of a second before hands clamp around me. All I can feel is heat on my exposed skin.

Slowly, I gain my bearings. His face is inches from mine. Hovering. His breath swirls between us. Cullen breath. It's coffee and something more. I resist the urge to inhale deeply. His brow furrows and he swings and plops me down into my seat. I blink again and again.

"I believe you owe someone an apology."

He steps out from under the bin. The bustle of passengers halts. I'm staring straightforward, observing the textured paneling.

"You." His voice booms.

The quiet feels like forever, but it's probably only a few seconds. My torso feels seared, as if I'll find two hand print brands on my skin when I undress later.

His crotch is also level with my face. My perception of the world at large is affected.

A reedy male voice carries back to me. "My apologies."

Cullen returns smoothly to his seat.

How does one process a situation like this? That was gallant. And kinda hot.

"Thank you Mr. Cullen."

"There isn't time to change if you get your suit dirty."

*Ah, chivalry.*

....

A/N: Update 4 of 6 for today

Next one at 7:34am Central

# Chapter 14 Day 370 7:34am

7:34am

"Nothing more that can be covered now."

We've been going over the proposal and possible concessions for the longest ninety minutes of my life. And I saw *Blair Witch 2*.

I know there is more to go over, but he doesn't want to compromise security...or some b.s. Whatever. I doubt that silver-haired, golden-anniversary couple behind us are really corporate spies hanging on our every word.

I understand our current operations, but this is a new venture. New products and production capabilities. We outsource most of our product line; the level of integration that's on the table would make us manufacturers. What I understand generally isn't going to be much help here. I want to push for info.

I doubt anyone pushes Cullen for anything...not successfully anyway.

His buttons. I'd love to push those. Or pop them.

"Very well," I say as I put my notepad back in my bag. In my peripheral, I see his jaw is set. Tense. *What have I done? Not done? He was as personable as he gets until...*

*...until I spoke just now. Until I said, "Very well." And a thousand thoughts hit me at once. Oh, shit... is this guy thinking I'm going to address him as "Sir" or "Mr. Cullen" every blessed time I speak? That I'm going to subjugate myself at every turn? That I'm mousy and meek and mild-mannered? I bet he gets off on... Oh great dandelions and unicorns - the son of a bitch might be one of those guys...*

His jaw is still tense. *You're gonna chip a molar at this rate, buddy. Let's test the theory...*

"Very well, Sir."

His jaw is still set and a little bulge at the hinge flexes. Then, he shifts away from me and presses his index finger near his ear. Cabin pressure is affecting his ears. Jury is still out on the other issue.

"Gum?" I offer him a stick.

He straightens – seems surprised – but reaches around and takes the proffered gum. It's wintergreen. Hopefully acceptable. Cinnamon is a deal breaker.

I get the universal guy nod that substitutes as an offering of thanks.

Roughly five dozen chews into the gum and the atmosphere is full-fledged awkward. Quiet. Unsettling. Weird.

He begins sifting through the in-flight magazines. I dare say he looks lost without his phone.

"Have you had a chance to read this?" I hold out the book I purchased for him yesterday. I feel confident that he hasn't read it; it just came out.

It's a Kodak moment. Tired phraseology be damned. This might be the closest I ever get to seeing Edward Cullen at a loss for words. Taken aback. Discombobulated.

Well, no. Not quite that far.

But, he is surprised and surprised enough to not completely mask it. There is an adorable twinkle in his eye. Or the reflection of the emergency exit lights. Whichever.

He takes it slowly, almost like he can't believe it's not booby trapped. He looks at it for a moment, then lifts it up in a strange salute to me before he starts reading.

*That's alright. Just go ahead and be above verbal expressions of gratitude. I'll get you to say the words some day, you ungrateful mother...*

*Holy crap, do I need to pee. Wow.*

The pilot has long since turned off the seat belt sign, but I'm not certain that I'm free to move about the cabin. Upwards of a gallon of coffee has gone down Cullen's gullet. No bathroom break. Inhuman.

I, however, do not have a retro-fitted industrial bladder.

I touch his armrest in hope to get his attention. His eyes flash to it, then me. I gesture toward the restroom. I tell myself that this is out of courtesy but I feel pretty

sure he thinks he's granting permission. I'm not going to trifle, to split hairs. I just need to survive this trip.

Close this deal. Last a week or a month.

I can play. I can deal.

Perfect. Quiet. Docile. Opinionless. Sterile.

Act as if the COYA file created me in a lab.

Whatever it takes. Whatever he needs.

30 days. At most.

A Bella-ectomy.

That's the new program.

I have a new plan.

...

A/N: Update 5 of 6

Next one at 9:45pm Central

Thank you again for reading/reviewing 3

The things some of you catch! How will I ever set-up anything discreetly? LOL



# Chapter 15 Day 370 9:45pm

9:45pm

Location: Hyatt - Top floor. Room 928. Across from Cullen's.

Room: Could not be more beige.

Laptop: Charging.

Suitcase: Unpacked.

Bath: Drawn. And cold.

Why is my bath cold? Because I, purchaser of sadist shoes, needed to soak after wearing cheese graters on my feet yesterday and then traveling and walking and sitting through meetings and touring facilities and impersonating a pack mule today. 'Twas not meant to be.

Instead, I've spent the last two hours typing up messages as Cullen rattled them off in rapid succession.

He asked for bar charts. I generated them while he shaved.

He changed his mind to line graphs. I converted them while he took a phone call in the hall.

He complained that he left his blue tie at home. I produced the spare one I brought from the office.

Ten minutes ago, he loosened his tie, wrung his hands and made an aside that he couldn't relax. I prepared a cup of Chamomile tea and texted Alice that I owed her big time for the ridiculous stuff she packed. He began drinking it and asked why I was still in his room.

*You're welcome.*

"When would you like the day to start tomorrow?"

"Their offices open at 8:00. We'll get there at 7:00."

No fashionably late for that guy. I tried to cover my surprise, but failed.

He explained, "It's best to see who arrives when, who's dedicated. Actions over words." His fingers twisted and pulled free the already loosened knot in his tie. His upturned chin and neck stretched above the shirt collar. He swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing smoothly. I swallowed, too.

I nodded and gathered my things. "Pleasant dreams Mr. Cullen," I said, turning to face him from his doorway.

He tilted his head almost like a dog that is pretty sure you have something behind your back.

"Goodnight Ms. Swan."

Now, I'm draining the tub while I hang the rest of my clothes. The cocktail dresses go in the bathroom in the hope the steam will help with the wrinkles. Suits go to the closet.

While the tub refills, I place our breakfast orders. The coffee is a total loss as they really don't have a large selection. I order the cream and sweetener anyway. Because my middle name is Prepared, I brought a bag of his coffee. Muffins and eggs and some type of pig. I have no way of knowing if he's a protein or carb morning person, so I'm covering all the bases. Orange juice for him. Grape, apple, and cranberry for me in case he hates OJ.

They send up the in-room coffee pot and I consider brewing a practice pot, but I don't want my whole room to reek of it.

I bring my cell into the bathroom because I just have a feeling.

The psychic network needs to recruit me because about three-point-five minutes into my well-deserved bath, he calls.

"Hello." I hold still, trying not to slosh water. I've suddenly become conscientious about being in the tub.

Tub means nude.

"Why would you take the second quarter P&L with you?"

"I didn't, Sir. It's in your case behind the personnel lists."

"If I had it, I wouldn't be calling you."

"Everything is in alpha order in your case. It's been in there all evening."

"I need it."

"Fine. I'll be there in under ten minutes."

"That's an especially long time to walk across the hall. No matter. It's not here."

"I'll look through my things and call you back Sir."

"I'll wait."

"Oh, surely you have better things to do than listen to me look for papers. I'll call you back in a few minutes."

"Are you unable to interpret certain social cues Ms. Swan? It should be obvious to anyone that I am irritated and yet you persist."

Sigh. I look at my bubbles. So long bubbles.

*I learned this yesterday, didn't I? Do what he wants when he wants it even if it doesn't make sense.*

"Of course Mr. Cullen," I acquiesce...

...and then stand right the fuck up in the bath, water sloshing and splashing and then gurgling loudly when I hold the receiver down near the drain and I flip it so the water starts to go down.

I pinch the phone between my ear and shoulder while I dry off. The terry is soft, but it still rustles against me. I might've made sure it brushed across the phone a couple of times, too.

"Ms. Swan, um, I'll check here again. I'll call back if I find it."

"As you wish Sir. I'll finish looking here and then, if need be, come to your room," I say, and smile what is probably a very wicked smile before adding, "as soon as I get dressed."

I throw on the first thing I find and get myself into his room almost immediately.

The file is here. Slipped down in his case. It actually is hard to see and I'm a bit panicked as I first begin to look.

Not sure what he expected me to show up in when I went to his room, but I don't think it was pajama pants and a tank. He is still in his slacks and dress shirt. I think he might sleep in them.

Hell, he may not require sleep. The advances of cyborg technology and all that.

....

A/N: This is the final one for today!

Next one is dark & early - 4:45am Central.

I've fallen behind on review replies - I took a nap today. ;) I will get to them - every single one is appreciated. Thank you!

# Chapter 16 Day 371 4:45am

Day of Employment: 371

4:45am

Bedspread: Back on bed.

Coffee: Set to brew in one hour.

Clothes: Yoga pants & Mr. Bubbles t-shirt.

Location: Hotel fitness center.

I'm wondering what cosmic missteps I've taken to now find myself perpetually awake before God.

I've committed myself to make personal progress. Hitting the gym early enough to be done and leave it before the sun cracks over the horizon tests my resolve.

Further, the object of my resolution, the point of it, was to get Cullen to notice me. That boost of confidence that puts a spring in one's step. The positive aura that translates as sex appeal. That's what I was going for.

It's all for naught now. So, reminding myself that I was merely trying to garner his attention for motivational purposes - that it would be really sick to otherwise hitch my star to that dysfunctional wagon - is getting harder to reconcile when the alarm goes off.

I speed the treadmill up. I'll feel better for this. Definitely. Maybe. Definitely maybe.

I sit at work all day and study all night. It's not going to do me any good to finish school if I keel over dead. Runs in the family.

This is the problem with treadmills. Too much time to think.

...

A/N: This is update 1 of 5 today

Next one at 6:00am Central

Thank you to everyone for reading/reviewing!

Special thanks Melee03 for being my rock

To FerlaV, celesticbliss, & Udo for all they do

To heatherbella - my beta &, it seems, my unpaid PR agent/pimp

# Chapter 17 Day 371 6:00am

6:00am

Breakfast: Arrived 15 minutes ago. Gone.

Hair: French twist

Clothes: Beige suit. It's like keeping a little piece of my room with me all day.

Coffee: Blue Mountain Jamaica. Freshly brewed. Go me.

Cullen's breakfast arrives as I exit my room. The server smiles at me; he knows he's getting a good tip for splitting the delivery.

He knocks and the door opens as if by magic. I duck in behind the cart, hot coffee in hand. Not that I have to sneak in. I have a key.

Clangs emanate from the bathroom while the table is set up and I make quick work of the sugar and cream.

"Will there be anything else Sir?" The server speaks loudly to a closed bathroom door.

Cullen dismisses him with something muffled I can't make out. There hasn't been any water running. I don't really know what I'll encounter when that bathroom door opens. He may be fully clothed.

He may regenerate suits like a T-1000.

But, the distinct possibility that he may appear in some stage of undress exists.

Edward Cullen. With skin exposed.

Must focus.

Focus focus focus.

He said to be here at 6:00am.

I am here at 6:00am.

*Do what he says when he says. Even though it doesn't make sense to me.*

Some items still need packing up. Chargers and files. His laptop.

Not a chance in Hell I'm going to do that now and rob myself of something to concentrate on when he walks into the room.

Be calm. Cool.

Cool as a cucumber...which sets my mind skipping down a dirty little path...

*Sweet Moses, it's happening now. The door is opening and I don't know whether to sit or stand or turn around or look away or jump out the sliding door and hold up in a log cabin in the hills.*

*Calm. The. Fuck. Down.*

This might be the closest I'll get to the upper hand.

*You're a reasonable man Mr. Cullen. You don't tolerate mistakes Mr. Cullen. When you set a time it's not an approximation Mr. Cullen.*

I breathe. Deeply.

And it's like a dance. But I'm leading this one. I know I'm here. I'm justified in being here.

One long leg breaks the threshold. I force myself to turn at what feels like half speed. I'm ramped up on nerves and moving too quickly will show it.

The leg and its friend are in black pants. I'm a bit more disappointed than I expected.

Bullshit. I'm super fucking disappointed.

But the point is I'm not showing it.

He turns toward the main part of the room, toward me, and I begin wrapping the cord around his charger.



Hoping my movements still look natural and unaffected – like hanging out in a hotel room with one's potentially half-naked boss is a regular occurrence – my eyes flick up to see Cullen stop mid-stride.

His shirt is open. The man is wearing a white dress shirt, unbuttoned, cuffs loose. Pretending not to notice has now become a Herculean effort.

"Explain yourself."

I barely glance up, even though staring would've been worth getting fired.

I start to pack up his laptop. I'm all business.

Pretending to misinterpret his words, I continue packing up as I rattle off the itinerary and my role in it. I'm to take notes, hand him hard-copies or access reports as needed, watch for discrepancies. I omit glorified nanny.

A few times it seems that he's about to say something, to redirect me back to the situation, but I plow through. Finally, I close with describing the food that better not have gotten cold.

He nods once, mouth a thin line. The shirt is buttoned and tucked in now. I've missed the show.

"You failed to mention the dinner meeting tonight. I presume you brought suitable attire."

"The little black dress. Perfect for all occasions."

"Hopefully not too little," he says under his breath. He may have rolled his eyes.

Do I seem like some sort of tart? Is this because I'm in his room? He shouldn't have told me to be here and given me a key then.

He takes a sip of the coffee and the look is priceless. He was so ready to bitch and moan and I've kept him from it. Despite the fact that he had to realize that I've checked off all the boxes this morning, he remains somber.

"If orange juice is not okay, I can get something else." *Prune juice perhaps?*

"A good rule of thumb," he says, and polishes off the eggs, "is not to make offers one can't complete."

"Agreed. Thank you for imparting your expertise," I say. "By the by, I have grape, apple, and cranberry juice in my refrigerator if you should feel so inclined."

He stops mid bacon chew. I think I'm getting addicted to flustering him.

If I can't be a blip on the radar, I'll be a fly in the ointment.

...

A/N: Update 2 of 5

Next one at 4:47pm

Then: 7:54pm & a short one at 11:10pm

# Chapter 18 Day 371 4:47pm

4:47pm

Location: Office of Laurent Peters, World's Most Tedious Man.

I'm thinking about that scene in Raiders of the Lost Ark when a female student blinks at Indy and her eyelids have words on them that read "I Love You" in black eyeliner. Maybe I can do that but make it look like my eyes are open. Even if I wasn't already sleepy, this company's CEO would do me in.

He's ether in human form. I could easily keep up even if I hand-wrote everything.

In calligraphy.

Mr. Peters, on the down slope to retirement, does not self-edit. Interspersed with the incredibly slow-spoken actual negotiations, we get it all. Some of it twice. The kids. The grand-kids. The basset hound. They're a hardy breed; seventeen years before Peters had him put down last week. He'll be missed.

Peters has prostate issues as well. Nothing is off limits it seems.

During this, Cullen doesn't even bat an eye. One would think he might be concerned about the health of his own prostate as it has been cohabiting with a very large stick.

He makes notes of all this minutia as though it's as vital to closing the deal as the fine print in licensing our intellectual property rights.

Cullen has remained stoic. Begrudgingly, I must admit I'm impressed.

Warm afternoon sun beats down on me from the window. There's a sunbeam on the carpet near my chair. I want to curl up in it like a tabby cat.

The morning was less trying. Three other executives had livened up the discussion. One was even lively enough to check out my ass. A pen jab to the leg he just happened to keep bumping against mine under the conference table seemed to give him the message he wasn't my type.

"I must say, you've thought of everything. What do you need me for?" Peters

chortles. Yes, chortles.

Cullen smiles and raises his eyebrows infinitesimally; he doesn't need this guy in the least and I'm fairly certain Peters is going to be enjoying his retirement sooner than planned. Mr. Peters doesn't notice and excuses himself to make a call. His meandering trek to the door takes about five minutes.

We're alone for the first time since his hotel room this morning. Cullen takes out his phone then returns it to his pocket almost immediately.

I turn, shifting toward him just a little. I'm sure my eyes are a bit wider than normal due to my struggle to stay alert.

Our eyes meet and I must be punch drunk from sleep deprivation and three hours of Peters' monologue because I can't help the smile that takes over my face and, just when I think I might be able to rein it in, one corner of Cullen's mouth turns up too. The shock wave ruptures the dam and I can't help a single laugh escaping. He looks at papers he's holding but even in profile I can see tell that his smile is bigger. Oh, good Lord, we've both been tortured for hours and he's just better at hiding it. I clear my throat and shake my head, trying to resume professional behavior.

*Not much longer. Though it will seem twice as long since this Peters guy has tortoise nervosa.*

"What?" Cullen is looking at me.

The filter is broken. I've said that out loud.

*Oh crap. I'm mocking a potential business partner. I'm so fired.*

I own it. I repeat myself.

And Cullen laughs. Hard.

*Holy shit. I have actually fallen asleep on the job. Or died.*

I hear myself laugh, too. It's a bit nervous and hollow. I need to get out of here.

"May I get you a drink Mr. Cullen?"

He nods repeatedly, pointedly avoiding eye contact, gaining composure.

"Take a chance with their coffee or just a Coke?" *Caffeine on an IV drip?*

"Coke is fine." He clears his throat.

Over thirty minutes later, our drinks are gone and Peters has yet to materialize.

"Do you suppose he's left?" I break the silence. I'm concerned about running late to dinner; I'd planned on being back at the hotel by now and I need time to change.

I bet this is killing Cullen, this waiting around.

"We'll give him two more minutes, then we'll leave."

I'm in the shower when I realize Cullen said "we."

...

A/N: Update 3 of 5

Next one at 7:54pm Central (just about 3 hours after this one posted)

I'm overwhelmed in the best way with the response to this! Thank you. Thank you everyone for reading!

Thank you to those who are reviewing & keep reviewing even though I'm fantastically behind in replies now. I am reading every single one & they make this all worthwhile.

Thank you to the many people who are recommending this story. Means the world to me. - QFX

# Chapter 19 Day 371 7:54pm

7:54pm

Location: Fogo de Chao, Churrascaria.

Itinerary Item: Dinner meeting with 4 top execs.

Dress: Black. Littlest one I brought. Worn intentionally. Don't judge me.

The food is amazing. Freshly grilled meat straight to the table again and again. Salad bar with items I neither recognize nor can pronounce.

We're dining with the comptroller and three VPs. There appears to be a shit ton of suits at this company; thinning the herd seems in order.

My recommendation is we begin with one Irina Lauren, VP of Marketing. Tits on display and blatant, just blatant, flirtation attempts with the males. She's the embodiment of every negative connotation with female executives. Giant step backward for the women's movement.

It's an all-u-can eat restaurant. All you can eat meat. Meat.

Lauren wants the only kind not on the menu. Her attempts would only be more obvious if she stuffed her panties directly into Cullen's mouth.

Most of the evening has been pleasant enough. Cullen is beside me, so I'm spared his judgmental looks. I do get a few errant brushes from Lauren's heels when her attempts to play footsie with my boss go astray.

If she snags my stockings, I might have to cut a bitch.

"More top sirloin?" The server says leaning a skewer of meat over Lauren and her décolletage. Making sure he gets a tip tonight. She's giving him two right now.

Others take slices and I wave him off. Undaunted, he returns with chicken moments later.

"Beautiful lady perhaps prefers chicken?" He smiles down at me. Beside me, I feel Cullen stiffen. All eyes are on me.

How unfair is it that this moment feels more unprofessional than all of the off-color comments made by others during the evening?

"No thank you. I'm finished," I say.

"I'll take whatever you've got," Lauren chimes. *I just bet you would.*

"We have glazed pineapple. Sweets for your sweet smile." He cuts meat for Lauren as he speaks to me.

I shake my head again. Cullen clears his throat loudly.

Lauren's eyes narrow. "How sweet Ms. Swan. Should I get his number for you?" she sneers.

Silverware clangs next to me. "Thank you for the dinner. We really must head out and go over those new proposals." Cullen stands and pulls my chair out.

*Sure. I don't mind leaving. I'm done. Thank you for asking.*

Peters takes a break from his protein bonanza. "Well, well, well. Throwing in the towel already are you man?"

"Oh," Lauren says, crestfallen. "We'll see more of you tomorrow, right?" Oh, she wants to see more of Cullen, that's for sure. The thought is nauseating. Her...him...across the hall from my room...touching...each other. I push my chair in a bit too forcefully. The place settings clatter.

I should be thrilled at the prospect of someone keeping him occupied. I shrug it off. It's probably just the thought that someone so crass, so unworthy, might get noticed when I've failed.

...

A/N: Update 4 of 5

Next ones are at 11:10pm & 3:33am Central - both short-ish. Then 7:00am, 11:05am, 11:37am...

Thank you again for reading and reviewing!

# Chapter 20 Day 371 11:10pm

11:10pm

Phone: In bed beside me. Like a lover. Possibly better. Definitely bigger than some.

Volume: On high.

Screen: Dark. Continuously so.

I should be focusing on the lecture playing back on the laptop. Instead, my eyes keep darting to the phone.

I keep expecting him to call.

He doesn't.

A silent ride from the restaurant followed by a silent ride in the elevator. Then, I followed him down the hall to our rooms. Three paces behind at all times.

A couple of hours pouring over tweaked proposals and highlighting differences with Bossy Pants. Now, I'm alone in my room to thrill to the history of common law marriages and other things only a handful of states still honor.

Back on task. Two days in and already seven hours behind in lectures. Not good.

At some point, I fall asleep with headphones on listening to Professor Caius explain the SEC's role in enforcing the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.

...

A/N: Next update at 3:33am Central



# Chapter 21 Day 372 3:33am

Day of Employment: 372

3:33am

"Noooooooooooo..."

*Huh? Huh - What the-? Oh. Oh, shit. It's me.*

I haven't had nightmares in a while. They seem to be stress-induced. Go figure.

In my youth, they happened all the time. Always different, but with one important element often the same: Mr. Lincoln.

Dude is scary. Just picture him out in a field, stoic eyes and stovepipe hat, staring. Shudder.

Tonight, he was in the closet. Not like that. Waiting. Breathing. Getting beard hairs on all my borrowed business clothes.

Then, Abe made his presence known. Dumped thousands of pennies on me. Drank all Cullen's coffee.

Yeah, I'm messed up. Other people get nightmares with mangy-furred werewolves tearing the shingles from their roof. I'm terrorized by Abraham Fucking Lincoln.

No point in trying to go back to sleep. I hit the fitness center.

....

A/N: This is update 1 of 6 today.

Next update: 7:00am Central

# Chapter 22 Day 372 7:00am

7:00am

Clothes: Black pantsuit.

Cullen: Dressed. Foiled again.

Not going in early today. He says there's no point if they're expecting it.

Worrisome. He's beginning to make sense to me.

"I'll need those figures from corporate." He's straightening his tie in the mirror.

"They're in your email as well as hard copies in my case."

The tie isn't cooperating. "They don't do me any good in your case."

I bite my tongue and pull the stack of papers out for him. It's not really a stack so much as a ream.

It hits the desk with a thud. *Help yourself. Might wanna bend at the knees when you lift it.*

The sound draws him away from his battle with the rabbit and its hole. He looks like he's about to say something but then thinks better of it. He yanks the tie free in frustration.

Wordlessly, I step around the desk and hold my hands out, offering to tie it. He pulls his head back and seems surprised, then takes the step to me, to where our feet touch.

So close together. Close. The soft sound of his breath fills my ears. I work, then slide the knot up and linger near his throat for a moment.

Warmth. I'm aware of every hair on my neck. Slowly, I smooth the tie down over his chest with my hand.

"Better?" My voice is hoarse in my ears.

He glances in the mirror, gives a nod.

Computers and papers are packed in silence.

...

A/N Update 2 of 6

Next update: 11:05am Central

Then: 11:37am, 9:00pm, & 9:21pm

Thank you for reading/reviewing! In case anyone is wondering: Yes. Yes, I am all kinds of happy/surprised/thrilled/freaked/humbled by the reception of this story. Thank you. I'm told many readers found their way here from ADF thanks to Jandco - so thank you very, very much. I don't want to miss out on thanking people; I'll try to sort through all this and do it properly as soon as possible. Please know that I'm very grateful.

# Chapter 23 Day 372 11:05am

11:05am

"This here's the main floor for pick-and-pack. Four tiers high for the runners. The fork trucks can reach clean up to the top." Seth Michael, floor supervisor, has been the most personable of all the personnel.

Of course, we are scheduled to spend ten whole minutes with him.

Peters and Lauren, however, are practically shadows. Boring, whorish shadows.

The distribution center appears efficient.

If I listen closely, I can hear the gears in Cullen's head turning. Copying it has become his plan.

Mine is still under revision.

Lagging behind, I film the operation with my phone.

I may or may not have filmed Cullen's ass. Twice.

...

A/N: Update 3 of 6

Next update at 11:37am

Thank you!

## Chapter 24 Day 372 11:37am

11:37am

"No, no, a discount is not okay. Not only will you not be paid for this, but you will be back on these premises with a suitable substitute in twenty-three minutes."

The deli delivery person does not seem to comprehend that some people can't be bought with 15% off. Wrong is wrong.

"But, ma'am, it's over ten minutes one way."

"Then you better call in an order to a nearby Quizno's."

He looks aghast. He's not read the COYA file. *Seriously, dude. I'm not going down because your people slathered honey mustard on his sandwich.*

Actually, I'm onboard with this preference. Honey is gross. Bee vomit. I have no idea why people willfully choose to ingest it.

The driver hustles off. Behind me, I hear movement.

"Mr. Cullen. I didn't see you there. Are we headed back in?"

His mouth may turn up. "Not yet. Everything seem to be in order?"

"It will be." I hedge and hope Deli Man pulls this off.

Pursing his lips, almost pouting, he looks at me. Really looks. I start to feel self-conscious, flushed.

Is there something on my face? Something wrong I've not noticed? Without thinking, I tilt my head and look at him questioningly.

His eyes widen for a moment and, just when I think he's going to inform me that I've toured the facility and met a hundred-plus people with omelet in my teeth, he coughs.

"Would you like a drink Ms. Swan?"

Knock me over with a feather. "Yes, yes actually I would."

"Good. Pick me up one, too," he says and disappears into the conference room.

My nostrils flare like a dragon guarding a pile of gold.

...

A/N: Update 4 of 6

Next update: 9:00pm

# Chapter 25 Day 372 9:00pm

9:00pm

Location: Bed. Alone. As ever.

Plans: Highly overrated as a concept, it seems.

Homework: Untouched.

Boss Man wrapped things up early tonight. I've rewarded myself with sleep in celebration of removing the sardine garnish from his room service Caesar salad without detection.

Deep in pre-dream fantasy about negative calorie brownies, my phone rings.

"Request the P.O.s for the last 5 years." *Well, hello to you, too.*

"Will do Sir."

"Also, the older sales contacts lists. We'll need to cross reference."

"I'm on it." I smother my yawn with a pillow.

"There are spec sheets for the warehouse. I need them."

"Yes, Sir." *Anything, just let me sleep.*

"Now. I need them now." Oh. Oh.

"I'll be right there."

Alice's robe is a beautiful black kimono. I don't own a robe, so it's better than none; however, I see now that it is rather sheer. Sheer, as in see-through.

My nightgown is like a grey slip and covers everything, so that's not an issue, but this wouldn't have been my first choice for traipsing across the hall to my boss's room. Well, there's nothing for it.

I knock and his door swings open. Suffice it to say, Cullen did not anticipate sheer

anything.

While I'm standing in the hall, his eyes dart quickly to see if anyone else is there – as if that would make a lick of difference – and he yanks me inside.

"What do you think you're doing?" He starts pacing rapidly in the small space of the room. If he rakes his hair any harder, he's going to need plugs.

"Sir?"

"Why are you in my room like ...like...like that?" His hands wave wildly around my frame.

"You said "Now" so I came now."

"I have to be able to trust you. Do the right thing. Tell me."

"Trust me?" *Well now, doesn't this just frost my buns...* "You're calling trust into question? You've said you're a fair man. I want to believe that. But, you're not being fair now...Sir." I want to spit.

"Is it fair to parade around in lingerie?" He paces, his shoulders brush against the curtains.

"This isn't lingerie." I reach in the robe and pull out the very non-see-through corner of my gown. "Trust me - If I wore lingerie, you'd know it."

"You may have boundary issues. I should've redirected you after you showed up in my room the first day."

"You insisted we have access cards to both rooms." I point out.

He shakes his head and seems rooted to the floor over by his window. As if lingerie cooties are catching.

*If Irina Lauren showed up in this, I bet he'd pull her into the room and do something other than lecture her about trust.*

I think maybe he's offended that he's been forced to look at me. Well, screw him. I'm not repellent. Many guys would be freaking thrilled if I knocked on their doors in this. Or less.



Calmly, slowly, I bend ever-so-slightly and set the files on his bed. Without the papers in front of me, I should feel more exposed. I don't. I'm livid.

I smooth the fabric over my front. Pull the tie tighter.

"Mr. Cullen, with all due respect, you've made it abundantly clear that I am to do as you say when you say it. Without question." He starts to talk and I don't why I lose control of my persona and I sure don't know what possesses him, but I hold up my hand to stop him from talking and he actually does. "It's clear that seeing me like this is distasteful to you. In the future, I'll take the time to fully dress and suffer your wrath for the delay rather than for forcing you to look at me."

"Ms. Swan, I-"

"Mr. Cullen, in the spirit of protecting you from things you don't want to see, I need to leave." I fight to keep tears from forming. "Goodnight Mr. Cullen."

...

A/N: Update 5 of 6

Next update: 9:21pm (very short)

## Chapter 26 Day 372 9:21pm

9:21pm

My phone rings. It's him.

*Has he called to apologize? I may faint...*

"Hello Mr. Cullen."

"We've been invited to lunch tomorrow."

Not a problem. I brought an extra outfit just in case. "Very well. Is there anything more Mr. Cullen?" My voice breaks. I don't want to examine why.

"No." His voice falls off. Pause. "Goodnight Ms. Swan."

...

A/N: Next update: 8:00am (about 10-1/2 hour after this originally posted)

Then: 12:15pm, 4:00pm, & 10:45pm

Thank you, again, for reading and reviewing!

# Chapter 27 Day 373 8:00am

Day of Employment: 373

8:00am

Clothes: Jeans and black turtleneck sweater.

Hair: Pulled back severely.

Breakfast: Skipped.

Mood: Foul.

The place is empty. As it should be. Coming to an office for three hours to marvel at the wonders of meticulous bookkeeping on the Saturday before Christmas is not something most people choose to do.

Edwardnezar Scrooge.

"Do you have access to the cleanser and toner market trials?"

"Yes. Here they are Mr. Cullen." *Enjoy them, Asshole.*

"E.T.A. for the P.O.s?"

"They'll be delivered to the hotel late today. They are stored off-site, Sir." *Sir Asshat.*

"Does market data suggest-"

I hand him the market research analysis for each test product before he asks. Final scores have been highlighted.

Lunch with the execs is early and casual. I say nothing. I point to my selection on the menu. I'm all quiet smiles.

Stepford Secretary.

...

A/N: Update 1 of 4 today

Next Update: 12:15pm

Then: 4:00pm, 9:45pm, & 10:57pm (very short)

Please allow me to answer a few frequent questions as maybe others have wondered as well:

I've been asked, understandably so, if some bigger chapters are coming. Yes, soon-ish.

re: EPOV - I believe this would ruin it. Also, he thinks very differently...to say the least. When this is over, if anyone still cares, I could do some outtakes in EPOV.

re: The Plan will end sometime before the end of the year.

re: Marlboros - I will complete it and my gratitude to those who read the o/s and remain interested in the expansion despite the delay. I'm plagued with guilt about the delay, if that makes it better. ;)

Thank you again.

# Chapter 28 Day 373 12:15pm

Author of 10 Stories Rated: - English - Romance/Humor - Edward & Bella -  
Reviews: - Updated: 12-03-11 - Published: 12-12-10 - Complete - id:6550419

# Chapter 29 Day 373 4:00pm

4:00pm

Purchase Orders: Cover every flat surface of the room.

Mood: About one Purchase Order from conniption fit.

Ass: Asleep. As are both feet.

Been sitting for hours. Need to walk around.

Cullen yawns. Even his yawn is magnificent. Sickening. "Let's go for a walk."

"Okay," I say, perking up.

He stretches, treating me to a glimpse of skin between his shirt and jeans. "My ass has been mostly dead all day."

*So, you're gonna flash trail and throw in a reference joke, then still expect me to function? Hardest job ever.*

We walk around the Plaza shops and admire this city's many fountains. Most are ornate and traditional. There are several cow statues. Who knows why anyone thought that was a good idea.

The bronze boar statue reduces us both to fits when we spot it near to the hotel.

This is easy. Conversation. Interaction.

He's never been so attractive. That's saying something. I'm doing a terrible job of staying mad.

"Want some?" Cullen points toward the Cheesecake Factory.

So tempting. Oh, we're just talking about cheesecake. "I better not."

"You have something against cheesecake?"

"Oh, no. I have something against walking it back off."

He shakes his head and mutters something as he heads to the doors. I guess I'm supposed to follow.

Painful. The display is fucking painful. Strawberry. White chocolate flakes. Lime.

"Ready?" He holds the door open, purchase dangling from his hand.

...

A/N: Next update 9:14pm

Then: 10:03pm (Both a bit earlier than previous stated)

Thank you for reading and reviewing!

# Chapter 30 Day 373 9:14pm

9:14pm

Room Service trays: In the hall

My thoughts on Purchase Orders: #%\*&^\$##!

Cheesecake: Gone. I caved almost immediately. He'd bought two pieces.

Tired. I'm tired. And I do stupid shit when I'm tired.

"Would you like for me to put on some coffee?"

Cullen is sitting on his bed. Legs crossed and barefoot. Stifling a yawn, he shakes his head.

*Oh, please let this be a sign that this day is nearly over. I mean, looking at him in faded jeans is a definite perk, but I am so over cataloging purchase patterns.*

"Long day, huh?" His eyes change somehow. I nod.

"Maybe you could find some Cokes?"

*Oh. We're not done yet.*

"Okay," I say laying a bit too long on the last syllable.

"I know this is taking forever. This is our only chance. This is the best way to make sure they aren't fudging their numbers. Go change into something more comfortable."

More comfortable than jeans?

"I have pajamas," I say.

He sits up straight and rubs his hands over his face. "Alright."

Twelve minutes later, I'm back with Cokes and wearing my "Fangs are Fantastic" PJs.



To say Cullen looks relieved would be an understatement. He may have been expecting the kimono again. In that case, I wonder why he'd torture himself.

I'm thinking this is simultaneously the best and worst idea ever. Cullen is wearing pajama pants and a white tee. All my theories are blown.

It's almost a foregone conclusion that I will embarrass myself by ogling him at some point. I can imagine what point: His point. The hold I have on my wandering eyes is tenuous.

He takes a swig of pop. Plunking myself on his bed and being careful not to scatter papers everywhere, I pat the mattress. "Let's do it."

Spit take. Coke everywhere.

"You okay?" I ask.

Cullen nods. And coughs. A lot.

...

A/N: Next update 10:03pmCST

Then: 8:30amCST

# Chapter 31 Day 373 10:03pm

Author of 10 Stories Rated: - English - Romance/Humor - Edward & Bella -  
Reviews: - Updated: 12-03-11 - Published: 12-12-10 - Complete - id:6550419

# Chapter 32 Day 374 8:30am

Day of Employment: 374

8:30am

My phone is ringing. Somewhere. It's not on my nightstand.

Screen light shines up through papers on the bed. Nothing seems right.

"He-hello?"

"It's after eight. The day needs to start."

"Huh?"

"I need to get ready."

In a flood of revelation, it becomes clear that this is not my room.

I fell asleep in his bed and he...must have gone to mine.

*Glad I never put up that dart board with his picture...*

"I'll be right out," I say, and bolt from his bed. His really, really amazing smelling bed.

*Oh shit. The video from the plant is still paused on my laptop...*

In my room, nonchalance is a casualty. Legs still half asleep. I'm Bambi, stumble-bumbling for the computer.

The editing program appears to be paused in the same spot. He doesn't mention it.

....

....

A/N: Update 1 of 4 today.

This is the only super short update today.

Next update: 11:08am US/Central - Time Zone Converter site: [http : / / www .  
timezoneconverter . com/cgi-bin/tzc . tzc](http://www.timezoneconverter.com/cgi-bin/tzc.tzc)

Then: 7:00pm & 9:22pm

btw - Monday is about than 4x bigger than Saturday.

# Chapter 33 Day 374 11:08am

**11:08am**

"You're on your own for lunch."

This floors me. Time to myself?

"When shall I meet back with you?"

"I'll call you." Cullen seems hesitant. For a moment, I'm drawn in to the tiny crinkles near his eyes. "Our trip has been extended for a few days. Through the holiday. Take the afternoon to make arrangements."

*What?* I can't be gone more. More 24/7 with this man? I don't have clothes or time or money or patience or ready access to happy pills to grind up into his coffee...

Or anything better to do.

He shuffles through some papers. "We'll also be attending more functions with their higher-ups, so you'll need additional evening wear. I can't imagine that even you foresaw that, so use the time to purchase whatever you need."

Blinking rapidly, I try to compose myself. I'm failing miserably. Homework, recorded lectures, coffee beans, starched white shirts. Images flood my mind.

"Is there a problem?" He finally looks up at me.

*Well, Hell yeah there's a freaking problem!* "I, um, I," I say, and clear my throat forcefully. "I don't have the resources."

"I said make arrangements, did I not?" He looks at me like maybe I'm dense.

My cheeks heat. Coming up short doesn't sit well with me. "I mean...that is to say...there's a cash flow issue. This is, um, beyond my means."

After a moment of monumental awkwardness, he reaches into his wallet and places a department store card near my hand. "Give them your measurements. Purchase at least one more cocktail dress."

"You don't have to do that. I mean, I can recycle."

"No," he says, waving me off. "People would notice."

I nod, still processing all this.

"Branch out. Anything but black."

"Very well, Sir."

From my hotel room's desk, I watch him leave. On the other side of the door, Ms. Lauren stands, bundled up in a heavy coat.

"Edward, Darling," she coos and ushers him out. "Finally, I have you all to myself. Whatever will we do to pass the time?" The door shuts, her laughter muffled.

....

A/N: Update 2 of 4 today

Next update: 7:00pm

# Chapter 34 Day 374 7:00pm

7:00pm

Location: My room.

Purchases:

1 Narciso Rodriguez Ombre shadow slip dress - teal at shoulders, gradual shift to charcoal.

1 Hussein Chalayan blue silk single shoulder dress.

1 pair of Gianmarco Lorenzi blue velvet pumps with stainless heel.

Everything hangs in the closet now. The tags and receipt mock me from the desk.

I took that card earlier today in a moment of shock. Extended trip. More clothes. What appears to be his personal department store card.

The company dime can roll right in and purchase whatever I need as far as I'm concerned; it sure wasn't my idea to go on this trip.

I really need to know if he's being reimbursed. Otherwise, the tags go back on and the clothes go back. Ideally, anyway.

I still need to wear them, regardless.

I just don't want to be indebted to him, take any gifts from him.

Everything in me demands clarification of whose money I just spent. Hours of contemplating this situation has made me sure of only one thing: Ms. Swan cannot question Mr. Cullen.

I've distracted myself satisfactorily with several school lectures but now nothing works.

Not just lunch, I was on my own all day. Still am. I've not heard from Cullen, he's not come back. I've said "Yes, Sir" to everyone and everything I've seen. Even the shower.

It's like I've had a something removed and I keep feeling it. A phantom limb. A phantom pain in my ass that replaces the pain in my ass. Whatever. It's just not the same.

Why does this bug me so? Should I check on him? He could be hurt...

I'm not fooling myself. I want to check because he may still be with her.

It's not my business. He's not my business. I don't care.

Keep saying it. It might make it true.

I had a plan. This was not the plan.

Fully intent on flipping more channels, I dial him without thought.

"Cullen." His voice is a surprise in my ear. Why did I call him? What's wrong with me?

"Yes, um," I say and look around the room for some non-existent guidance. Nothing. "Is there anything you'd like for me to be working on?"

"Are the purchases categorized?"

All the places he could be, the things...and people...he could be doing crowd my thoughts.

"Yes, all in order. Every pencil and enough Tyvek to furnish a clean room environment all accounted for." Word vomit. "We can only have these rooms until Tuesday."

He's quiet for a moment. "You did make other reservations though?"

"Yes. Three places. When you have a moment, I can go over th-"

A crash, maybe something small breaking, on his end of the line interrupts me.

"Whatever you choose will be fine...Goodnight Ms. Swan."

"Goodnight Mr. Cullen."

One bath, two room service desserts, and a nightie that makes me feel beautiful



don't chase away the glum.

I feel lonely.

I fall asleep reading a textbook.

...

A/N: Update 3 of 4

Next update: 9:22pm

## Chapter 35 Day 374 9:22pm

9:22pm

Lincoln is here. In my room. I throw the bedspread at him.

Lincoln is unfazed by bacteria.

He uses my Chapstick. He paints my toes. He licks them. He sucks them in. I twist and claw at my mattress and beg him to stop, but he-

"Bella! You've got to wake up..."

Cullen is holding me but I feel jostled; he's been shaking me. I gulp down air.

"Shhh." His hand smooths my hair out of my face and down my back. Pulling back, he looks at me. "I thought...oh God, I thought you were being....and I heard you and I could see the lights and then and then and th- oh my God, what the motherfuck are you wearing?"

He propels himself backwards from the bed.

This is all so weird. I look down and remember the pity party that ended in donning a peach negligee with black lace inlays and fabric that makes Alice's robe look like plaid flannel.

"This? This is actually lingerie."

I told him he'd know it if I wore it. I don't do things halfway.

"Wh- Why?"

Deer in headlights. Yeah, that description works here.

And, just to keep things straight, I'm sporting the headlights.

Maybe we could call them blips.

I may have just set off the radar...

There's something about flustered Edward Cullen I can't get enough of. I'm practically naked, yet he's the one uncomfortable.

"Why? What did you expect me to wear?" I stand to usher him out...and show off the cute little coordinating panties. "Or, did you think I sleep nude?"

"Goodnight Ms. Swan," he calls behind him. He has already crossed the hall.

"Goodnight Mr. Cullen."

...

...

A/N: Next update: 10:00am

Then: 11:10am, 6:15pm, 9:20pm, & 10:30pm

...

If I may, here's a rec:

Twific about a vampire - What will they think of next?

Dead Confederates - Goldenmeadow has created a world where anything is possible; even a 108 year old red-neck Vampire. Her prose is audacious, stylish and hilarious.

Sassy, sexy and silver tongued Eddie DC Cullen is unlike any other character I've read. His inner musings are an amazing mix of low and language delivered in the way only a lascivious, aged, intelligent and redneck-by-choice vampire could.

[http : /www . fanfiction . net/s/5106610/1/Dead\\_Confederates](http://www.fanfiction.net/s/5106610/1/Dead_Confederates)

# Chapter 36 Day 375 10:00am

Day of Employment: 375

10:00am

Meetings. All day. Shoot me.

Location: Conference Room.

This is our show. Cullen is in game mode. Proposals. PowerPoints. Power suit.

Sweet Mercy, just look at him. Yum.

He points out that they seem to have "lost" an important sales area about the time this merger was proposed; a whole product category, just gone from the line-up.

His tone is smooth, his insinuation clear: he thinks they are attempting to retain an exclusive area.

Ms. Lauren adjusts her cleavage so thoroughly that I begin to suspect the lost sales area is actually in there somewhere. She pulls an index card out from behind her neckline.

"That was part of a former associate's territory," she offers, glancing at the card. "Anyone have an explanation?"

Flustered, Peters shuffles through some papers. This guy knows zilch about his job. "Looks like Whitlock oversaw that most recently. Is he...let me see...he may be on site..." Davies flounders while clearly looking for who this Whitlock person might actually be.

Davies has forgotten to bring a file. He can't find his pen. Lauren fishes one out of her bra. It's like the damned Room of Requirement in there.

Cullen is unimpressed. He's been working the room during his presentation, this breaks his stride. His fingers are in his pockets, his shoulders set.

The tension is palpable. "I can go track him down," I finally offer.

Looking down, Cullen nods. He wants this info, he wants this to be on the up-and-up. This glitch was the principle concern that seemed to stand out to him in all those hours of research we logged.

....

A/N: Update 1 of 5 today

Next Update: 11:10am

## Chapter 37 Day 375 11:10am

11:10am

I find him almost immediately. Just had to ask a non-suit. They always know the score.

Whitlock is Jasper Whitlock. We went to undergrad together. Small world. Dated a couple of times.

Blue eyes and blue jeans. Baritone Texas drawl.

My, oh my, why did we only go out twice?

Oh yeah. Kate.

Lucky ho.

"Hey, Bella - It sure is a pleasure to see you. You part of the new regime?"

I smile. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Well, what can I do for you, Ma'am?"

The next hour plus is spent at a break table. He's got records of everything. Looks like the line fell through because his predecessor had failed to deliver on time for years. He'd inherited a mess. A dying moose.

"I have no idea why. Just consistent bad luck...poor planning." He stretches back in the chair, popping his back.

We catch up for a bit. He's only been here a year.

"That's something else we have in common," I laugh.

"Ms. Swan." Suddenly, Cullen materializes in front of us. "If you can manage to tear yourself away..."

Jasper lets the chair legs hit the floor. "You must be Edward Cullen," he offers his hand without standing.

Cullen ignores him. "We're breaking for lunch already. Since you've been enjoying Social Hour, it seems we'll have to catch up before everyone gets back."

I feel like I've been smacked on the hand.

Jasper tries the phlegmatic approach. "Bella and I went to undergrad together."

"One big, happy UW family." Cullen scowls. "Ms. Swan?" It's not a question. It's a command.

Forcing a smile, my face on fire, I say goodbye to Jasper and trail behind Cullen. He leads us to our temp office. I've not been gone that long, but he's incensed. Quiet and fuming.

"Shall I go get your lunch?"

"Can you manage to do so without attracting a throng of admirers?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're paid to do a job. Why is it that at every turn, you're filling your dance card?"

"My dance card?" I don't even recall the last time anyone danced with me. Probably when Shady still had people imitating. "I went to school with Jasper." One would think the instant rapport would be valued. Normally, Cullen would be grateful for something like this, for in-depth knowledge.

"Jasper," he snorts.

"Mr. Whitlock," I correct myself.

"Expanding this trip is not ideal for me either, I hope you realize. Every hour is critical," he says.

Unbidden, I think of him leaving with Ms. Lauren yesterday. Spending some untold portion of his day with her. I want to ask. I don't.

Not that it should matter.

"Dinner is at the owner's home tonight," he says, tapping his pen. "Will you be able to make it or will you be spending quality time with Jasper?"

"I don't normally spend time with my former college roommate's husbands," I level at him.

His pen stops clicking.

We work in silence the rest of the day.

...

A/N: Update 2 of 5

Next Update: 6:15pm



# Chapter 38 Day 375 6:15pm

6:15pm

Location: Sam Marcus residence.

Dinner: Pretentious dish. Name forgotten. 'Tastes like chicken' would be a marked improvement.

Hair: Down and straight.

Drink: Rum and Coke.

James Jacobs, the executive who acquired a new limp in the conference room the other day thanks to my pen jab, is plying me with alcohol.

He thinks he's being smooth. Suave. He tried handing me a Cosmopolitan at first. I told him that he might not advertise that he digs "Sex and the City."

Now, he thinks I've drunk three Rum and Cokes.

Let's get something straight: I can drink. Hold my liquor. The table? That's what I put other people under.

It's a gift. The one thing I've gotten from my mother that I can truly use. Her favorite story is the time a bar band challenged her and who ever got drunk first had to pay. The night ended with her packing up the band's gear after every member passed out. Sounds more like a hassle than a victory to me. Mom's a little off.

Humoring the guy seems like the path of least resistance. Not rocking the boat, I take the drinks, smile, then set them down elsewhere. Or tip them into a potted plant.

The fern may need detox.

I dump most of the drink. *Say hello to my little fronds...*

This is the largest dinner party I've ever attended. It's also the only formal one. There are about twenty people roaming around. Execs and a few spouses enjoying drinks.

"Ms. Swan, how long have you worked for the company?"

"Ms. Swan, how are you enjoying our fair city?"

"Ms. Swan, this is an exciting opportunity for us all, wouldn't you agree?"

"Ms. Swan, that's a lovely dress."

The banter is innocuous enough, but I feel that I need to guard my words. Remain opinionless.

My dress actually is lovely. I must agree. It's silk in a gradient fade from teal to charcoal with a neck so wide the straps sit on the very edges of my shoulders. Nothing revealing, but the way the air touches my collarbones feels sensual. Sexy.

My heels click across the marble floor as I position myself in the corner.

From behind the rim of my glass, as I pretend to take another sip, I watch Cullen. He maneuvers through the clusters of people. Talking. He slides to another group when Lauren appears. A few minutes later - after she appears to count down to 'not too obvious' zone - she joins his new group. Shortly, he moves away. Their game begins anew.

Oh, his discomfort pleases me greatly. Enjoy, Sir. Enjoy.

...

A/N: Update 3 of 5

Next Update: 9:20pmCST

For those who've asked: Yes, they are in Kansas City :)

## Chapter 39 Day 375 9:20pm

9:20pm

In my hand, I hold the ninth Rum and Coke of the evening. All totaled, I've taken enough sips to equate one whole drink.

This guy thinks he's adding stains to my hotel bedspread tonight.

Moron. I'm not even acting tipsy.

"No, thank you Mr. Jacobs. Enjoy the veranda without me."

"Thank you for the drink Mr. Jacobs."

"Really Mr. Jacobs? Four touchdowns in a single game?"

Cullen is looking at me from across the room. I may have been hasty in congratulating myself on how I've handled this situation. That is one heckuva scowl he's rocking.

Extricating myself from the lecherous delusions of Mr. Jacobs yet again, I walk closer to Cullen. Letting him know I can tell he has something to say. I stop a few feet away; I am not going to heel. He can come to me.

He does.

"I see your reputation for professionalism is undeserved," he hisses over my shoulder.

"If you feel I've behaved unprofessionally, please clarify Mr. Cullen."

"Drinking."

"I can handle it." I turn to face him. As punctuation, I take a sip. "You're drinking, too."

"It seems Jacobs thinks he's what's going to get handled."

"He can think what he wants."

"That's your fifth drink."

"Ninth."

His mouth drops open. "Don't move. I'll say the goodbyes."

Before I can formulate a response, he's gone. He makes the rounds, shaking hands enthusiastically and thanking the owner for a lovely dinner. When he sidesteps Mr. Jacobs' outstretched hand, I can't help but smile.

"Give me your arm."

"Excuse me?"

He rolls his eyes, grabs my hand and wraps it around his bent elbow. His pace is slower than normal as he leads us to the car.

Utter silence until we're in the hotel parking lot.

"I'm not drunk." My voice echoes in the car. His hands wring the steering wheel.

He escorts me through the lobby.

"I didn't do anything to embarrass you," I say in the elevator. He removes his jacket and watches the numbers climb.

The doors open and he leads me toward my room.

He's going to fire me. Maybe I don't care anymore. I've done my best. I've been his ideal. Even when I felt certain he wanted to find fault, I gave him nothing to complain about.

Well, fine. Have it your way Cullen. Enjoy the stimulating company of Laurent Peters without me. Good luck with closing this deal on your own. I'm taking your coffee with me too, you picky bastard.

"Good luck," I seethe as he watches me open my door. I'm so pissed I actually do fumble and miss the first two times I try to slide the card. Fantastic. "I'll catch the first flight out."

"Be quiet." He steps into my room.

"Quit telling me what to do!"

"Don't act like you need to be told."

"You can't boss me around!" I switch on the bathroom light in the darkened room.

"It may have escaped your notice, but I am your boss."

"Not anymore. You're firing me!"

"You're nonsensical. Sleep it off." He towers over me, his breath smoothing across my exposed shoulders.

Sensory overload. I'm so exhausted I can't think properly and I can't take it anymore. I put my hands on his shirt and push him. Even in the dim light, I can tell he's surprised.

"Either you're firing me or I quit. There - I've said it." I shake my arms, but he must think I plan to shove him, because he grabs both my hands in his.

"You're intoxicated and cannot be held responsible for your actions." He lets go.

"You enjoying pushing people, don't you? It's different when someone else is doing the pushing, isn't it?"

"Goodnight Ms. Swan." He turns to leave.

"You think you're so superior to me." I'm hot on his tail.

"Ms. Swan, I'm not insulting you. It's simple biology; your body mass can't handle that much alcohol."

This is it. These are my final moments with Edward Cullen and I can't even see him properly. Sometimes he seems to connect with me, but now he's so condescending. Who does he think he is? He won't hold me "responsible for my actions." He thinks I'd embarrass him, that I'd embarrass myself, by drinking too much at a business function, that I "can't handle that much liquor."

Drunk, huh? He thinks I'm drunk? Ha! If I was drunk with Edward Cullen in my room ...well, let's just say this would go down differently.

An idea; it hits me like an eighteen wheeler. Hell, what have I got to lose at this

point?

He's such an ass. Underestimating me. Doesn't think I can handle things. I'll show him what I can handle. I'll show him I can handle an ass.

I reach out and grab hold of that glorious ass and squeeze for all I'm worth.

Air whooshes from him and he wheels around.

If I'm going down, I'm going down in a blaze of glory.

I don't give him a chance to say anything and I stretch around him with both hands and knead the ever-loving fuck out of his butt and it's motherfucking glorious and I think the memory will keep me satisfied when I'm living off Ramen for the next few months.

Off-balance and stumbling, he falls against me. Hard.

Actually, he falls against me gently. He's what's hard...part of him anyway.

Blip.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have blip.

"Mr. Cullen," I whisper up to him, "Explain yourself." My left hand runs smoothly along his hip, drawing ever closer to his...revelation.

I'm not sure where this boldness is coming from. My index finger traces his length. The fabric is rough under my touch.

He hisses. He hesitates. I feel his palms smooth over my arms.

"Some might say this constitutes an offer," I breathe. Warmth from his hands sears my skin. I'm calm; I don't let it show.

"One should not make offers one is not prepared to complete." I turn his words back on him and grasp him firmly.

His head rolls back. I watch his throat as he swallows repeatedly.

He's losing it. I want more. The power intoxicates me.

Watching him for a reaction, I pull his zipper. He doesn't disappoint; his breath ceases.

"Stop me," I say.

He doesn't. I slip inside and hold him. Grip. Fist.

Claim.

It's silk and heat and pulsing want. His body jerks, surges forward and I can barely contain my shit because I know, I just know, that this is a pure reaction. This is a human moment and it's what I wanted but more. So much more.

My body sings. Oh, my – I am controlling him... I have him in the palm of my hand. Literally. Figuratively.

Fingers curling around, thumb in tight circle circuits, pressing his flesh. He rocks and pants into my hair, down my face. Power. Intoxicating power. This, this I could get drunk on.

My free hand follows along the path of his shirt buttons. I release him and he makes a noise that sounds like a pained whisper but it dies on his lips when I grab his shirt and tear it open, broken buttons flying across the room.

"Didn't think I had it in me, did you?" I say as I press my lips to his chest.

"Bel...you...you don't really want this."

I shove him against the wall. The thud sounds through the room.

"Don't tell me what I want." I speak against his skin as I tongue and bend and descend...lower, lower.

"But I sure know what you want." My knees hit the floor. "I'm excellent with non-verbal communication."

A rhythmic beat resounds in the room and I think it's the blood rushing through my system but then I realize he's banging his head against the wall again and again. He's losing it. I want more.

He's still nearly fully dressed; I watch his chest rise and fall between partially untucked shirt scraps and draw him out through his open zipper.

My mouth closes around him. He clamps down on my shoulders as if to steady himself, as though the wall isn't enough to support his weight. He's leaning on me. Needs me.

Tapping on his belt buckle, I pull back and say, "Off."

He nods mutely. He complies.

Now, there's an element to oral sex that might be called worshipful and I'm a fan of it - and even in the pale light it's clear his cock is worthy of worship, praise, maybe some hymns - but that's not what I'm here for today. I suck him in, swallow around him, press my tongue flat and create enough suction to rival a Hoover. His knees give a bit, and since his legs are so long it actually puts him at a better angle.

One hand returns to his ass, securing him where I want him and I stroke him with the other and he's moaning and writhing and I know this is going to be fast.

Embarrassingly fast.

And I want nothing more.

I pull out all the stops. Tongue his slit. Tight in my mouth. Hint of teeth. In unison, my hand moves from his ass to massage his perineum while I pull him to the back of my throat, hum, and swallow.

Whoo-hoo. Mind over matter. Deep throat. I've never been able to do that before.

I hum - sorta, it's not the easiest thing when your airway is obstructed - and only I know it's the opening bars of The Battle Hymn of the Republic.

"I...I'm...Christ." His back is bowed out, arcing, as he twitches and swells. I pull back and he spills onto my tongue and struggles to stop rocking.

He's gasping for air and his hands are running through my hair, along my face with....reverence?

That's unexpected.

I stand and spit.

"I'll add pineapple juice to your breakfasts," I say, and pat his tie twice, his chest heaving underneath. "Drink it if you ever want that to happen again."



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A/N: Next Update 10:10pm

Then: 6:47am

# Chapter 40 Day 375 10:10pm

10:10pm

Bella Swan: I don't give head. I claim it.

Jacobs was on the money about one thing tonight: I did get new stains on my bedspread.

*Oh, my God. I sucked off Edward Cullen.*

This is something we need to talk about. Discuss. Hash out. Cover.

What have I done?

I wonder if going to his room now is a good idea.

Oh, sure – now I worry about crossing a line. Knocking on a door now isn't too invasive; I've tasted the man's semen, pinged his radar so hard I pretty much sunk his battleship.

He would let me know if he wanted to talk, surely.

I'm definitely the sort of person who would want to talk about this...situation. Explain myself, if there is any explanation. Defend if it's defensible. Hear these same things from him. I want to understand him, this. He wanted it, even in a war with himself, he wanted... me?

Maybe this is not such a mystery. What guy is gonna turn down a blow job?

I need answers. It's only natural. It's in my nature.

But...

I'm not me right now. Nothing I'm doing is natural. *Today, the role of docile will be played by Bella Swan.*

And a docile Bella wouldn't go seeking answers.

She would make sure Mr. Cullen's coffee was ready at 7am.

She would turn the lights out and go to sleep so she could facilitate her boss's day efficiently.

Since I'm only acting like a docile Bella, the lights go out but sleep doesn't happen.

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A/N: Next Update: 6:47am

# Chapter 41 Day 376 6:47am

Day of Employment: 376

6:47am

Bags: Packed. In case of hasty retreat.

Hair: Straight. Clipped back.

Coffee: Ready.

Me: Not.

I've been standing in the hallway for a while. Mustering. Muttering.

*Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think-*

My hand rises to his door, to knock. Before I can, he opens it.

Make or break.

If I make eye contact it's going to break me.

"Good morning, Mr. Cullen," I say, breezing past him and setting his coffee down with a flourish.

I begin gathering up his things, focusing on them. "Rosalie sent over the reports you asked for, Peters' assistant finally emailed me the correct documents this time, they're catering lunch in from a pizza place so I requested thin crust for you, I've forwarded an email from Mr. Marcus about some tickets to an event later this week, and I will need time in my schedule this afternoon to relocate everything to the new hotel." *And...breathe!*

I've packed up during this spiel and now have nothing to do but look up at him.

He's standing across the room, ready except for the jacket still draped across the bed. He seems to have been motionless, to have simply watched me.

I finally meet his eyes. He blinks away.

For over a minute, he says nothing while he fastens his cuffs.

"Is that everything, Ms. Swan?" Monotone.

"I believe so, Mr. Cullen."

"Very well." He grabs his things and side-steps the incoming breakfast cart as he exits.

A pineapple has died a needless death.

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A/N: Update 1 of 7 (Seriously.)

Next Update: 9:15am

Then: 1:15pm, 5:25pm, 6:10pm, 8:05pm, 8:35pm

# Chapter 42 Day 376 9:15am

9:15am

Location: Office of Irina Lauren, Wearer of Actual Wonder-Performing Wonder Bra.

"These closing costs seem exorbitant." I shake my head looking at the expense records for the deals Lauren has touted as the most profitable.

"You have to grease the wheels overseas for everything from getting your phone lines hooked up to filing government permits," she says. She looks at Cullen and shakes her head. "I thought everyone knew that."

I do my best to ignore her and also make for darn sure I don't see the look she probably throws Cullen at my expense. He excuses himself to take a call.

"And these promo items?" I sift through voluminous printouts. "That's a huge line item expense. Do you have records for where these went?"

"Our paperwork is in order." She waves her hand. "Listen, Honey, maybe this is all new territory to you, but let me explain how things work in the real world." She sits on the corner of her desk. I feel my eyebrows disappear into my hair. "Sales reps do just that: Sell. If they have to account for where every single individual sample goes, what nurse gets a pen with our logo, who might end up with a free t-shirt...well, you can see where they'd spend all their time doing things other than selling."

"I'm not suggesting that the level of detail be anything that...stringent," I say. "But, there are concerns with sales in foreign markets. Your international distributors, their tactics, expose the whole organization to scrutiny. If anyone receiving discounts or free items is a state official-"

"Maybe I wasn't clear, *Bella*. I'm sure you're competent at what you do. This is what I do. Don't get me wrong. What you do is important; one can't undervalue the skill of making a good cup of coffee." She smiles too sweetly and smooths her already immaculate updo. "I'm also very good at what I do."

*I think this isn't about work.*

"There are those who work for and those who work with." She traces her finger

along the top of Cullen's laptop.

*Yep. Not talking about work.*

"Listen, let's cut to the chase," she practically whispers. "I have an MBA and I earned my way to VP in less than two years. I'll run this place when Laurent's worthless ass finally retires. I know where I belong, where I fit. And with who."

This may be it.

This may be my breaking point. Well, my daylight breaking point.

I may snap and get on the intercom and yell to all that can hear me that I have an advanced degree in technical writing, a full scholarship to law school and a recently acquired mastery of my gag reflex.

I'm under attack. I want to tell her that I - courtesy of numerous hours of lectures from my professor who helped write NAFTA - have a tad more awareness than she does of the recent surge in Department of Justice and SEC prosecutions for things like giving free samples to anyone who works for a hospital in a nation with state run healthcare. Things are different. People are going to jail. Companies are paying hundreds of millions in fines.

But, I don't. Because that's not my role.

I don't flaunt my divided priorities.

I don't assert myself.

I don't embarrass my boss.

And it hits me. I hadn't even thought about it. I'd been focused on awkward, morning-after hook-up tension. He may be embarrassed to have been with me.

Irina Lauren knows her place. I never thought about mine.

I've never before so thoroughly questioned something I've done or why I've done it.

Question myself.

And I don't like that. I'm allowed to celebrate my womanhood, experience what I

choose with whom I choose. I'm not easy. I'm discriminating.

I've wanted him to notice me, hoped he might desire me. He might not always do so, he might do so and not show it, but there is no denying that he desired me last night. I, literally, had proof in the palm of my hand.

The door opens as Cullen returns to the room.

"Edward," she says, bolting from her desk and bumping my shoulder on her way to him, "your Ms. Swan is quite the go-getter. So concerned about our foreign trade practices."

"She is quite thorough," he says, sounding almost as confused by her comments as I feel.

Lauren taps her chin as though she's just now forming an opinion. It's for show; she's plotting.

"Well, she seems to have so much insight. Maybe it would be a good idea for her to spot check some things."

Warning bells. They're ringing.

Cullen turns to me. He must wonder what I've been saying. "What did you have in mind?"

Lauren smiles broadly. "Well, I can give her access to a few market segments, let her explain her accusations to the sales people whose records she pulls - of course you'd want to find more passive phrasing, Bella," she chirps. Cullen's eyes look like they may pop out of his head at the word "accusations." She doesn't miss a beat...or an opportunity, it seems. "I can lend you a temp while she's working on things."

She wants me out of the way.

Here's where I'm going to balk. I'm not playing this role under different circumstances.

I'm here for him...for my company.

"I don't thi-

"Mr. Whitlock would-



She and I talk over each other.

"That won't be necessary," Cullen holds his hand up, effectively cutting us both off. "Give her access. We'll go over it."

"Surely, that would be a burden for you Edward," she backpedals. I, on the other hand, may do a wee jig. Even my plan didn't fail this miserably.

Walking away, he punches keys on his ever-present phone. "I'm not enduring a temp. Ms. Swan is the best I've ever had."

Suddenly, I'm fine if we're not talking about work anymore.

....

A/N: Next Update: 1:15pm

# Chapter 43 Day 376 1:15pm

1:15pm

Location: Hotel front desk.

Luggage trolley: stacked like a Jenga tower

"But I specifically requested adjoining rooms or ones across from each other." I'm livid. Distraught.

My hands have taken to gesturing as if independent from my body.

"Our sincerest apologies Ms...Swan," the front desk clerk says after glancing to verify my name. "We can try to arrange for accommodations elsewhere."

"I've already checked. I gave up two sets of reservations in favor of here," I say as my hand swings, smacks, and threatens to topple our bags.

I'm both mad and scared. The rooms are in separate buildings at opposite ends of the hotel grounds. I'll have to run back and forth. I'll impact productivity. I'll have to tell Cullen. This is the first thing I've not delivered on.

Still at the counter, I call him. The clerk, Heidi, seems like she'd like to leave. *Oh, no you don't. You're going through this with me.*

"Cullen." There are voices in the background.

"Hello Mr. Cullen." I swallow back my nerves and take a deep breath. "There's a problem."

"Such as?" The voices fade. He must be moving.

"The rooms are several minutes apart." I describe the grounds and room layout.

He's silent.

Then he's not.

"Unacceptable," he fumes. "Put them on."

I hot-potato my cell to the wide-eyed desk clerk. "This is Hei...Yes....It is an unfortunate mix-...Yes, I suppose you're right...No, I mean, yes. Yes, there is no suppose." Her face is as red as the poinsettia on the counter. "Perhaps I could fin-...I do understand, bu-... I understand...one moment, please...I'm sure your time is valuable...I do need a moment to loo-...but..." She's tearing up. I almost feel badly for her. That fact that she's the person who booked my reservation helps to somewhat erode my sympathy.

"Yes, we do. I'll make the change now. Thank you." Thankful is not how she sounds. She hands my cell phone back to me.

"...is disgraceful. How does it feel to be so incompetent that a customer has to complete even the most perfunctory of tasks for you?"

"Mr. Cullen," I say after waiting for him to take a breath.

"Ms. Swan?"

"I take it that you resolved things, Sir."

"Not ideally. You were right to call. Set up there and come back. We should be out around five."

At least it won't be a late night. I think of my Inbox once again crammed with unwatched lectures, the numerous briefs I need to read or write. I feel like joining Heidi in her sniffles.

Moments later, I'm being handed two access cards and a signature page.

"Your room is here," she says, and circles a corner room on the top of the main building. "Room service is 24/7 with a limited menu after 10pm. If you need any special accommodations," she looks up at me as if, having spoken to Cullen, she's well-aware that this is a given, "please let us know."

I sign and wait.

And wait.

"Did you need help with your bags?"

"Well, yes, that would be nice, but we need to finish the paperwork for the other room." I manage to keep the irritation out of my voice.

"But, there is no other room. I...I had to... I bumped a late-arrival party and gave you their suite," she splutters.

"One room?"

"There are separate sleeping areas."

*Oh, well, indeed, yes, that's a great comfort. Sure.*

"One room?"

"There are rooms within the room. Separate sleeping areas."

"Yes, you said that. But, we're sharing a room?" I say and she nods. "I'm sharing a room with that man?" I'll have no break, no respite from that man? She nods. I'm not entirely sure she hasn't heard my thoughts.

I snatch the cards from the counter and glare at Heidi as if it were all her suggestion. I barely remember to wait for the bellhop.

It is a lovely room. The nicest I've ever stayed in. Pale Marble. Sage green silks. Soft Cottons. Deep mahogany woods. One actual bedroom. Living area with glass doors to a balcony. In front of the doors, a sleeper sofa I'll be calling home. Small kitchen. Huge plasma. One closet. One bath.

*One friggin' closet.*

I hang the clothes. His shoes on the floor, mine on the shelf. He gets the top drawer, I put my stuff in the bottom. His stuff was on the left of the sink in the old hotel, so I put it there and put mine on the right or out of sight completely. I order extra towels and blankets. The room already has a coffee pot.

*One friggin' bath.*

Plug his charger in by his night-stand. Make sure the in-room alarm is not set from anyone else.

*One friggin' room.*

I'm at a loss for where I can keep all the school reading material. It ends up in a suitcase.

*One friggin'... how the Hell did this happen?* I've tried to take it in stride, go about my business, but how the... what the... I can't room with my boss! I can't room with a guy I shoved around and dropped to my knees and sucked the stuffing out of. Went all "wham, bam, you better call me Ma'am" on.

Sweating. Not perspiring or glowing or any of those ladylike things. I'm sweating. My ass cheeks are even sweating.

I splash my face at the sink. My reflection seems foreign. Not my clothes. Not my hair. Not me.

The reflection stares back. Judges.

Perhaps I'm berating myself too much over last night.

How am I going to study? Get dressed? Relax enough to sleep?

*Maybe you should try talking to him about what happened...*

Voice of Reason... do you have an invite?

I'm not allowed reason in this room situation. I have to take it in stride. He set this up. If he's okay rooming together, I have to act like I am as well.

Do what he says, when he says, without question.

I leave for work. I need a raise.

....

A/N: Next Update: 5:25pm

# Chapter 44 Day 376 5:25pm

5:25pm

Location: Entryway of hotel room.

Pin: If one dropped, you'd hear it.

Stagnation gets to me. "Shall I show you where everything is?"

His lips are pursed, tense. His eyes dart to the sofa, the bedroom, the bath, and back again.

"The bulk of your things are here," I say, and beeline for the bedroom. He shows up in his own time.

I begin opening or pointing to everything. I'm like Vanna White if Pat Sajak had his sex appeal ramped up by infinity.

"I put your things in the top drawer. The rest are in the closet. Shoes on the bottom." He opens the closet and peers in while I rattle on. "Charger on the stand. Alarm is already off. I've sanitized the remote."

I think I hear him say "perfect" from behind the open closet door.

"You may notice a few things missing. I've sent them to the cleaners due to the extended trip.

"If you'll follow me, Sir, there's not much left."

Instead, he actually leads into the bathroom. My heels click across the tile. "I believe this is everything you had out in your old room," I touch near his things at the sink. He glances at them, then around the small room until his eyes fall on the few items of my own I've left out. It almost looks as though he's going to pick up my perfume, but he doesn't. "If it's a problem, I can keep my things elsewhere."

"No, no," he says rather softly. It's a small space. Intimate. Something shifts in the air.

I cough to clear my throat and throw open the shower curtain. "I've noticed you're

nearly out of shampoo. Shall I pick some up for you or will the furnished kind be sufficient, Mr. Cullen?"

"You don't have to do that." His hands are in his pockets.

"Very well. Shall I order dinner, Sir?" I leave the bathroom as I speak. Flee, actually.

"I feel like Mexican," he says, still in the bathroom for some unknown reason.

Not good. I've already read it over and there's nothing like that on the menu. "I can run out and pick something up."

His tie appears on the doorknob. "Get changed."

"Sir?"

"We'll go. There's got to be a decent place around here. A chain or something."

He disappears into the bedroom. I sit on the sofa, fingers drumming my skirt.

Changing as fast as men tend to, he's out in jeans and surely something else but I'm fixated on the jeans. Denim in long expanses. Barely contours to his thighs. Thighs I've leaned against but not touched. Bare feet.

Barefoot! Put some shoes on already! How am I supposed to look unaffected and asexual with all this unfair fuckery happening?

He sees me sitting. He stops short, looks back toward the bedroom.

"Um, it's all yours." He pulls his shirt down and steps to the side. A grey, long sleeve, v-neck tee. I pass silently and close the door.

I really want to lean my back against the door and breathe deeply for a few moments. A few hours. Fill my lungs. Decompress. Instead, I grab out my jeans and a white pullover. If I were home, I'd wear my favorite electric blue sweater.

As I slide on my clothes, it occurs to me that I've missed the opportunity to search for restaurants.

It's getting to me. I'm slipping.

A quick search on my phone finds one within walking distance and several others nearby. Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I vow to keep my head in the game.

Grab door. Yank open. March.

"Ready Mr. Cullen?" My words are followed by clatter in the open bathroom.

Cullen walks out, nodding.

I check the mirror and might smell my perfume in the air.

...

A/N: Next Update: 6:10pm



# Chapter 45 Day 376 6:10pm

6:10pm

Location: On the Border.

Chips: Basket #3.

Salsa: Abandoned for queso.

Margarita: Want one.

Had: None.

"It's often this way. You get on site and the whole proposal needs reinventing." He practically shouts over the music.

"Good to know." I'm smiling for some reason. I feel happy. It must be the cilantro talking.

He goes on a bit about contracts and even more about supplements and the new skin care line. I'm surprised; I'd figured he didn't involve himself in products, just deals.

"This was the best idea," he says and points his fork at his plate. I think we're both weary of stuffy dinners and room service.

Careful there Cullen, you'll dislocate your shoulder patting yourself on back. I nod and take a bite of my black beans. Then stop mid-chew. Do black beans cause gas? I can't be playing a tune in my sleep. Not with him a few feet away.

"Yes," I say, cutting off a bite of chimichanga. "It's delicious." Without thinking, I offer him the forkful.

It's just suspended there. Hovering. He looks at it and me and then leans over and wraps those lips around my fork and pulls and takes what I've offered him.

And now I'm just supposed to act like it's no big deal to put that fork that's been behind his lips, inside his mouth, touched his tongue, back into my mouth.

"What do you think of Laurent Peters?" He finally speaks.

What to say in a situation like this? Be professional or go for blunt honesty? "He's an ignorant bore."

Guess we're rolling with honest.

Cullen looks like he might have horked a jalapeño into his sinuses.

"And your opinion on the owner, Sam Marcus?"

"Well," I say, charging ahead, "I spent very little time with him. He seems shrewd but has eclectic taste in personnel."

"Eclectic..." Cullen repeats, smiling. "Jacob James?"

"Delusional, manwhore sycophant."

He laughs. "Irina Lauren?"

"You'd know better than me," I say, and stuff a stringy, cheesy bite into my mouth.

"I asked you." His brows knit together.

Not side-stepping that landmine. Honesty. "Duplicitous skank."

"Wow. Not pulling any punches." He sits back and sprawls his arm across the back of the booth.

I shrug.

"What did she do to you?"

I'd like to ask you the same thing... Scratch that. I don't want to know.

"Got you to call her Irina," I mutter into my chimichanga.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"It didn't sound like nothing."

"You mean to tell me you haven't noticed how condescending she is toward me?"

"Yes, actually I have."

"So, why would you ask?"

He studies me for a moment. "Why do you let her get away with it?"

"I'm not supposed to embarrass my boss."

He blinks. Repeatedly.

Yeah, put that in your picky pipe and smoke it.

He watches his fork swirl the rice around the upper corner of his plate. "I think we need to talk."

"If you say so." I try to look nonchalant.

"Don't you think so?"

"If you think so, Sir, then I think so."

"Don't do that."

"Do what, Sir?"

His fork clinks on the Fiestaware. "That. Don't you think we've moved past the Mister/Sir thing in our off-hours now?"

Oh, this is more to the point than I was expecting. Pointy. Thorny.

This is different.

I swallow. Which is different, too...

He appears to chew on the word he's about to say. "Bella." Piercing stare. "You do remember, don't you? Because I really hope to Hell you remember otherwise I need to take a whole different tack here."

Our perky waitress appears. "Did you two save room for desert? Our fried ice cream is amazing." *With a pineapple garnish?*

Cullen looks at me as if to say he's game. I think he's a puzzle.

"Does it have a honey-based sauce?" I asked her.

"Oh, yes. Cinnamon and honey. It's delicious."

"No, thank you then," I say.

"Ugh. Bee vomit." Cullen looks nauseated. I'm probably catching flies. Too weird... the same phrase I use.

"How about some margaritas? They're on special."

"No." We say in unison quickly. I shiver. Drinks. A reminder of last night.

"Just the check," he adds.

...

A/N: Update 5 of 7

Next Update: 8:05pm (a combo - 2 short ones)

Then: 8:35pm

## Chapter 46 Day 376 8:05pm

8:05pm

Cullen is in the shower.

No other status report possible.

....

....

...

...

8:17pm

I am in the shower.

The same shower Edward Cullen was naked and touching himself in mere minutes ago.

The water on the walls may well have splashed off his skin.

Showerhead: Does not detach

Universe: Hates me

Water beats down on me. Our conversation plays back in my mind.

*Not the best of decisions... for either of us.*

*Not my finest hour.*

*Mine either.*

*You regret it?*

*Yes... no...*

*Me, too.*

*Friends?*

*With you?*

*He scoffs lightly. Friendly then...*

*For the best...*

I don't feel better. Not in the realm of better.

...

A/N: Update 6 of 7

Next Update 8:35pm CST

# Chapter 47 Day 376 8:35pm

8:35pm

I don my PJs while still in the bathroom. My skin is damp and the fabric clings.

I step out into the quiet main area. Cullen is in his room.

A sofa bed is not as easy to set up as one might wish.

I'm determined not to ask for help. It's not the weight. It's stuck.

It pulls free. Of course, a spring hook also digs into my fangs pajama pants and rips a huge hole as it scrapes down my thigh.

"Aaahhhhh!"

The bed legs smack the floor. I press my hands to my leg and will the pain away. It's probably not that bad, just shocking.

"What happened?"

I open eyes that I hadn't realized I'd squeezed shut. Cullen is down on front of me. He moves my hands to check.

I hiss.

At the sound he looks up at me. His fingers press through the tear in my pants.

"I'll be okay."

He shakes his head and tries to check for damage. Unsuccessfully.

Without looking up, he pulls what's left of my pants out of the way. Why the concern? I can surely still brew coffee and type even if my leg needs amputated.

"I said I'm okay."

All thoughts cease when his thumb traces a foot long red mark up my inner thigh.

"Enjoying yourself down there Mr. Cullen?"

The words are out of my mouth before I realize I've thought them.

He freezes.

It's like a switch flips.

My hands run through his hair. I don't know when I put them there. They move down his neck. To his shoulders. I fist his shirt and pull. Never looking up, he grabs the bottom of his shirt with his free hand. It goes over his head in one motion. It hangs in a circle around the arm he's still using to apply pressure to my leg.

"Move your arm to finish."

His breath hitches. I'm shaking. I hope he can't tell. His shirt falls next to my pants and he returns to my thigh.

"Surely you are familiar with the saying... kiss and make better?"

Slowly - oh, God so slowly - he leans in more and presses his lips to the bottom of the scrape near my knee. Oh, yeah. I'm feeling no pain. Then, his warm lips move up and press again.

Then again.

Up and again.

If my knees don't buckle out from under me it's going to be an unqualified miracle.

Near the top, after a dozen plus ongoing kisses, I touch his arm and bring it to my hip. To steady myself. I hope it seems like a reward.

His arm wraps completely around me. My hip at his shoulder, his palm presses along the small of my back, stopping when his fingers encircle the other side of my waist.

I indulge myself. I run my fingers through his hair. Silk. Slide them over his shoulders. Satin. Trace the indents and sinews. Stone. The planes of his shoulder blades. Oak.



He hums.

I drag my fingers back up his back, lightly scratching with my nails. Very lightly.

He moans.

It drowns out mine.

Here's a crossroads. A bridge. A defining moment. Grab it or run or succumb. Lead or be lead. Live or be dead.

I want a lot.

I want to be more like the women he dates. The polished women. The ones on his arm.

I want him to not just be a fuck hot pretentious wank who should drink pineapple juice so I can blow his beautiful cock more often.

Or something less whorish.

I want him to scoop me up in his arms and carry me to his bed and tell me that he sees me for who I am and wants me and respects me and he's only a hardass to get the job done and he'll be the most patient and wonderful man on this green earth if I'll only give us the chance.

But, at the end of the day, I'm a practical gal.

And he's practically the sexiest thing I've ever encountered and I'm going to practically do whatever I practically can for as long as he's willing.

He reaches the top of the red mark.

I want him to cross it.

"Mmmm." I hear myself say. "I bet your lips make everything feel better." With my words, he bows his head against me, his grip tightens around my waist.

"Isn't there something in your way?"

"Yes," he whispers.

Oh my... why is this actually working?

"What do you need to do? Want? Tell me." Slowly, I run a hand through his hair again and again.

"I need... to take off your clothes. I want... I want to..." he breathes into me.

I run my hand up under his jaw. "Want what?" My voice is low, slow. "Tell me."

His hand at my thigh moves up and twists around my panties. "I want to take these off and spread you open and taste you and tongue you and feel you come apart."

*Gah. Thoroughly outlined. Well done Cullen.*

I wrap a hand around the one he has at my waistband and encourage him to pull down. His other hand slides around to help and I move out of his way.

They fall into the ever-growing pile. I feel his breath. He kisses and slides his palms up my sides.

There's probably something I should say now to keep this little scene going, but I'm rather focused on not doing a header onto the sofa.

He presses his lips to my inner thigh, his breath swirls inward and I pull his hair reflexively. He angles and does it again before he speaks. "Let me take you to bed." I think my ears trick me into hearing a "please."

The light hairs along his arm graze my palm as I travel from shoulder to forearm to hand. My fingers drag over his life line to reach his fingers, their tips. I curl and hold his fingers and they curl into mine. Though I wish he'd put himself out there, pull me, I pull him and step toward the bedroom and I feel him shift and rise to follow me.

Half-naked Edward Cullen is following me to his bed. Forget buckling knees or not doing a header, this... this is a bona fide miracle.

I'm afraid to breathe. Afraid to upset whatever astrological alignment has set this in motion. Wherever you are dear butterfly, keep flapping your chaotic wings. Flap them. Flap them like your little life depends upon it... or at least my little death.

Save for moonlight filtered through the curtain, the bedroom is dark. His feet pad

the carpet behind me. Next to the bed, I stop; I need to turn and face him. Face this.

But, I'm not able to make myself turn.

I reach back behind me and find him. Stretching until I feel his arms, then slide down them until I can feel his wrists and hold them.

I can't get over the feel of his skin on mine. Warm. Smooth. Real.

I pull forward and he steps flush against me, his every breath pushes against my spine. My hands travel to cover his, palm to back, and I place one on my abdomen and hold it there while I guide the other beneath the front of my shirt and drag it up my body until it brushes under the swell of my breast.

His breaths burn my neck. I press his hands into my flesh, then leave them there as I arch back and bring my arms around his shoulders and bend until I feel his hands stir. He twists to cup my breast as his lower thumb traces where my thigh ends and the rest of me begins.

As if I think he's asking needless permission, I grant it. "Yes."

And if I thought we were flush before, I was wrong. He pulls me against him, into him. Palms my breasts. Yeah, just palms. I'm not big enough for his whole hand. Few would be. His hands are big. Huge.

Big hands include long fingers, a fact of which I'm reminded when the cupping between my legs turns to delving.

*Oh, yeah, well hey now...there. Right there. Oh, please – keep going...or, there...up there. Yeah, that works, too..Jesus..I whoa...I guess there works, too....I concede, you know better than... more... holy.... wow... All those times my knees threatened to give, to stop supporting me, weren't crying wolf; I'd collapse if I didn't have my fingers entwined behind his neck.*

I need to lie down. Before I fall down.

I break away and sit back on the bed and he seems almost worried but I pull him to me and he drops and hits the floor and ends up looking up at me, hands roaming my skin.

Beautiful. He's gloriously, scandalously, incandescently beautiful.

I want to hold him. And never let go.

It scares me.

Get back on task. I find a word.

"Now."

He descends into shadow.

Oh. Okay, that's what we're doing. His outline. Um, alright. I bless the darkness and hope it hides whatever shows on my face.

"This isn't something I've ever been into." I hear myself say. That's a bit too real. A trip down memory lane of lame lovers. Wow, over share much? I know I need to cover my slip. Distract him.

"Convince me." I pull his hair without reason. It spurs him.

Oh, holy night... I've been wondering about this. A niggling. Rooting around in my brain. Why would he need pushing? Act like he needs it? The concern has been there; I've not wanted to consider it. It would be unfair. To have such a pretty package and nothing inside. To be a sex god sans skill set.

Not. An. Issue.

I don't know what the Hell he's doing down there and I don't really care just so long as he keeps doing it for a long, long time and ...

Then he adds fingers into the mix. Where was I...what was I thinking?

Each pass and pull works together to remove and erase the fumbblings of past visitors who should now, in whatever clouded corner they inhabit, hang their heads in collective shame. Alec with his kitten licks. Paul rubbing out a fire.

Feet on his lower back. Hands in his hair. I trace his eyes.

Now I'm fucking writhing. Writhing! I've got zero idea what he's doing and I think I've given up trying to figure it out. Just for all the peonies in Pennsylvania let him keep doing it and I'll endeavor to stay focused on that and pay no heed to how I'm beginning to tear apart at the seams.

Because I am. I'm going to lose it and start saying some pretty embarrassing, revealing things.

Like exactly who I've pictured when sealing the deal solo for the past year.

One hint.

I want to stay staid. In control.

When my hips start to surge forward, I force them back, deep into the mattress. I want to pull his hair and grind against his face and hope he's learned to breathe through his ears. I force my hands to the sheets, nails into the mattress.

It's a losing battle.

And then, I am lost. I'm shouting and moaning and maybe channeling sounds I haven't uttered since sophomore year Latin class. Salve o magister... Is est Olympus quod abyssus...

The Latin word for male genitalia eludes me...

It might be genitalia...

My breath remains gasps. He looks at me, eyes sparkle in the window light.

I want to kiss him.

But I don't.

That doesn't seem to be what we do.

My hand touches his face. The reverence that he seemed to give me yesterday, I return to him.

I notice he's not still. Rocking. Rutting into the mattress.

My shirt peels off and I lean back on my elbows and point to my chest. "Here."

His pants go away and he moves over me and I try not to be too damned obvious in my perusal – that's the polite word for it – as I devour him with my eyes.

He sits back on his heels, straddles my chest.

That's where his eyes are fixed anyway.

My tits.

He studies. What's in the envelope. Behind the door. His shadowed face looks nearly pained.

I hold his hand and bring it over where his gaze has frozen. "Hold me." As the words leave me, his hand envelops, thumb easing across, teasing to a point.

I try to calm my breathing. Run my index finger down my sternum.

"Paint me."

He growls, throws his head back and strokes his length.

While he works, his head still back and one hand anchored to me, I roam his contours, sinews. His thighs tense. I trace their definition. His hips and hand work in tandem, pulse and surge and stimulate.

I want to, try to feel all of him. Everywhere and all. Memorize his V. Wrap my hands around his waist, feel a hint of hip bone push into my grasp.

Ragged breaths. Sheen on skin. Everything about him has taken on an edge of feral, harsh focus... save where he holds my breast.

My lips are on his body before I realize I've moved and run along his chest, nip the lower curve under his ribs, wrap my arms around him, fingers travel up his back, his muscles moving beneath my hands and he rocks and pushes and propels ever closer to completion, knuckles bang against me, silk teases my throat.

"You're so close... I want it." My words echo in the tight space between us.

Sounds leave him in notes of strain and relief. It hits against me. Spurs. Trails. Hot.

I'm overwhelmed. Euphoric. And it wasn't even about me. My head rests against him, rocked with his heaving breaths and he sags against me, drapes over me, chin at the back of my head, heart beating near my ear.

It's the strangest and best hug of my life. I never want to move.

Close. I've never felt so connected to anyone.

Joined without joining. Intensity.

Intense and real.

But not. Not real.

I need to get away.

In the shower, I scrub away what we did. He was still on his knees when I slid out from under him. When I pulled away.

The sofa bed sheets are cool.

I have no dreams.

...

A/N: Next Updates: 6:00am, 7:03am, 1:51pm, 6:10pm, 6:43pm, & 7:18pm

CST/Central Standard Time

# Chapter 48 Day 377 6:00am

Day of Employment: 377

**6:00am**

Location: Hallway outside room.

Earbuds: Pandora radio. White noise.

I'm still breathing heavily from my unscheduled visit to the fitness center.

The hotel door opens quietly for me. Pointless.

He's sitting on the end of the sofa.

I can't see his face.

"I thought you'd left." He doesn't look at me.

"I...I'm not leaving," I say. I don't know what else to say.

He nods and rises and walks to me. Our hands bumps. Then twist. Then hold.

Squeeze, tighter. Then apart. The bedroom door clicks.

In the shower, I consider not shaving. Maybe stubble will help me keep myself in check.

It's all a bit more than I bargained for. That may be okay. I still feel out of sorts.

Out of control. *How did I get so out of control?*

I'll fake it. Control.

It's a plan.

I'm still contemplating the merits of Fake Control Plan 4782 while I dress.

I slide on black stockings and heels. Black panties. My bra doesn't cooperate.



My arm is bent back and arguing with the hook and eye when I feel him behind me.

His fingers brush my back. He fastens the fabric together. Runs a finger under a strap, untwisting it as he moves up my back to my shoulder.

"Thank you." My voice is soft.

He says nothing. I feel his lips against my hair.

Nevermind. I think I'm no longer a fan of plans.

....

A/N: Update 1 of 6

Next Update: 7:03am

# Chapter 49 Day 377 7:03am

7:03am

Breakfast: Most interesting eggs ever.

I'm staring at my plate. He's in a tie.

I don't even know what to say. Uneasy. Almost...maybe...scared? I don't know if it's because he's so imposing elsewhere, or that I had him on a pedestal, or that this simply feels...different.

I remind myself that I'm acting different than myself in every way.

I pack his things. The weather is turning. I hand him his coat. We leave.

I can feel him watching me. It's warm. Not unwelcome.

There nothing I can think to say that will transition us.

Then, he spares me the awkward move from night to day.

"Write up a temporary transfer proposal of Seth Michaels to oversee our warehouse build," he says in the hall.

"Yes, Sir."

"Rosalie needs a progress report." In the elevator.

"I'll send it by end-of-day."

"Ms. Lauren has set up a dinner meeting with me tonight." In the car.

Oh. Lovely. "What would you like for me to do while you're at dinner, Mr. Cullen?"

He switches lanes. "Wear whatever outfit goes with those black lace shoes and sit to my left."

I can't help but smile. His eyes flicker to mine. The corner of his mouth turns up just slightly, then he refocuses on traffic.

Incoming Text: **Just checking on you. You ok? - Angela**

Reply: **Fine. How's the betting?**

Incoming Text: **Eric Riley will be so disappointed. He had down that Cullen would eat you alive by last night.**

Note to self: Never bet against Eric

...

A/N: Update 2 of 6

Next Update: 1:51pm

CST/Central Standard Time

# Chapter 50 Day 377 1:51pm

1:51pm

Location: Breakroom

Task: Fetching drinks. Arf.

Clicks sound out behind me.

"Edward tells me I need to change the reservations because we'll have the pleasure of your company at dinner this evening. "

"Yes, Ms. Lauren," I say without turning around. "That's what he told me."

I stack cans and cups, pour coffee. Her nails tap the counter.

"Have you made any headway with your little foreign accounts pet project?"

"Not yet." The patronization grates at me, my words are clipped.

"Perhaps tonight would be a good opportunity."

"That would have to be cleared with Mr. Cullen."

"Of course, of course. Though..." I stir in sweetener. She sounds like saccharin. "Whitlock is the best man for working side-by-side on that. Most flexible schedule. He might be available on short notice."

"Again, whatever Mr. Cullen says-"

"You do," she finishes for me. "I can tell. You're quite the dutiful one, aren't you? He says 'jump,' you say 'how high' and if he says 'bend over'-"

"I need to get back," I snap and walk past her.

"He is so focused this trip." Her voice, shrill, echoes in the room behind me. "Last time, he made time for fun."

My steps falter. I sincerely doubt that he did any such thing. A vision of Cullen

wearing Mickey Mouse ears and holding balloons pops into my head.

Then, I recall his absence when she showed up the other day. But, he's said every hour is critical. He doesn't waste time. A date would be a waste.

He couldn't get that time back from her. Unless ol' TARDIS tits can also time travel.

Not asking him questions has never been harder.

I just wanted him to notice me. This is so much more.

I don't know what to do with all the 'much.'

Real? Convenient? Why do I care? Oh.

Oh. I do care.

I'm going to ask him. Tonight, after dinner, I'm going to ask him.

Maybe this is one plan that won't go awry. The others have sorta bordered on best laid.

I'll probably berate myself all afternoon for letting Lauren get to me.

The atmosphere back in the conference room is oppressive. Claustrophobic. There are too many people and too many independent conversations being carried on.

11: Number of times Irina Lauren has found a reason to touch Cullen during this meeting.

I suppose it's too late to say I'm not counting.

"Ms. Swan?" His voice breaks my concentration. Not good. Should've been concentrating on his voice. "The printouts?"

"Uh, yes, Sir. Here they are." I dig out the papers. Lauren smirks, and wraps her hand around Cullen's to tilt the words toward her. He moves and sets the report on in front of her as his eyes turn up to me.

*Don't mind me.*

*I'll just be over here. Enjoying a nice round of self-flagellation.*

...

A/N: Update: 3 of 6

Next Update: 6:10pm Central Standard Time/CST

# Chapter 51 Day 377 6:10pm

6:10pm

Location: Hotel bathroom.

Clothes: Angela's Black skirt. Alice's taupe, drape blouse. My never-worn taupe heels with black lace overlay. Unknown owner's Citrine earrings.

Hair: Up, twist.

Make-up: Earth tones.

Reflection: Not me.

"We need to leave." Cullen speaks from behind the door.

"Yes, S-," I say, stopping myself. In the main room, he's messing with his tie in the mirror.

I step behind him. Straighten his collar.

If it were up to me, I wouldn't go to this dinner.

Neither would he.

At the restaurant, we're seated near a large, stone fireplace. Bottles of house wine line the tall walls.

As requested, I'm at his left. He's right-handed, so either he doesn't want to spend all evening keeping his elbow out of my face or...

Under the white tablecloth, his palm glides long my forearm and down until it rests over the scratch I got last night.

A chair scrapes as it's pulled out from the table.

"Mr. Whitlock, I didn't realize you'd be joining us," Cullen says, his eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly.

"Call me Jasper." He offers his hand.

After a pause, Cullen actually shakes it.

Then, Jasper steps in it.

"Irina said Bella is anxious to work with me."

I'm about to clarify, but Cullen beats me to it. "Anxious or not, she only works with me."

"Oh, Edward." Irina slips into her seat. Across from Cullen. Prime footsie access. "Don't give the kids a hard time. I tried to tell you that Jasper would be the best person to look over things with her. He's been a workaholic ever since his divorce."

I feel Cullen stiffen beside me, but his hand stays on my leg. Seems Jasper and I didn't get very caught up the other day...

"I suppose that's the upside of it. I'm flexible Bella. Whatever works for you, works for me," Jasper says.

"Traditionally, that's the sort of thing one clears with an employer," Cullen says, looking at them, then his menu.

I unfold my napkin. It's a task that doesn't take nearly long enough.

Jasper's eyes meet mine. He looks at me as if he's realized he's not gotten the whole story here.

"If it's a problem, we can get together another time," Jasper offers.

Irina smiles into her wine. "Oh, it's not a problem, is it Edward?"

"Why start asking me now?" Cullen says without inflection.

The waiter appears to take drinks orders. While the others make selections, Cullen excuses himself. He may never drink again.

When he reaches the far side of the room, he turns to look at me; he wants me to meet him.

I chug water down my dry throat and leave wordlessly while Lauren and Whitlock



discuss something.

Cullen is leaning on a thick wooden door frame. Somehow, he looks purposefully positioned. As if aiming for blasé.

"Yes?"

"You should know that I can tell what's going on," he says, jaw set.

"What do you mean?" *With Jasper?*

He glances at me, then looks straight ahead. "With her."

This is new. Volunteered info of a personal nature. What a novel concept.

I look at him, encouraging him to continue. He stands up and starts toward the table, pausing to speak low, near my ear.

"I'll handle it."

The waiter takes our orders almost as soon as we return to the table.

Cullen stops him as he starts to leave. He waves a finger between Jasper and I.

"Box their food to go. They have urgent business it seems."

"And bring us a bottle of this," Irina adds, holding aloft her glass.

Uh, that's not what I was expecting. At all.

....

A/N: Update 4 of 6

Next Update: 6:10pm

## Chapter 52 Day 377 6:43pm

6:43pm

Location: Parking space near Buca di Beppo

Jasper's truck: Equipped with gun rack

Food: Going to waste. No appetite.

Try as I might, I could not get Cullen to let me discuss anything privately with him before our orders arrived.

Jasper opens the passenger door. "Your chariot, m'lady."

I manage a smile. Not a good one though. "He's a piece of work, isn't he?" Jasper says and offers his hand.

"Huh?" I step toward the door. My voice sounds foreign to me. "Oh, Cullen? I suppose he can seem rather terse."

"Terse?" Jasper laughs as I slip into my seat. "Does he have you bugged or something? I was just glad to get you an evening away from that asshole."

He pauses for a moment, then shuts my door.

*What is this I'm feeling? Oh, who am I kidding - I'm jealous. That bitch. "Handle it" as he said he would or not, she got me out of the way. She set this up and I said nothing and now Cullen thinks I may have lied to him about Jasper being married and maybe even that I wanted to be alone with him and I really was flirting with him, but I wasn't and I don't want to be alone with Jasper and I don't know why I don't want a break from Cullen because he really can be an insufferable son of a bitch and I don't want Cullen to be alone with Irina because I only want him to be alone with...me...*

"How long?"

"What?"

"How long have you had a thing for your boss?"

What? "That's crazy Jasper." *Crazy, crazy, craziness kind of crazy. Like post anti-helmet law Gary Busey crazy.*

"Crazy or not, you definitely have feelings for him."

"Of course I have feelings for him. I feel he drips disdain and breaths arrogance and harbors standards designed specifically to ensure their failure to be met."

"Uh-huh."

"Don't 'uh-huh' me Jasper." It wouldn't do me any good to have feelings for Cullen. Sure, yes, he's nicer than I ever thought possible. But, he wants the exact opposite of me: obedient in the day and some sort of aggressive role with which I'm not accustomed, not comfortable with, at night. *How crazy would I be to have feelings for someone who pushes me around during the day and then wants pushed around at night? Who confuses me with desire and doing up my bra?*

"I won't claim it makes sense. But, you've always been strong. Maybe this a good fit. I've never seen anyone affect you like this."

I laugh. It's weak. "What makes you think I'm so affected?" My arms cross over my chest.

"Because we've been sitting in your hotel parking lot for a good ten minutes."

*What the...?* I look around, bewildered. The hotel sign lights the thin ice layer on the lot.

Cringing, I realize I hadn't even noticed we'd left the restaurant.

I've got to harness this. Get a lid on it. Control.

"I'm not in love with Edward Cullen."

"Um, Bella...I never said you were."

...

A/N: Next update: 7:18pm

## Chapter 53 Day 377 7:18pm

7:18pm

Sofa: Sitting on it.

Lights: Off.

Jasper: Elsewhere.

I left Jasper in his truck, crossed the lobby, went to the room, dumped my food in the trash, and sat on the sofa. About 20 minutes ago.

Cullen could very well be helping Ms. Lauren make her way through her wine. Then, she'll want his help making a way through her.

I'm angry. Jealous and angry.

She's out maneuvered me. Out plotted me. Out planned me.

I've let her. Because I'm not being me. Maybe if I was, maybe I would've put her in her place, called her out on her shit, schooled her.

More than that...more than that...the idea of her... him...

The thought is pain. I try to shut it down.

But, I keep coming back to the notion that I'm not certain what it is that I - me, not this little PA part I'm playing - have on the line here. A romp with my boss? A couple of encounters?

A fling? A potential fling?

No, I don't even have that.

Ms. Swan has that. He's willing to give her the time of day...er, night... whatever.

I'm still unnoticed.

And - I think I've known all along - I'll probably stay that way.

I've made a mess of this.

If I wasn't here, on this trip, in these borrowed clothes, ironing my hair, hiding my studies, holding my tongue, he'd never know that I exist.

But, for me, he definitely exists. More than ever. Intelligent and intuitive. Precise and passionate. Decisive and desire and I'm desperate.

I've planned my way into desperation.

There are two choices here: Grab the bull by the horns and make some memories or let it go and regret not experiencing more... whatever this is.

If this is all I get, I'll take it and make the most of it.

Bargaining stage.

If he comes back tonight, I'll be whoever he wants me to be.

Just let him come back tonight.

God, I'm not in just in the neighborhood of pathetic, I'm circling the block.

The door opens. The light spreads across the carpet, growing from sliver to spear, then snapping back to dark with a click.

"Ms. Swan?"

"Mr. Cullen." I'm slumped forward with my elbows on my knees. I don't know if it looks quirky or clumsy.

He looks around for the first time, apparently not expecting me to be here alone. "Where's the illustrious Jasper?" He flips on the entry light. His jacket is undone. The access card bends in his hand.

"I don't know. Not here."

"I gave you your leave for the evening. Why are you here?"

"Because this is where you want me to be."

A beat. "I never said that."

"You didn't have to."

I've been sitting here too long; everything seems bogged down, in slow motion. He hangs his jacket. It feels as though it takes a whole minute or more. Without a sideways glance, he's gone into the bedroom and my train of thought steamrolls down the mountainside as I go from nervous that he'd not come back to nervous that he actually would with a side track of the possibility that he'd come back covered in Irina residue, and then barreling into town with a load of he might very well not give a fair fig if I'm here or not, no matter who I happen to be.

This is crazy. I stand up on Jello legs - sitting on the sofa has taken its toll - and start toward the door.

As I wobble round the coffee table, Cullen steps back into the room. Shoes and tie gone.

"Where are you going?" He stops trying to unbutton a cuff.

I look at the door and realize I've forgotten my card. "For a walk."

"If I wanted you walking around the hotel in the dark, I wouldn't have booked this single room."

A record skips in my head. And while I'd love to contemplate how and why anyone dug up an LP just to scratch it inside my brain - and it better be "Don't Worry, Be Happy" because God knows that song's just asking for it - I'm a tad busy trying to process Cullen's statement. Aren't we in this room for productivity's sake? The time to traverse the hotel campus between rooms and all that? He asked for that reason. Or, wait...did I?

"You've given me my leave for the evening, as you say. I'm going for a walk."

He shakes his head and sighs. "If you insist upon going for a walk, I'll go with you."

Your coming with me rather defeats the purpose of the walk...

"I'll stay in then."

"Because I'd walk with you?"

"Because it's cold outside," I counter and step into the entryway with him.

"It's been cold all day."

"I'm not dressed for it."

"Change." Oh, my dear Mr. Cullen. That's the operative word, isn't it?

"This is what you told me to wear." He winces slightly at my words.

"I also told you to sit beside me but you left."

"You told me to." I step closer.

"For someone who seems to pride herself upon knowing what I want, why do you pick tonight to insist upon acting to the contrary?"

Good question. "Why are your wants so contradictory?"

"They are not..." He wavers.

"You're quite the contrarian." Closer. More.

"To the contrary, my wants are not contradictory."

"That's a tongue twister. Did you reward Ms. Lauren for her efforts to get me out of the way tonight? She got your tongue all limbered up?"

His head pulls back, stunned. "What are you insinuating?"

I'm silent. I move again. Close.

"Answer me," he tries to huff, rakes his fingers through his hair.

"You need clarification?" I'm in his dance space. Breathing in his breaths.

His hands go out as if he's going to touch my shoulders – but he hovers there. Hands fold inward and skim above my arms and down, brush my skin.

"If I wanted her, I'd be with her," he breathes. I press my hands to his shoulders. Warm.

"So...if you want someone, you'd be with them." Sliding down his arms, I bring them to me, to my waist.

His voice is nearly inaudible. "Yes."

"You're with me." I speak against his neck.

Beside my ear. "Yes."

Whoa. Hold up there, Buttercup. No fun storming the castle tonight.

We need to talk.

I need to clear my head. I step away. To the balcony window.

Lightest of snow fall. A thin layer of white. Reflected lights.

He moves the curtain out of the way. "Why do you always do that?"

We both watch the snow fall.

"Do what?" The bare glass is cool under my hand.

"Leave."

A car cuts through the fresh snow.

"When I was little, one Christmas, a cotton-tail visited our yard every day over break. Big, fat, grey. I'd watch as it hopped through the snow, finding whatever little treats and treasures others overlooked. Some uncovered grass behind the bench. Last night's dinner in the compost.

After a few days, it felt like my own. My pet. I looked forward to it everyday. It's fat footprints in the overnight snow. Then, I made the mistake of trying to pet it."

I turn to him, his arm still braced on the glass.

"Well," I say, "you can imagine what happened. I never saw it again."

He looks to me then returns to study the night. "But, you know you're not you in this scenario."

His words shock. Can he know? Does he realize I'm not acting like myself?

"You're not the little girl." His drops the curtain. "So, knowing how you felt then,



why do you choose to be the rabbit now? Is it because the rabbit has all the power?"

...

A/N: 4:43amCST

# Chapter 54 Day 378 4:43am

4:43am

Day of Employment: 378

Location: Next to him.

I awake to the sound of my own huge intake of air and sit up bolt upright.

He stirs but stays asleep.

I haven't stayed up late just talking in bed since Alice and I were in middle school.

I'd asked him about Irina.

"I don't have anything with her and I never have." He had rolled onto his side to face me. "She's been more than clear, but so have I. She's a necessary - well, I hate to put it this way -

necessary evil for this process. She can mess up everything. I've told her I'm not interested. But she's determined...maybe even more so since I expressly turned her down.

"Until we sign, I'm just trying to keep the peace, keep her at arm's length."

"Bet you wish you had longer arms," I said.

"And more of them. She's grabby." He smiled and reached out; almost touching me, then pulled his hand back and stuffed it under his pillow. "I don't think I like this 'no touching' rule."

"Well, it was your idea," I reminded him. My hand tingled; it really was this hard to be so close and not touch him.

He huffed and pulled the bedding higher around us. "It seemed to be the only concession that would get you to stay in bed with me."

"So, you got me into your bed by offering to not touch me. Pretty sure that's the opposite of how it's usually done."

Then, he'd told me about himself. The stuff I couldn't learn by watching him in a fish bowl.

His father raised him on his own after his mother had died. His father had asked him to be his best man when he'd finally remarried last year.

"I'd rather not talk about my mother," he said, folding his arm across his face. "I barely remember her. Only little pieces."

I left it alone.

I could remember my mother, but there still wasn't a lot to talk about. "My parents are okay. Just shuffled me back and forth after the divorce. Now, they both have new families." It didn't really bother me to feel like an outsider around either of them. "But then, I don't have anything to compare it to. This is it. Just me."

It had been quiet for a while; I'd almost fallen asleep, when he spoke again. "Aren't you going to ask me?"

Disoriented, I wondered if I'd missed something. "Ask what?"

"Why I'm such an asshole."

I blinked up at the ceiling. "Um, no. No, I'm not."

He sat up on one arm, his face surprised. "Really?" He paused for a moment. "I thought that might be the first thing you'd ask. I've been waiting."

"You have no patience with distractions," I offered. "I get it. Besides, you've been slipping."

"How so?"

"You've been nice to me lately."

He'd burrowed down into the bedding. "Some distractions are better than others."

Now, I slide out from under his arm.

In the doorway, I look back at him. Peaceful.

I think about how frustrated I've been with him, but I can't feel as angry, even

with effort.

My conversation with Jasper plays back while I get into the shower.

But, why would I feel that way about Cullen?

"Stupid," I say into the spray. "Stupid, stupid, stupid." I spit words through the water. My head rests against the cool tiles.

It has to be the oxytocin or endorphins or whatever those evil, mind manipulation chemicals are that surge during sex.

In this case, really, really surge.

Reason it out. No big deal.

He's an ass. *You do realize I've seen that movie....*

He's judgmental. *What do you think of the owner, Sam Marcus?*

He's condescending. *I'm not insulting you. It's simple biology...*

He's conceited. *...she's the best I ever had...*

He's selfish. *Give them your measurements...*

He's incompatible. *Ugh. Bee vomit...*

He's secretive. *If I wanted her, I'd be with her...*

He's impossible to please. *Wear whatever outfit goes with those black lace shoes and sit to my left...*

He's aloof and distant and cold and who am I kidding with this line of bullshit he is the singularly most passionate and responsive man I've ever known...

The water pounds down on me like the truth.

"I've been entirely wrong about him."

Shit.

...

A/N: This is update 1 of 7

Next Update: (short) 6:45am Central Standard Time/CST

Then: 2:20pm, 4:18pm, 6:30pm, 8:00pm, 10:35pm

## Chapter 55 Day 378 6:45am

6:45am

I'm standing over him. He's where I left him. On his side, tucked in.

Cutest little snore ever.

Stop it. I'm making myself sick.

I shake his shoulder and he moves a little then settles back.

"Si...Mis...Cu..." No, none of that seems right. I don't know what to call him in these circumstances.

His hair is a mess. I run my hand along his face, into his hair to try to tame it. He turns into my palm. A small hum floats up.

"Please wake up," I whisper.

He blinks up at me. "Hi."

"Um, hi." I straighten up.

He sits up and takes in my clothes and the general condition of the bedding that has him wrapped up like the savory filling of a bedding burrito.

"I've overslept."

"No, no. Not by much. I... I thought you were going to... so, I woke you."

He nods and starts to unwrap and I already know what's in that package - it's a different kind of package, go figure - and that's my cue to exit. Stage left. Turn and leave. In haste.

I hear him sigh loudly as I leave the room. The sunrise peaks through the curtains and either the rooster crows or I can actually hear my own chicken shit soul.

I'm envious of how quickly he is ready.

I gather up our things and let the breakfast server in when it arrives.

"Over here." I motion for the cart to go near the sofa.

"Anything more, ma'am?"

"I don't believe so," I say.

Cullen, suited, walks into the room.

The server turns to him. "You want anything more, Sir?"

"It appears not," he says, slipping on his watch. "It seems that having more is a harder decision for some."

We eat and leave and drive and arrive and I never hear his voice again until Mr. Peters greets him at 9:18.

"Fine. And you?"

....

A/N: Update 2 of 7

Next update: 2:20pmCST

# Chapter 56 Day 378 2:20pm

2:20pm

Location: Breakroom.

Emotional state: DEFCON 2.

And I'm mad at myself about it.

Fumes: Running on them.

Hot coffee overflows the cup and pours across my fingers. After a delayed reaction, I hold them under cool water.

"Hey, Bella," Jasper says, leaning on the counter next to the sink. "Just got my orders. Looks like I'm headed back to the old stomping ground to work with you guys."

"That's great. Really great." It's nearly impossible not to smile around him.

"So, any progress?"

Glancing up at him, I can't decide if he's inquiring about the foreign accounts or ribbing me about Cullen. I play it safe.

"Nothing definite."

He turns the water off and hands me an ice cube. "Maybe you need a different approach."

"I need more time."

"How much longer is your trip?"

"Just a couple more days." I hear myself sigh.

"So, it's really a now or never kind of thing? Or, will there be a chance when you go back?"



"It'd be too late by then."

"How are you going to handle it? Do you have a plan?"

Ha.

I shrug.

He cocks his head. "That doesn't seem like the Bella I remember." *Yeah, you're telling me.*

I shrug. Again.

"But, it's important...right?"

Yes. "Yeah."

"Yeah?" He leans with his back on the counter. "That's it? Just a 'yeah?' Maybe... oh, nevermind."

I roll my eyes. I wish he'd just get to the point already. Hypocritical, I know.

"Well, Jasper, this has been...real. But I need to get back to him."

He smiles. "Get back to who?"

"What? Work. I have to get back to work."

"You said 'him.'"

"Well," I say, pointedly avoiding eye contact and gathering up drinks, "I work for a 'him.'"

"Bella," he says, looking out blankly at the empty microwave. "Regret is a kind of cold forever."

....

A/N: Update 3 of 7

Next Update: 4:40pm

## Chapter 57 Day 378 4:18pm

4:18pm

"Ms. Swan?" The unfamiliar voice draws my attention away from my screen. A woman in a delivery service uniform stands in the office doorway.

"Yes?"

"Delivery for you. Signature required." She hands a clipboard to me and exits only to return moments later with a wide, flat box and a far smaller one on top. She's gone without notice.

It occurs to me - and I don't like the feeling at all - that I've not been asked to pick this up myself. It seems he'd rather place orders and make arrangements himself than interact with me. I know I've brought this on myself.

It's a white box. No markings. No address. I also no longer see the smaller one.

Opening it, I wonder if there's been some sort of mistake. Perhaps a different, heretofore unknown, Ms. Swan works here. Perhaps it's a present for Cullen, from his family or something, that I'm expected to keep from him until the holiday. *That should be handy and all, you know, since it's roughly the size of a Jetta.*

Inside, beneath a sapling's worth of sugar-scented tissue paper, is a dusk rose evening gown. Halter, empire waist, no trim. Understated in every way, save the color. The color may not even be season-appropriate. Not that I'm complaining; it's lovely and reminds me very much of my favorite lipstick shade, My Wish List.

I pull the dress out and a smaller, inner box tumbles out onto the floor. Inside is a pair of delicate chandelier earrings. Without thought, I slip one on and begin with the other only to stop and burrow frantically through the tissues in search of a card.

Tissues crinkling and earring tinkling near my ear - so different than the nothing I've heard all day. Or, at least nothing I've wanted to, the one thing I've wanted to, I realize. I miss him.

I ache.

A small card, held between two long fingers, appears inches from my nose. I look

up and meet Cullen's guarded eyes. There was a time when I would've taken this look to mean detached, aloof; now, I know this is observation and caution. Wary.

Without breaking our gaze, I take the card. Quick glance and flip. It's blank on both sides.

I look to him again. "What is this?" I ask, smoothing the bodice against me.

His eyebrow quirks. Wordlessly, he sets something on the desk and leaves the room.

I stare at the spot where I last saw him until my eyes become unfocused. Only then do I look down. A pair of tickets sits on my desk. Nutcracker. 8pm. Black tie.

...

A/N: Next Update: 6:30pm

I mistakenly listed the wrong time in the previous update. I went with the earlier of times I've announced.

# Chapter 58 Day 378 6:30pm

6:30pm

Location: Hotel bathroom.

Hair: Unruly. It's fuller and not at all flat. How is a landlocked state so humid?

Internal debate as to whether I wear lipstick that perfectly matches the dress or not rages on.

Which is better than the other things that beg for a turn in my obsessing. The delivery. The dress. The blank card. The earrings... they seem a bit more than I can attribute to needing me suitably attired.

The tickets. To the Nutcracker. Of all things, to the Nutcracker.

Of all the things that could simultaneously make me feel like it really was Christmas but also make me ache with longing, "The Nutcracker" would be the pinnacle.

My family wasn't big on tradition, or at least not on any that were recognized as such at the time. Dressing up to see the ballet performed while my cousin played in the symphony was a memory I treasured. We didn't do it every year. Just enough. Enough to make it our solitary tradition.

I've never gone since my family quit going. Well, since I quit going with my family. Different directions. They have their families. I have me. Just me.

I haven't been in years.

Actually, I'm not sure I've been since I got boobs.

Admittedly, an odd segue.

But, right now, I've got boobs on the brain. I'm staring at the straps of my bra. Inches and inches of black straps. The dress is a halter. I don't have a Y-back or a convertible bra with me.

One reason why men buying dresses for women is not always the slickest of ideas:

They have no frame of reference for necessary undergarments.

With no other real options presenting themselves, I take off the bra ala Flashdance.

Matching lipstick wins out. No one's going to be looking at my lips. I can't say as much for things that rhyme...

Final touches and then I exit the bathroom. Cullen is nowhere to be seen. Or heard. Still.

I slide on black pumps and catch my reflection in the full length mirror. Pantyline.

Splendid.

Tonight, I'll be wearing the matching panties to the no bra look.

His bedroom door opens and I shove my underwear into the back of the sofa.

He's in a tux.

A tux isn't that much different than a suit. That's my mantra. I chant it internally as I now force my body to do things like blink, breathe and remain vertical.

It seems tuxedos affect the cerebrum.

"Is there anything I need to be doing?" I squeak. *Anything besides proving the theory of spontaneous ovulation?*

He hasn't looked toward me yet. He shakes his head, opens the closet, pulls out my coat, and holds it up for me. Never once looks at me.

I slide into it and he holds the door, silently ushering me out. When is he going to talk to me again?

The drive to the theater is accompanied only by the sound of the tires moving through the snowy slush. We may be meeting others there. I'm not sure what's expected of me anymore. I'm not sure of him or myself.

The valet line is long but moves quickly. He hands the keys over and takes my arm from the attendant who opened my door. I'm ridiculously comforted by the contact.

Inside, I check my coat. When I turn around, for the first time today, he's looking directly at me. Staring.

I want say something, to get him to talk to me again, but nothing comes to me. *What can I say here? Thanks for the dress that you had to get me so I could come to this*

"You look beautiful," I hear myself say.

Well, he does.

I think I see the whisper of a smile, but then it's gone. There is an alcove nearby and I consider pulling him there to ask/demand/beg that he speak with me. We become part of the crowd streaming toward seats and I can't make myself pull him there. I've stepped out of my role so many times already; I can't imagine he'd be pleased to have attention drawn in public.

Mournfully, I look to the alcove as we move along. Then, suddenly, I'm in it. He's steered us there.

"I can't do this," he says. There is a faint echo.

I've lost my bearings. I don't know what to say or do and everything is on autopilot. I reach out and touch his back. "Do what?" I whisper.

He looks toward the ceiling, sighs heavily. I rub my hand along his arm, hoping it's comforting.

We're inches apart. He turns and looks at me in a way I don't understand.

"This." He gestures between us.

I've taken to breathing through my mouth. "This?" I repeat softly.

"Ask me."

I'm sure the look on my face is confused. I'm good, but I'm not that good; I need more information than this.

Without looking any tenser, which may not be possible but I choose to take it as a good sign, he expounds. "About the card."

I didn't say he expounds greatly.

Oh. I have so many questions about the card but I go for the obvious. "Why is it blank? Why have a card at all, if it's blank?"

He opens his mouth then closes it. It seems he was going to tell me, but changed his mind.

"Why do you think?"

Oh, heavens. The show is going to start before we muddle through this. Not that I care anymore. I thought I missed him earlier, but now that he's here and I can see him and hear and, oh God, smell him, I really don't want anything else ever. Sugar Plum Fairies can do the dance of the damned.

"I don't know." I trace his lapel.

"That makes two of us." He touches an earring.

"They're beautiful." I brush against his hand near my ear.

His knuckles skim my cheek. Drag down to toward my mouth. I turn and press my lips to his hand. His eyes shut for a moment.

"The signature was troublesome." He presses his forehead to mine. "What am I to you?"

I know he has to be thinking that I'm hung up on the fact that he's my boss, or he's powerful in my little universe, or that this trip makes him handy, or that he's a really smoking notch in my bedpost. It's none of those things. I won't work there much longer. But, I'm all I've got. I make my own way.

I can't risk anything.

This is risks everything.

But, here in this tiny space, with strains of prelude music in the air, our echoed breaths on the walls, I realize that not another soul exists for me in this universe. If I never left this space, his side, I'd be content.

He's everything.

Wow. I'm pretty slow on the uptake.

His hands come to my bare shoulders and I brace myself against his frame, run my hands up to his neck, his face.

"E-," I begin, but stop. That seems a bit much in the way of confessions. "Edward."

It's like I said it anyway. He beams down at me and I feel his grip tighten on my shoulders, like he's testing something or feeling it for the first time. I'm feeling more self-conscious than I expected and I really just want to curl into him, to feel him hold me and be strong for me for just a minute because I'm allowed to be scared. I'm allowed to be scared when emotional epiphanies present themselves unbidden and unexpected.

I inch forward and he does exactly what I hoped he'd do. His arms wrap around me and I want to press in even more but I'll probably smear make-up all over his shirt. I look up to explain. Our eyes meet and I watch his flicker to my lips. *Yes, please. Please do it.*

But, he doesn't move. I know he's tried to make the moves before, but I've shut him down.

I stretch up and brush my lips over his. Then again. His eyes close and mine follow. His hands move up me until he holds my face in his hands and then he's kissing me back and I'm kissing him back, trying to show him that this is real and I am real and please see me for who I am and let me taste your tongue already.

I suck in his lower lip and he hums and brushes his tongue against the tip of mine. It's soft and sweet. My hands weave into his hair, anything to try and have him closer. To have him.

We miss being seated.

...

A/N: Next update: 8:00pm



# Chapter 59 Day 378 8:00pm

8:00pm

Seat: C12.

Hand: C11.

Loon: Grinning like one.

Darkened theater. We found our seats at the last possible moment. I may have skewered some toes.

He's holding my hand. My hand is in his and our hands are on his thigh and that means he's holding my hand.

Edward Cullen is holding my hand.

*Sure, sure, he's been, um, there... but this somehow feels different... more intimate.*

Good thing I've seen this ballet several times, because I'm paying attention in the range of nil.

My lipstick is gone. Eaten off, as it were. All that pondering about whether to wear it or not a waste.

Smeared make-up would normally torque me off. But, as long as I'm not channeling Tammy Faye Baker after a cloudburst, I'm feeling pretty peachy about it. Hell, I've never been so happy about... anything.

Edward is fixated on the stage. Or he appears to be. His thumb traces my life line. Every once in a while, I feel him hold me tighter, press my hand between his own and his thigh.

Looking around, I can't see anyone we know. I've wondered if this was a work-related function or motivated by guilt about the extended trip making me missing the holiday with family.

Realistically, I know it might well be a date.

There was no asking, no explanation. I want to ask. I want answers.

But, I don't; I am now sure this reticence stems from fear of confirming that the demure-by-day-freak-by-firelight way I've been acting has been what he finds appealing enough to date.

In over my head here. I care about this quiet, complicated fucker.

I need to show him me.

In small doses.

After the curtain closes, we walk along The Plaza. White lights. Soft snow. Horses pulling decorated carriages clip-clop in the midst of the idling cars. That can't be healthy.

He hasn't said anything since we left the theater. Just held my hand and walked among the carollers and shoppers.

"What are you thinking?" I ask as we pass a store that smells of gingerbread and spices.

"As little as possible." He pauses in front of a book store. The glow from within clears any trace of shadow from him face. "For the first time in as long as I can remember."

On the surface, his words are dismissive; his face isn't.

Still staring in at the books, he brings my hand to his lips and kisses two knuckles.

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A/N: Next update: 10:35

# Chapter 60 Day 378 10:35pm

10:35pm

Car: Hands folded in my lap.

Elevator: Hand in his.

Hall: Other hand added over his.

Room: Hands everywhere.

My coat slips from the hanger and hits floor. He looks at me as if to say it looks just fine there.

"You feel it, don't you, Bella? What's happening. You feel it."

I nod. Yes. So much I can't feel anything else.

Street lights and shadows color the room. We're near the bedroom. Near the door.

He's waiting. For me. On me.

I loosen his tie. Feel him swallow below my fingers, breathe beneath my arms.

He's not moving. Waiting. Baiting.

I look at him and then to my shoulders, tilt my head, silently suggest. Strongly suggest.

His hands slowly roam me. Tentative. I step forward and his arms go round to meet at the small of my back.

"You wanted me to wear this," I say as his fingers play at a dress seam. "So...take it off."

He holds his breath. I can tell because I'm holding mine.

Slow rustle of fabric fills the room. He pulls the zipper, looking down, watching me while each tooth pulls free. His hands slide under and graze my torso, along my

sides. He slides it over my shoulders.

I wouldn't think this would be such a surprise. It was darn cold in that theater.

But, his breath hitches. Silk splashes the floor.

I'm down to black thigh-highs and heels.

Okay, the man might pass out.

A panty-less warning might have been prudent. Noted.

His arms wrap around my shoulders. Thumb at the joint, palm around, fingers reach and press my back.

His hands travel down my arms, unhurried, drag. My wrists. Shoulders. Pale flesh inside my arms, almost tickles. Slower at the curve and swell.

I can feel him looking at me. Hard. Hands continue their trek. Soft.

Deliberate, measured, I bring my arms to him, to his shirt. His buttons a puzzle. Hesitant and unfocused, I curse my nerves.

He doesn't seem to notice.

I don't remember the buttons being this difficult before. Probably because I tore them free.

Which seems like a genius idea and I contemplate that method again while I push a fingertip under the rounded edge and thread it through. It's slow going. Maybe that's okay.

It's going to take forever at this rate.

Still in my heels - gets me closer to his level; he barely bends to watch me, continues to feel me. Warm at my ribs. Heated fingers on my back.

Another button finally gives. Yeah, taking forever.

He breathes, shuddering, watches my progress. Roams me. Waits. Waiting.

I take on another. He follows my waist, my hip.

The top of my stockings. Fingers dance. At the rim. Palms my ass, traces where thigh meets cheek. Dip and explore. Ready.

And I'm not holding my breath anymore. Not at all. I'm panting. Pants.

Pants. Oh, yeah...his pants. I start pulling at this pants and yanking and I guess I'll be going to the store to buy clothes for him after all because there's a rip that should be sickening but instead I hear my laugh, a laugh like the sound you make when you see a car wreck and it's the exact opposite of how you feel and I'm frantic, desperate to not let on how very real, really real I'm finding all this.

Because I'm going to make love to him in a moment.

I just sorta realized that.

I start to step out of my shoes, but the change in height from the first movement makes me feel even smaller. I leave them on. He watches as I kick away the dress with my shoes still on..

I step into him. Run my hands down around his open shirt and start it over his shoulders and down.

He watches my chest rise and fall.

"You like?"

Corner of his mouth turns up. He might laugh now.

That will never do.

"Show me."

And I guess "show me" equates to "prove it" in his book because before I know what's happening he's pulled me by my butt and lifted me against him, bent himself to bury his face in my neck, arms encircling and cock - some hard proof right there - running near roughly between my legs. Somehow we get to the bed and he's backed up against it and still moving and holding and oh-wow-that's-pretty-fucking-amazing between my legs.

I finish pulling his sleeves down his arms and discover they won't come off as they're bunched up at his wrists where I've failed to unbutton the damned cuffs. Ah, screw it. Or, him.

I give a shove and he falls back onto the mattress, shirt under his ass, hands trapped at his sides.

Eyes wide, not scared, something else. Something... I don't know.

I put my thumbs under the edge of my stockings and look down at him to ask if he'd like them to stay. His head is raised off the mattress, watching me, gauging me, because this may seem more of a tease than a question - maybe he thinks I'll take them off or not as I choose... but he's wrong... I'm watching him for a reaction, to see what he wants. I trace the lace hem. He eyes the shoes and I'm pretty sure he likes them.

Guess that's a yes.

Forcing myself to go slowly, counting to ten as I go, I bend at the waist and crawl up the bed. Slow and straight, trying for calm, trying for unruffled.

Eyes on me. Fidgets within sleeves.

Fidgets until I start to hover over him. Then he stills. Then watches. Then breathes.

Kiss his thighs. Lips to hips. Tongue on shaft, base to tip. His turn to writhe. His fingers dig into the bed at his sides.

His chest rises in short gasps and I want to touch it, to feel his heat on me. Knees astride and hands at his face, in his hair, I bend and slide the whole of myself against him.

Warm and welcome and... home.

So good it's bad.

Shift and bring my chest to his mouth. He watches me and I'm not sure what I'm showing him when his lips press and his tongue slips along my breast, seeks and teases. Licks and nips and pulls me in, near bite.

He starts to object when I slide away, but my sliding stops. Abruptly. Because I'm there.

There, there.

Oddly enough, right about now I'm wondering about the mechanics of having sex with shoes on. How does that work? How do you keep from gouging someone with pointy heels, keep from scraping them? I'm already straddled over the expanse of his hips plus the hands that I've managed to trap there and now there's the distinct possibility that I'm going to hurt him. Taking them off is going to be clumsy and awkward and not at all in-charge-looking, but it turns out all my concern is unwarranted as I feel his hands wrap around my ankles, fingers anchoring me, almost like I've anchored him.

And I feel secure.

I wrap my fingers behind his neck, thumbs circling below his ears. I slide down onto him. Just the head. Up again. Off again. And back. Angle, catch the ridge. And he's watching me. And I'm watching him.

Another pass and I'm going for broke, all the way as it were, this time and he must sense it and leans up and presses his lips to mine. Kisses me in a way I've never been kissed before. Kissed to my soul.

I sit up and slide him in to the hilt, until there is no more, until I've run out of me and he's run out of him.

Eyes locked and faces facing. It's intense and burrowing and connect and I want to look away and but not as much as I want to feel this ribbon unspool between him, me, us, and see. Really see.

Forearms on his shoulders, hands behind his head, and feet held down at his sides. I move. He moves. Tandem. Tense. Together.

Noise flows from him, the cadence alters when I do. Shift, he hums. Rock, he moans.

Full and hot and perfect and show me what you want, what you like.

Slick skin and breath rasps.

Seems another shirt is ruined - his hand clamps down on me, splays across my back, pulling me down to him and I keep moving and he tastes my shoulders, my neck, holds me there, saying something. Low. I can't hear.

God, I want to hear.

I want to taste his secrets and feel his sounds and listen to his mouth on me.

Lick his jawline. Sweat and sweet.

Break away and sit up straight and he arches back as he thrusts up into my down and I bend back, my hands flat along his chest. I can feel his thighs tense under me, he's straining and feeling and hitting inside me and rubbing against me in the best oh, please don't let this end too soon but maybe it should because I'm exhausted way. Because I'm nearly there.

Hell, I'd be there and back again if I weren't over-thinking this whole thing, if I weren't determined to see him undone, to do the undoing.

His free hand is at my hip, helping and holding. I've grown so accustomed to the light that every change in his face shows. The blinks. The lip bites. How he watches me, more than looks, like he's studying.

Alarm flickers in me. Then, an idea. I move off him and his hand holds fast. God, he's breathing so hard, his chest crashes, nostrils flare.

"No...please." He swallows. He snaps his hand away and looks at it like it's done something offensive.

I take his hand and press my lips to it, reassure him.

Nothing is wrong. So much is right.

And I spin over him - pausing mentally for a moment to congratulate myself on clearing my three-inch heel over his torso while I'm a hair's breadth from orgasm and teetering on a panic attack from the enormity of all the things I've not been letting myself think about, the thoughts scratching at the peripherals - keeping his hand in mine, to steady, to tether, together.

Backwards, facing away, hiding somewhat I can admit it, I reach between my legs with one hand and align him with me. It's wet, wetter than I anticipated and I almost think I should be apologizing to him for some crazy reason - for what, him turning me on? - and I turn my head over my shoulder and watch him as he watches me sink back onto him. It's sneaky. I don't think he even knows I've observed. Pretty sure actually, because he didn't look cool about it at all. Mouth open, eyes rolling back, might've bit his tongue.

I'm still holding his hand and I bring it to my waist as I roll back onto him. His



fingers entwine with mine and he moves to meet me again and again and I run my nails up his thigh while he moans and rocks and then my hand smooths down to below where we join and cups him, plays at his base... and he's frozen.

"Oh... goddamn..." he breathes. *My dear, has no one done this for you before?*

Well, not that I've done this for anyone before... but I'm me and you're you and, well, I'd think people would tend to roll out the red carpet and pull out all the stops...

I keep moving, his breathing changes and suddenly he's pressed against me, breathing into my hair, my ear, warm on my back I hadn't even realized was cold. His hand leaves mine and snakes down to touch me so near where I touch him and then I hear myself, hoarse and breathy and burning and I'm over the edge, complete. Our rhythm finally falters.

He swells. Curses. Drives into me at least as hard as I've pressed onto him and then throbs and pulses and push. Murmurs against my back. Whispers one of those secrets I want to know into my spine.

Time passes. I don't know how much. Our breathing slows. Finally, eventually, matches.

And I need to move. For many reasons.

But, I'm boneless and my knees are numb. If I shift wrongly, I'll tear into his skin with my heels. Wiggling, I test my strength. It's lacking.

Then I feel him pull away a shoe and run a thumb up my arch. He leans us and shifts and uses what was his trapped hand to remove the other. He rubs that foot too.

He pulls me up the bed and I'm spent and it seems perfectly okay when he's wrapped around me. I'm tucked into him, and his arm is my pillow and the shirt still hanging from his wrist is our blanket.

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A/N: Next Update: 4:09am

# Chapter 61 Day 379 4:09am

4:09am

Warm. Everything is warm, and I'm being jostled.

My eyes flutter open.

"Hey," he says, kissing my bare shoulder. "I couldn't wait any longer."

His lips are wet, soft. I stretch and kiss his throat.

"There's something I have to tell you...that you should know," he says against my skin.

"Hmm?" So sleepy. Content.

"I love you, Bella." His lips brush the corner of my eye, my cheek, my own. "I love you."

In my waking haze, no act, no filter, I say the first thing that comes naturally to me.

"I probably love you, too."

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A/N: Next Update: 10:45am

# Chapter 62 Day 379 10:45am

10:45

Temporary desk: About to become 'former.'

Probably: Not the most romantic word choice ever.

Cullen: Edward

This company's foreign account processes aren't terrible, but they aren't safe. Not in the current climate. Too many payments to get things going in certain countries that could be construed as bribery. Small things, like taking clients to dinner. Clients who happen to work for foreign governments.

I know this info is not going to be welcome news. I know I'm not positioned as someone to take seriously on these matters.

That doesn't mean I'm not right.

I'm on page three of my detailed report. In the end, the evidence will be irrefutable. They will have to believe me, despite the source. Despite that fact that I am just a PA.

"Just" associated with the term "PA" doesn't feel right. *I'm just the ring-bearer. I've just gotta keep the bus over 50 m.p.h.*

Edward has been in and out of the room all morning.

Fact checking. Finalizing. Looking fine.

Now, he looks more relaxed. Open briefcase and papers scattered.

"Would you like something to drink, Bella?"

I know this game. "What can I get you, Sir?"

He looks up, eyes bright. "Well, since you offered..."

I roll my eyes and push back my chair.

He laughs softly. "Since you're going... I'd probably like a Coke."

"Coke?"

"Yeah, probably."

I narrow my eyes.

"Oh," he says, "could you probably get the transfer files?"

I'm at the door.

"And probably order lunch. Probably barbeque."

I spin around. He looks exceedingly pleased with himself.

I'm back with drinks in just a few minutes, but the air is different. He's on a call.

He paces at the far corner of the room. "Yes, I will, Dad. Merry Christmas to you, too."

The phone closes but he doesn't turn around. He's studying the nothing of the wall.

Slowly, I go to him and nudge the can against his arm. He twists, smiles weakly, and nods in thanks.

I'm back at my desk for a while when he inhales deeply. I didn't even realize I was staring at it until I noticed the change.

"Elizabeth."

I don't speak. I assume he knows I have no idea what he is talking about.

"She worked with my father."

His eyes stay trained on the wall.

"When I was three, I went to my father's building office with my mom. Elizabeth came out of his office looking haggard. Every hair out of place. Blouse half done."

His shoulders tense. Even through the suit jacket I can see the change. I can

practically see him force the memory up.

"I didn't understand the rage coming out of my mother that day. Elizabeth was always nice to me. She gave me candies and baseball stickers. I was enamored. So was my father."

I sat still, careful not to stop him.

"My family changed after that. I don't know how long it went on. It felt like forever, but time is relative. It might have been only a day or two. Every time a door closed, they screamed.

"Until my mom left. To go for a ride. I wanted to go for a ride, too. She always took me. But not that time. I understand now. But then...then it felt like she didn't want me."

He shifts and finds his chair, but never looks to me.

"Then, they called. I suppose it was something as simple as "There's been an accident." They said she may have been 'distracted.' I don't know. What I do know is that all I can remember of my mother was her yelling...and then dying to get away."

"My father brought Elizabeth around a few times later. I couldn't look at her."

He looked up, at nothing in particular. His gaze cold. "I learned to hate when I was three."

He began shuffling papers and I tried to focus on an appropriate response.

Since it didn't look like one was coming, I went with this: "So, are you telling me this is why you're a...um, demanding and hate distractions...why you're an...?"

"You mean 'asshole?'" He voice is lighter, the mood leaving with the memory.

"Well, yes."

"No, I don't think so. Maybe somewhat." He stretched back in his chair. "God, who sits back and analyzes themselves like that?"

"It might not be a bad idea...in some cases," I say as playfully as I can manage.

"There's a lot riding on my shoulders. People's jobs, futures. Nice gets you friends.

I don't need friends, I need results."

I pop my can open.

"So, Bella, maybe you'd care to enlighten me as to why you seem so hesitant about us?"

"You mean beyond the obvious drawbacks of being involved with a self-proclaimed and unapologetic asshole?"

His mouth turns up. "Well, when you put it that way..."

I take a swig. "No, it's mostly me, I suppose," I say, and breathe deeply. "I'm used to being on my own. I control that. It's comfortable. I never cared much if anyone came or went before."

He smiles, shuffles some papers. I think he's trying to act nonchalant. "So, you *probably* care now?"

"Okay, fine! It was a ridiculously inappropriate way for me to say it, and you deserve better, and I'm embarrassed about it if that makes you feel any better, but if think you're going to get me to declare that I love you for the first time in the middle of this crappy office with printouts and empty Coke cans everywhere you are going to be sorely disappointed."

As I rant, the smile on his face grows wider. The man is on the verge of openly laughing at me.

"Oh, I'm not disappointed." He folds his hands behind his head. "That'll do nicely,"

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A/N: Next update: 4:00pmCST

Then: 9:15pm

# Chapter 63 Day 379 4:00pm

4:00pm

Little white box: Haunting me.

Business: Not mine.

I want to chuck it out the window.

It's not the box that has offended me, really. It was just sitting there on her desk.

No, no. It's the tag on the little white box.

The little box that I've seen once before. The one that came yesterday with my dress, but left with the delivery person.

I lift the flap again, carefully. As if I might trigger a spy cam installed to catch nosey assistants.

And, yes, again. I've already looked. I just want it to be different. To say something different.

But there, in perfect pointed script was the source of my problems.

To: Irina Lauren

No "From." Just her name.

Not blank, but no signature. Do the same rules apply to her? He doesn't know what to sign for her?

I know what he said. I really believe him. I do. But the gift... Why?

The card is staring back at me. Mocking me. Making me want to take that damn box and wing it at her so it falls down into her abyss-cup bra and possibly aids in the battle for Narnia.

I can hear her make her way toward her office. I picture her sauntering and laughing and adjusting and touching up her lipstick all at the same time.

I jump up and away from the box... but not before moving it a fraction of an inch, trying to imitate its exact position pre-nosey fingers.

"Oh, Bella," she says, stepping into her office. "I'd nearly forgotten about our little meeting."

*I gathered as much since you're nearly thirty minute late for it.*

"Do tell. What sort of illicit dealings are you here to detail for me today? A dinner meeting in Portugal? Free Post-Its in Luxembourg?"

My jaw clenches. "Actually, I've generated report of several now questionable practices and cross-referenced them with companies who've been on the line for doing similar activities. The results are everything from heavy fines to disgorgement of profits. Some also result in jail time."

"For palm money to set up phone lines and steak dinners with officials? Please. We're hardly arms dealers."

I didn't really expect her to be receptive, but it was necessary to at least attempt to talk to her before saying she wouldn't listen. "I'm not saying you are deliberately breaking the law. Just that things are different in the wake of Wall Street failings. The SEC and the Department of Justice are now far more aggressive and far less lenient than in the past. You cou-

"I'll look it over," she says and snatches the papers from my hand. "Now, you'll need to leave. I have to get ready for a party tonight."

She slings her bag over her shoulder. It's huge. I recognize the brand.

"Ms. Lauren, what a beautiful bag. Is that a Dooney and Bourke?"

She glances back at it dismissively. "Yes, it is."

I continue toward the door, the stop just before I exit, "I'd hang onto that bag. Potential collector item. That Bourke guy thought what he was doing was no big deal, too."

There is no chance she's even going to bend back the pages of that report. There's even less chance that she'll Google Bourke and find out a whole team of high-power attorneys couldn't keep him out of jail on bribery charges during this new crackdown.



Turning on my heel, I make for the door rather than waste more time on her.

"Bella," she calls out behind me. "Do tell Edward how much I love his gift."

*Oh, I'm sure he'd much rather hear it from you.*

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A/N: Next update 9:15pm

# Chapter 64 Day 379 6:29pm

6:29pm

"It's a replacement more than a gift." The steering wheel turns fluidly under his palms. "And she's a shrew to imply otherwise."

I stare out the window. Christmas lights dot the landscape.

This is not a feeling I like. Jealousy. Especially since I think it's unwarranted. I remain quiet.

"I'm not used to explaining myself," he says.

I shrug softly.

"The other day when I left with her, we worked for a few hours. Then, I left." He coughs and grabs the steering wheel a little tighter. "In an unusually optimistic move, I left to pick out your dress." He looks flush, maybe a little embarrassed.

"I went back to collect things from her office and she, once again, thought I was making an excuse to see her. That's when you called and between talking to you and thinking about changing hotels and Irina stalking me around her office, I knocked her business card holder off her desk. A hideous crystal thing.

"I replaced it. I'm just trying to keep the peace."

I nod a few times and glance over at him. He's watching to me as much the road.

"Why put her name on the card? My card was blank."

"I had no desire to be there when it was delivered to her."

We twist a few miles further toward the hotel.

"How 'fun' were you on other trips?"

"Pardon me? Fun?"

"She said you used to be fun."

"I'm the same life of the party I've always been. Though, I didn't avoid her so much initially, before I knew what she was like.

"Bella, I've told you I don't want anything to do with her."

Big girl panty time. "I know you did. I don't want you to think I don't trust you. It was just so hard to understand."

He pulls the car into a space outside the hotel. "You can ask me anything, Bella. I'm never going to lie to you."

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This was an unannounced/bonus update.

Merry Christmas – Irina is delusional.

A/N: Next update: 9:25pm

# Chapter 65 Day 379 9:25pm

9:25pm

Location: Hotel Ballroom.

Dress: Last one. Blue silk.

Christmas Eve office party. I've begun to think that no one at this company has children. Then, James Jacobs sidles up to a tipsy woman. He's a prime argument for asexual reproduction.

Dinner was hours ago and now almost everyone is pretending they still want to talk to the other people here. As if everyone doesn't get enough of their co-workers during the week.

On the way here, I tried to talk more with Edward about the report I'd made. His phone kept ringing. Then, he needed to make a call. Then another. When we arrived, we were late and had to rush in.

Edward went missing shortly after we arrived. I took up residence in the corner, holding up the wall, as that seems to be all I do lately.

After well over an hour, maybe two, I've actually begun to partake of the open bar. I've made a sizeable dent. If one considers the Grand Canyon a dent.

Blessedly, the occasions for small talk have diminished as the night wears on.

Now, my primary companionship is in the form of a white poinsettia pyramid.

They actually are better conversationalists than Laurent Peters. Plus, poinsettias don't have prostates.

I weave through the masses, but cannot find him.

Eyeing the crowd, I catch Jasper's attention. He seems to understand who I am looking for and nods toward a set of side doors near a champagne glass tower.

I smile in thanks and head that way.

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A/N: Next update 1:15am

# Chapter 66 Day 380 1:15am

1:15am

Edward, Irina, and the owner, Mr. Marcus, stand huddled in the hallway outside the ballroom.

Hold back and wait. Do not draw attention. That's the name of the game. My role.

"Congratulations, Edward," Irina purrs, placing her hand on his arm. He stiffens, moves, but continues to speak with Marcus until they shake hands.

"Closing this deal early is the ideal Christmas gift, don't you think?" Marcus booms as he leaves.

*Wait, what?* Not yet, it's too soon.

I didn't tell him. I didn't convince him.

I've been so busy worrying about my plans and my hormones and my concern about what it is about me that he likes, I've failed.

I didn't do my job.

"Closed? We're done?" I steady my voice. Eyes turn to me.

"Oh, you didn't tell her yet?" Irina giggles and rolls her eyes.

Edward smiles at me and beckons me over. Obviously counting on me to save him from her clutches.

I step forward.

"I'm out of champagne," Irina pouts toward her glass.

"There's more inside," I say.

She rolls her eyes and walks past.

"Thank you for saving me," he pulls me to him once we're alone. "It's becoming

increasingly hard to keep her at bay without tossing her off the roof." He punctuates his joke with a kiss to my temple.

I start to push away, refusing to let myself enjoy it. I need to tell him how thoroughly I've fucked up.

He may not be married and I may not be the other woman but I've most likely just cost him everything.

Before I can form the words, glass shatters in a small explosion near our feet.

My legs are splattered in champagne. The broken pieces of a bottle swirl around our feet. Foam glugs from the broken neck like a thick, white tongue.

"What the Hell, Irina?" Edward glares at her.

I looked up to see him just as soaked.

"Toss me off the roof?" Irina fumes and begins to march away. "Don't think I'll be around when you get tired of screwing the help."

Edward starts after her to, I assume, confront her.

"Wait." I stop him. He turns and looks at me. Surprised.

"I need to leave." Liquid has already soaked through my shoes. My feet feel slippery, sticky.

Brow knitted, he returns with me to the ballroom. Irina is there. Livid.

There are so many things I want to say to her. Things I want to do. Things like punch her right in her Mary Poppins' bags.

Instead, I slide right by her and grab a final glass from the tower. Liquid courage.

Edward stops beside me. "Are you okay, Bella? You're not acting like yourself."

Too true.

Until now.

Irina appears. "You know, Bella, it's pathetic-"

Her words are cut off when I suddenly toss the remainder of my drink in her face. All eyes on us.

"Let's go," Edward says through clenched teeth.

Well, there now. I have embarrassed him. Nicely done, Bella. Jeopardized an entire company, his career, and embarrassed him in a single evening. Stellar job.

By the time I return the empty glass to the table, Irina has found her bearings. She grabs a full glass and starts to toss it at me. Everything is a blur, but it seems Edward knocks her hand away as I duck to avoid it and irony descends in full force. My slippery feet give just enough that, instead of avoiding the splash of a one glass, I bump the tower and everything rains down on us.

Covered. Soaked. To the bone.

Humiliation. Shock. Regret.

"I'm so sorry," I look up at him.

Champagne runs in rivulets down his face. "It's okay. We just need to go."

But that's just it. There is no 'we'.

There is him and me and someone who doesn't exist. Someone who does his bidding and gets drinks. Someone that nobody takes seriously enough to read a report. This mouse that I've become. This mouse that roars at night.

I'm the other woman in my own relationship.

"I... I can't do this. I can't be with you. You don't really want me and I've jeopardized everything you've worked for." My voice shakes as nerves and cool liquid wrack my body. "I'll get a ride from Jasper and pack up. I quit."

He tries to hold my arm but I snatch it away.

"I won't always chase you, Bella."

You won't have to. This is different. This is leaving for you, not me.

The ride is quiet. Jasper pulls up to door.



In the room, pale petals are strewn about. A bouquet of mixed color roses sits on the dresser.

A single word written on the card: Everything.

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A/N: Next Update: 2:00amCST

(The 2:00 is the final update for today)

# Chapter 67 Day 380 2:00am

Day of Employment: 372..381....maybe 495...something. They all run together.

2:00am

Champagne: I'm covered in it.

Petals: Litter my entire room.

Balcony door: Open.

Room: Effing Freezing.

Nipples: Probably hard enough to puncture this silk camisole.

My heart: Who the Hell knows at this point?

The curtains flutter open. It's not the breeze. It's him. He steps into the room, watching his own feet move. He barely resembles the man who makes grown men cry, who barter lives and livelihoods like wares at a flea market, who I've fantasized about for over a year.

His hair is slick and dark and drips champagne. A single, thick lock escapes, flipping forward as he rakes his fingers through it. His gaze never leaves the floor.

"Just tell me why." His whispers, barely audible over the street below.

Every instinct in me screams to run to him, to wrap my hands around him, lose myself in his touch...in him.

But, I would do just that. Lose myself.

It's all been make-believe.

"You don't know me," I say as softly as I can, as if for the first time I consider that I need to be soft, that he might actually be breakable.

His head snaps up and his eyes – oh, God his eyes! – they swim, an unfocused torment swirling in their depths.

"How can you say that? After all... after everything?"

"This isn't me. I'm not what you think I am."

"You are everything I want." He moves to me. I move twice as far away.

"Edward, I'm not who you think I am. I'm a liar. And I can't be what you want."

"Liar?"

"Yes."

"You've lied to me..."

"Yes."

"Lied..."

"Yes! Yes, yes, yes!" I'd like to run my hands through my hair right about now - seems to be the thing to do in these instances - but the ol' hands are otherwise engaged in a rumba-like series of gestures about my head. Or knitting a caftan. "Yes. Lies. All lies."

"What is it you think you've lied to me about?"

"Think?" Frustrating! As if I don't even comprehend when I'm not telling the truth... which may actually be a fair assessment given my conduct of late... but I'm not feeling generous enough to not be mad at him for thinking as much. My hands find their way to my soaked hair this time, threaten to uproot it... until I realize that this maneuver has pulled the sodden camisole tight across my breasts. Nothing left to the imagination. They are practically staring at him. He's not noticed. I may be insulted.

"I don't 'think' I've... never mind." Like weights, my hands drop.

"These are lies." I point to the bland clothes I'd been packing until I heard him at the door. He'd gone straight to the balcony. I suppose he was giving me space.

"This." I find a broken crescent of a button and hold it between my fingers. "I broke this lying. I don't get aggressive in bed." He doesn't hide his surprise at my words.

"But, I've pretended to be the sort of person who will hold my tongue. Who will follow, and take orders, and keep her opinions to herself, and play nice - far nicer than the people we're dealing with deserve. I've made it so I can't be taken seriously.

"That isn't lying," he says. "That is deception. An attempt to deceive."

"They are practically synonymous."

"For someone so together and determined, you certainly are being obtuse." He rests against the wall. "Bella, that is the only thing you thing you didn't do perfectly. You didn't deceive me."

He moves. Just a step. Then turns only his eyes in my direction. "Considering that I've been nothing but forthright about my intentions, my affections... at the very least, you might trouble yourself to explain your decision."

"Explain... my... decision," I say, each word slower than the one before. His agitation grows exponentially with each syllable. He's closer now. I don't know when he moved.

He searches my face for something. It's not there.

"You know... you must know how I feel about you." His words barely carry.

I nod. Yes. Yes, I know. I know how he feels because it's in every touch, in every look, in each breath and moment together and ache when apart. I know it. I know it because whatever I feel leave him, come from him, it parts me in the same way or more.

"Answer. Me."

There's a broken thread in the comforter. Just a few pulled stitches, a tiny fray at the end. That's my focus.

This is so much more than I was prepared for. I just wanted him to notice me. I want it. I want it all. But I've made him fall in love with someone else. Made him want someone else.

"Everything about me is a façade," I begin and he starts to say something but, as it seems there's little point in pretending any longer, I talk right over the top of him.

"I don't take orders, I give them. I never even brewed coffee before this trip. My hair is curly. My clothes are colorful. I've been neglecting the things I need to do for myself - the things I need to do to improve my life - for this trip. Contrary-" I laugh dryly at my word choice; he's rubbed off on me. "Despite what it seems, I don't shove men around or rip their clothes or..."

I stop again. Straighten. Deep breath.

"None of that really matters." I stand firm. "What matters is today, when I needed to be me, when you were on the verge of closing a big deal and making an even bigger mistake, I played my role. I sat quietly by some flowers. Earlier, I didn't insist that you speak with me before we got there. I played my role and now you are going to get hurt because I was so busy pretending to be this person I'm not that I couldn't even step up."

"You think I've misjudged this." He finally pushes wet hair out of his eyes.

"You've misjudged their practices. I've misled you about me."

"So, this is what you think," he says.

What I think is that I'm crying now. The room is blurry and my cheeks are wet. "Please know... you are the last person," I choke out, then sniff in a wholly unappealing way. "You're the last person I would have wanted to hurt."

He's quiet for a moment. I'm still fixated on the now very fuzzy thread.

"Why is that?"

He's going to make me say it, label it. I knew since he stepped into the room. I knew since he first said it. I dared to hope differently, but it is going to happen. Cullen always closes.

My words are less than whispers: "I love you."

He kisses me. Fierce and free. I rejoice in it. Memorize it.

Possessive and promise. Revel in it. And break it.

He looks unbelievably happy. Like there really is a tree and lights and that train set he always wanted but never got. Like someone knew what he wanted, exactly what he wanted, and gave it to him.

Then, they took it away.

"Edward," I say. "You don't love me."

He shakes his head, laughs out relief, and pulls me in. I'm greedy; I take this last hug.

"Don't attempt to tell me how I feel." His hands run along my arms, warming me.

"You care about a lie. I'm a lie."

Pulling back, he runs a hand through my wet hair. Then steps away. Business mode.

"Ms. Swan, it's time for your review."

"Um, Edw- Sir, I tendered my resignation."

"Fine. Exit interview. Suit yourself." He waves a hand toward the bed and I sit in spite of myself.

"As I was saying, Ms. Swan, we need to discuss the matter of your employment."

"Yes, that is what you said." And welcome to the weirdest break-up ever for a couple that never actually was.

Exaggerating each move slightly, he begins to pace the room with his hands behind his back.

"You did not apply for the PA position, correct?" Edward asks and I nod, taken aback by this question, but then I tell myself that he would probably do a check on any new assistant.

"Your primary reason for leaving?"

"Inability to perform my job effectively." I fidget. He continues to pace.  
"Also...impact on my personal life."

"Impacted - adversely or positively?"

"Um...just impacted. I have too many obligations... I don't have room fo-"

He cuts me off. "Were you given a poor performance review by your supervisor?"

"Well, no."

"Wouldn't your supervisor be the one to determine whether or not your job was performed satisfactorily?" He stops in front of me, eyes bearing down, hands still behind his back.

I do my best to level my puffy eyes at his from my place on the mattress. "Failing to prevent a problem by sitting idly by is the same as creating the problem. I am guilty by omission."

"You put a great deal of stock in your influence," he resumes his movements, slower this time. "Do you think so little of your supervisor? That he is incompetent at evaluating information? Unable to take precautionary measures?"

"That he doesn't know exactly what his assistant is working on at all times?"

"No!" This is not what I meant at all. Does he mean...? Could he have...? "Did you alter the contract last night?"

He pivots and looks over his shoulder. "I'm not at liberty to discuss these matters with non-employees."

Oh, fine. Play that way. My arms fold across my chest.

"Did you receive a raise in the past year?"

"No."

"'No' you say. But, you seem to have had an outside source of income," he says, and touches his chin.

I feel my head pull back. I'm not sure where he's going here.

"During your time with us, would you say that you were a dedicated employee?"

I nod. He must not conduct very many exit interviews.

"Consider your answer carefully, Ms. Swan."

"Edward, I don't want to play this game anymore." I start to stand. He stops short

in front of me.

"Fair enough," he says. "No games." I start to stand again , but now he's directly in front of me.

"I know you. Don't tell me I don't." Serious. He looks dead serious.

"Your name is Isabella Marie Swan. You attended UW for undergrad and had a 3.98 GPA. You retook Chemistry only to improve your grade. You've worked for our company for-" Edward looks at his watch, pauses for effect - "380 days. You took your current position as a favor to your supervisor, Rosalie, who is also the only person whom you've told of your return to school." He puts his hands in his pockets and leans back on the dresser. I think I'm still blinking.

"You have a Pierce scholarship and will graduate with a JD next spring. You love movie theater popcorn, but hate microwave. You like Pepsi, prefer Coke, and never, ever RC. Your favorite sweater is electric blue; you wear it at least once every two weeks in cool weather. Since the day you started, there's been a woefully under-watered cactus on your desk. You've won approximately \$1822 in PA betting pools. It appears you purchased taupe suede pumps with the latest winnings. You wore them for the first time on the day you came to my office, the day you took this job, the day we officially met."

...

A/N: Happy Holidays

This is the final update for today.

Next update: 8:15amCST December 26th



# Chapter 68 Day 381 8:15am

Day of Employment: 381

8:15am

Location: Terminal B, KCI.

Bags: Holding my own.

Cullen: Holding his.

"So, you are capable of carrying your own things." I begin, and pull my suitcase along behind me. "Good to know."

He keeps pace beside me as we near security. "I have no choice in the matter, as I find myself currently without staff." He's closer to business mode today, but his voice, with me anyway, is markedly softer.

"This process could not take any longer. It's as if we're all unwitting participants in a study for inefficiency." He talks to no one in particular while we take off our shoes at the checkpoint. "Procedures implemented solely to instill a feeling of security in paying customers. There are too many reports of items still being smuggled aboard to indicate that any of these measures are effective. Has anything..." He continues to bemoan the sorry state of airport security while our bags are checked. One guard seems about to comment, but sees something in the look Cullen shoots him and thinks better of it.

I've decided I consider him 'Cullen' when we are doing anything remotely work-related.

I've decided that transitioning back to business-as-usual at work may be tricky, but not impossible.

I've decided the only running I'm going to do might be to catch a connecting flight.

I'm the first of the two of us onto the plane. I toss my stuff overhead and he does the same. He spends some bonding time with his phone prior to take off.

As the plane climbs higher, I offer him gum. He smiles and takes it.

"So, how did you know about me?" I try to sound casual. Inside, I'm salivating. "I mean, some of that would be in my HR file, but the pop? The bets?"

He looks to me for a moment, then to the turn-down tray in front of him. "Angela keeps a chart. It's right there in her cubicle for all to see.

"When I pieced together that you were always winning – you, the pretty girl I'd spotted a while back – I became more curious. How would one person consistently win something like that? Luck? Strategy? A system of sorts?" He shifts in his seat, stretching as best anyone his height could in the small space.

"I was curious to know how you knew. I became more aware of you. Where you were. What you were saying. By chance, I caught the ends of comments you'd made a few times. Complaining about popcorn the day a bag was burned in the breakroom, for example. The rest just cropped up when I made a conscious effort to pay attention."

I think about how I gleaned all my tidbits about him. We had similar methods.

"Then," he begins, "one day I realized I wasn't paying attention anymore merely for curiosity's sake. I considered even going ahead and asking you out. I even walked up to you to do it. But I heard you talking about a man you were seeing, so I backed off."

"Really?" Shock is an understatement. He was going to ask me out. On a date. You know, one of those things where guys buy food and pretend to listen in the hope they'll get to see boobies. "You weren't worried about working together?"

"Until this trip – when someone decided sending the most distracting thing possible along with me was a stellar idea – we didn't work closely together."

"What about the fraternization policy?" I try to remember if we even have one. It looks to be a non-issue.

"Do I seem like the sort who would let an arbitrary rule like that matter?" His look is a bit more serious than earlier. "I'll go tell the appropriate people today and they will just have to accept."

I smooth my skirt. I wonder what he considers us, what he labels us. "What will you tell them?"

"We're together. That's all they need to know, if they truly even need to know that."

Suddenly, I recall his comment about me seeing someone.

"By the way, I'm not sure what you heard. I haven't dated in over a year."

He looks uncomfortable. Like he doesn't like discussing other men. 'Yay' for him that for the last year I have embarked upon a self-imposed penis boycott.

"It sounded serious and long-term." He shifts again, clears his throat. "Some guy named Abe."

...

A/N: This is update 1 of 3 today.

Next update: 3:20pmCST

Then 8:00pm

# Chapter 69 Day 381 3:15pm

3:15pm

Clothes: Unpacked. Sorted. Ready for cleaners.

Boxed: Taupe shoes. Receipt included & ready to return.

Roommate: Inquisitive.

Withdrawal: Already.

Different. Home feels different somehow.

Little knick-knacks Alice has had out forever now seem different and new. I've not taken notice in a while. Commonplace.

The driver dropped me off at home a little while ago. Edward had muted his call with our owner and kissed my temple as we'd pulled up.

Unlike the last one, this driver actually helped me with my bags.

Through the windows, I saw Edward tap the front seat once I was inside and they sped away.

On autopilot, everything gets unloaded. Shoes. Toiletries. Cosmetics.

Alice helps put away all the miscellaneous crap we packed.

Tea.

Glue.

Needle and thread.

Duct tape and bailing twine.

"So, tell me again, why did you quit? I thought the idea was to endure this and get a bonus or something," Alice says as she stretches to put Q-tips away.

I dump my hair-clips into their basket. "It was a raise and it's complicated." I cringe as soon as the words are out of my mouth. "Complicated" invites clarifying questions.

Alice is quiet as we continue to unpack. Unusually quiet.

I sort through a stack of papers and tickets and Alice dumps out the contents of the Late Night Emergencies bag. Then, she eyes me.

"Bella, where are they?"

"Hmmm?" I keep sorting.

"The condoms. The pack of condoms I put in there as a joke. You know, since you were going on a trip with Corporal Asshole."

"Major Asshole."

"Whichever." She waves me off. Glares at me. "Oh my God, with him? Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Nude up."

"Fine. Yes," I huff and look skyward. I had every intention of sharing this with her, but at a point of my choosing. This will have to do. "I did. I used them. We used them. We barely left bed yesterday. I'll be soaking in the tub tonight until I am indistinguishable from a shar pei."

It is rare to catch Alice off-guard. I've done nicely.

She gapes at me like a fish. A guppy. "I thought you'd tell me you met someone or that the S.O.B. needed them and you actually gave them to him."

"Or, that maybe after a year of lusting after the man, you'd snapped one night and just had your way with him once." She folds her arms. Indignant. "Once."

I really don't know what to say. I'm about drop the bomb that we are actually together, an item, involved, when my phone rings. It's him.

"Hello?" I hold my finger up to Alice, letting her know I have every intention of full disclosure and that we're not done here.

"Hello."

Pause. *Okay.* Blink. Blink.

"Is everything alright?"

"Yes." He clears his throat. "Everything is in order." You bet your firm, beautiful ass it is; I had everything set up.

I try to think of why he would be calling me already. There seems to be only one conclusion. I smile at Alice in apology and excuse myself.

"Edward, I miss you."

I can practically hear his smile. "Good."

And whatever felt like it was stretched thin, like it might've broken when he pulled away in the car, is back. Everything feels warm and welcome and home again. I sit and play with one of Alice's throw pillows while he and I talk about everything and nothing.

...

A/N: Next update: 8:10pmCST

Twii-Crazy is posting parts of an interview along with these posts today [http: // twi-crazi \(dot\) blogspot \(dot\) com/](http://twi-crazi(dot)blogspot(dot)com/)

For those who asked, "Abe" in the last update refers to Mr. Lincoln for the three dreams she's had about him. :)

## Chapter 70 Day 381 8:10pm

8:10pm

"Bella! Can you get the door? That should be my pizza." Alice is painting her toes as she always seems to be whenever her food is delivered. I think she may have a delivery driver phobia.

Grumbling, I point out to her that we are a bit too old for pizza this late at night and she is cruel for tempting me so. I scuff my way to the door in fuzzy slippers and sweats. "Coming!"

I'm ready to shove the wad of her cash at the driver when I open the door and suddenly decide that we need to order pizza more often.

"You really eat this?" Edward is standing in his overcoat and holding the box more like one would a football than a pizza pie. He follows me in and makes a face when I open the lid. Then I make a face.

Hawaiian. Not my favorite.

"No, not this kind." I shut the lid. "You can have my share." Actually, please, please do. My grin is salacious.

He hangs his coat in the hall, shoes by the door. We're a "no shoe" house.

He sprawls out on the sofa, arms stretched across the expanse of the back. Freshly showered, hair still wet. Sleeves rolled up. Relaxed and stuffy at once.

Alice, after having waited long enough for a driver to have safely left the premises, shows up.

"Oh, you must be him. I'm Alice, the roommate." She says "him" with a fair amount of disdain, but extends her hand anyway. Edward's eyes flicker to me, but he moves and shakes her hand.

"Nice to meet you Alice. I'm Edward, the 'him'."

The conversation is somewhat stilted while they eat and I contemplate who first thought hot tomato sauce and fruit would taste good together. Perhaps the same

type of person who first looked at a cow's udder and thought "Gee, I am rather thirsty..."

Alice leaves, a bit warmer with Edward, and I make a mental note to thank her for being gracious as I've done very little explaining at this point.

"I know it's getting late," he begins, "but would you like to go for a ride?" *Not if you mean in a car...*

"Do you need to go?" I place my hand on his leg.

"Not particularly. I just..." he says, shifting on the sofa. "I came here to see you. I got used to you being around."

I smile at him and kiss his jawline. He didn't shave this evening.

I breathe him in. He smells like want.

"Bella, I didn't come here with expectations," he whispers near my ear.

He shifts again under my touch. Only then do I realize my hand has drifted to the top of his thigh. Down into heat. He grows.

My head shakes softly.

Run my nose down his throat.

Breath changes. Pulse quickens.

The sofa squeaks under us. Leather and denim and skin.

His hands close around my waist, almost encircle. Held.

His shirt untucks, my fingers run a path in light hairs.

His tongue knows my lips, greets them. Wraps around my tongue and pulls me into him.

"You're a dozen feet from your bedroom B - use it!" Alice yells from down the hall.

We do.



Clothes on the chair. The floor. The foot of the bed.

Two hands entwined. Landing on our sides. Our fingers knot above our heads.

Other hands explore. Visit and remember and trace and learn and memorize.  
Commit.

I touch his hip. Finger pads and grasp behind. He moans and shifts into me.

He likes when I grab his ass.

Lucky, lucky me.

Pull him to me. He rocks, mouths together, his heated head presses into my stomach, then between my legs, then finds inside.

Oh, God, his breath is so harsh. He rocks into me. Squeezes my hand. Pulls me closer. Presses.

My thigh is over his hip now, calf against his cheek.

I feel it flex and tighten and move. And move. And move.

I shift and angle and slide. He's there. Again and again. Hit and meet and press against that spot until I shake. Then scream down his throat. Then shake some more.

Shove him over and take him in all the way. Feel the change. The length. All.

His neck arches, head into the pillow, eyes behind closed lids.

Our hands clasp still near his head. He kisses me and opens his eyes to watch me ride.

Hands on face. Then neck.

Nails down his chest. Light.

I shove my hand under his waist and move more. Faster.

He slams up, meets me. Again. Hits what might be a new place. His.

Rasp and pant and sweat and more. I want more and I want all.

He strains, near roar and I know he's close, we've gotten there. Arrived.

"Yes," I breathe. "In me. I want to feel." I bend near his ear, keep the pace. He paws at me, keeps me close. "It's mine."

I blink away the words. Too much. Is it?

He grabs my face, fingers in my hair, wrists under my chin, practically yanks me in.

"Yes." It's a hiss. And it's in me and mine.

We should shower. We don't. We sleep. Together. Complete.

...

A/N: Next update: 2:47am (short)

Then 8:03am and 12:11pm

Yes, there is a condom.

# Chapter 71 Day 382 2:47am

2:47am

Bed: About half as warm as it was mere moments ago.

"Are you sure you have to go? Your clothes would be okay just this once." I yawn into the pillow that now smells like Edward and pull it close.

The zipper makes a series of quick clicks. "I know you're not suggesting I wear jeans to the office." He sounds both teasing and aghast.

I want to pout and I want him to stay. I'm not proud of either. I may feel needy.

"No, you're right."

"Of course." He is dressed and tucks the blanket around me. "I hardly think waltzing into work in jeans for first time coincides with our goals. We're going for low-key." He kisses me goodbye quickly. "That's what I assured the owner yesterday."

I nod. I wasn't really expecting him to stay. Just a thought. A snugly thought.

Okay, Edward Cullen is not the greatest of snugglers. Shocking, I realize.

Hard to imagine that someone so warm and fuzzy doesn't just snuggle right up like a big ol' baby.

He likes his half of the bed. But, we've held each other until I sleep. When I wake up, he's always holding my hand. Often with feet braided together.

I think that means more.

...

A/N: Next update: 8:03am

# Chapter 72 Day 382 8:03am

Day of Employment: 382

8:03am

Clothes: Favorite electric blue sweater and coordinating skirt.

Hair: Down and untamed.

PA Desk: Empty.

Cactus: Dry. At home on my old desk.

Angela is leaning over my cubicle wall. She wants answers. Explanations. Details.

Rosalie is not much different. She's sitting on the edge of my desk, arms folded, looking rather terse. I was not prepared for her to be so upset about my quitting the PA position.

"I suppose you expect a raise for lasting a week," Rosalie huffs and crosses her arms. She's clearly miffed, but exaggerating and not truly, truly mad.

I continue to arrange my stuff. Stapler by monitor. Pens and highlighters in upper left drawer. "That was the offer you made."

"I think it's amazing that you lasted a week, Bella," Angela says. "Eric came closest, but he never said you'd quit. I almost can't believe the day has come when I get to pay-out the special pot."

I'd almost forgotten about the side bet for a PA who left without tears.

"Um, I didn't earn that," I say over the rapidly-forming lump in my throat. I choke it back. There is no way this is going to show at work.

Both are silent for a moment. Rosalie unfolds her arms and places a hand on mine. "Really? I didn't mean to give you a hard time...I just thought you got fed up with him jerking you around."

"I'm fine. It was just an emotional moment when I gave up." I smile quickly at

them both and focus back on putting things away. "Just trying to be honest."

I'd like a raise. I'm almost relieved that I didn't go the month and wind up being offered a promotion. "I did still earn the raise though," I say and look pointedly at Rosalie. *Pay up. I owned that position.*

And a few others.

"Yes, fine. I suppose you did," she huffs. Her reaction is off somehow. I look at her with what I assume is apparent confusion.

She rolls her eyes slightly. "Nevermind me. I'm just mad that I finally found a PA for myself that I like, and now I'm told that it's more important that Mr. Cullen have an assistant immediately. So, I'm without again."

"You can always take back what's left of them when Cullen fires them." Angela says, moving back to her desk to gather the winnings from the traditional bet. I've technically won since no one guessed that I would not end up fired.

Rosalie nods thoughtfully and stands to leave. Then, she sits back against my desk with a thud.

"Rosalie," Cullen's voice fills the floor. I feel my eyes go wide.

"Good morning," Rosalie nearly covers her surprise. "I take it your trip went well."

"Yes," he says dismissively. "Ms. Swan, I'll see you in the breakroom at noon."

Turning, I nearly beam when I see him standing there, imposing and somewhat larger-than-life. His face alters ever so slightly, a hint of smile cracks at the corners. He taps the top of the cubicle wall twice and leaves.

"What was that?" Rosalie asks, her voice higher with each word. Angela has materialized back at my desk. I cannot hear a single keyboard click.

I shrug and smile. It's best to just get things out in the open. Less time expended on speculation.

"That?" I move to watch him walk away. I watch him because I can and want to and because he's beautiful in ways that I'm just discovering even after a year of studying him for other reasons. "That was my boyfriend."

Rosalie looks surprisingly self-satisfied.

Angela's mouth drops as well as the envelope of cash.

I bend and pick it up. They both give me their own versions of a you-are-so-telling-me-everything-later-in-private look.

The envelope quietly finds its way to Eric's desk.

....

A/N: Next update: 12:03pm CST

# Chapter 73 Day 382 12:03pm

12:03pm

Location: Breakroom.

Lunch: Cobb salad. Chicken and rice soup. Cut fruit (which I plan to share.)

Angela: Bemused. Trying to see Cullen as human.

Eric: Confused. But \$347 richer.

Rosalie: Pleased. She had a plan.

New PA: Big as a bear.

Cullen: Late.

When he rounds the corner, the atmosphere changes. The breakroom is unusually quiet; people move softly, trying to hear. Understand.

His suit and starched shirt also looks very incongruous among the plastic chairs and microwave dinners.

"You're late," I say, and kick an empty chair out from under the table for him. "You should endeavor to perform future lunch meetings more promptly."

Smiling, he shakes his head, then opens up what looks to be a freshly delivered, hot sandwich.

"Did you have trouble finding me? Already lose your edge tracking my moves?" I tease.

"Oh, yes." He snorts. "I stalk you."

"I stalk you right back."

We begin eating. After a moment, I nudge the fruit toward him.

"You are nothing if not persistent." He looks from the cup to me.

"It's up to you," I sing-song.

"I'll have you know there is probably less pineapple at your average luau than in my system at this moment." His voice is flat, the straight man to our comedic duo.

I smile victoriously. It's still fun to fluster, to influence him.

I move onto soup just as a hulking form appears near our table. "The report from Jacobs is on your desk, Sir."

Edward swallows but doesn't turn. "Was I not clear to bring it to me as soon as it arrives?"

"Yes, Sir," barks the large man. "You were at your desk when you said that, so I took it to your desk."

"I am not my desk. It does me no good on my desk." He sets his sandwich down and turns to face his new PA.

"You also gave the distinct impression that you did not wish to be disturbed at lunch." He looks to me quickly.

"Mr. McCarty, Ms. Swan," Cullen introduces us without elaboration.

"Pleased to me you," I say taking the hand he's offered. I note that he has a daunting presence and demeanor. This may work.

"You'll learn soon enough to do what he says, when he says it, even if it doesn't make sense." I offer my tried-and-true advice.

Cullen returns to his sandwich.

"Thank you," McCarty says genuinely. "Logic is a hard thing to abandon." With that, he's gone.

"Insolent little..." Cullen grumbles.

"Not working out already?" That's too bad. McCarty seemed feisty.

"Perhaps I shouldn't elaborate. It would give you an unfair advantage in the latest betting pool."



"I'm already excluded. Insider information."

"Oh, however will you support your shoe habit?"

"You like my shoes?" I smile up at him and brush my pump against his calf discreetly.

He swallows, "I believe you are well aware how I appreciate your shoes." He takes another bite to hide his grin.

I flush, recalling post ballet hijinx. A moment or two on Christmas...

and a scenario involving a red pair I may just have the nerve to try out tonight. Probably.

~The End~

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A/N: Please excuse long author's note.

That's all she wrote. She would be me.

I hope that this calm, Happy Ending is satisfying to everyone who joined in this crazy ride.

It has been made abundantly clear to me that Christmas Day would be an outtake in which many are interested. I will write one, it will take me a bit as there would be a shifting dynamic in their encounters and a whole box of condoms to deal with. Please alert me if interested.

Tentative outtake title: Trojan Hoarse: One Christmas, one box, & how I lost my voice

I've been asked about a sequel. I see potential in that. If I can find a worthy plot devise to help give the urgency/energy I think is necessary to make this format work, I'll do just that.

Also, I keep hearing EPOV rumblings. It would be very, very different in tone, etc. Just saying. No promises. Maybe I could be convinced.

Whatever words I choose to write here will fall short of expressing what this experience has been for me. It has been amazing. Thank you all.

If you've sent me a message and I've not responded, please know it has not been intentional. My inbox is a scary, scary place at the moment.

Thank you to those who actively recommended this piece to others, to those who showed their enthusiasm through setting alarms, tweets, blog entries. This is surely not an all-inclusive list:

Twi-Fic Promotions

Twific Pimps

Random Acts of Rob

FanFicaholics Anonymous

TwiFFaddicts

Special thanks to those who used some of their precious time to produce banners, pics, and vids. If I miss you in this list, it is not intentional:

Melee03 (my dear friend as well and plot muse)

FerlaV

Lolypop82

Hermione Cullen Fanfic

Melbie Toast

Rob Rator

Don't Live in Regret

My beta, Heather Bella, who lost perhaps more sleep that I during this run.

There is a blog in the works where I will put all the amazing things I've been sent.

Again, thank you. It has been the experience of a lifetime. I can't expect lightening

to strike twice, but I would love it if you'd join me again if/when I write more for these two.

Much Love,

QuantumFizzx

# Outtake Day 1

The Plan - Outtake

Day of Employment: 1

7:55am

Bag: Wallet, picture of best friend & myself, make-up, notepad, lunch, hairclip.

Clothes: Red wrap dress, red pumps.

Hair: I don't even want to talk about it.

I left twenty minutes early today. That should've been plenty of time for normal traffic and most emergency circumstances.

But no.

The lot was scraped down to glare ice. The windshield would not defrost. Time out in the wind has taken a toll on my hair; it's now inexplicable. Everyone drove too fast or too slow. Hit every light. Encountered a school bus route that I didn't know about during my route test run yesterday.

I should learn not to even bother with being prepared.

The best laid plans oft go awry. Oft? What the fuck is 'oft' all about? Too much going on to finish the entire word?

That's all just a nice of way saying one is screwed regardless.

Life's a bitch and she has several sisters.

Now, I'm riding the elevator while it stops on nearly every floor. People file in and out.

One person gets on and rides it up one whole level. I suppress a scream.

Someone behind me huffs irritably. I keep my eyes trained on the numbers. Climb. Stop.

We're over capacity at one point, I'm certain of it. I feel my backside get pressed into the person behind me.

"Sorry," I mutter.

"Not your fault." A deep voice. A soft reply. The flesh behind my ear tingles. Instinct, for reasons I don't want to examine, tells me to fold into the man behind me.

Then, I realize that this man is probably getting a face full of my frizzy hair. Mortifying.

The doors open for my floor and I bolt, never looking back.

10:11am

"This is the breakroom." Angela states the obvious. I don't mind. It's comforting.

"The coffee is on the honor system. There is usually a fundraiser for someone's school children if you want snacks, otherwise the vending machines are here to price gouge you." Angela goes on explaining and tosses some change in the collection jar next to the coffee pot.

"The refrigerators are cleaned out every Monday," she says, and begins to pour a coffee from one of the pots. "You can get some really nice st-"

A blonde woman with a severe look barrels through the room toward where we stand. The crowd parts like the Red Sea, clearing a path for her, but conversation continues without pause. Angela stands to the side, holding her coffee pot aloft and smiling cryptically at me. I'm sure I look confused.

The blonde reaches to a pot with a masking tape ring on the handle, pours a cup swiftly with one hand while adding what looks to be special creamer and sweetener. She turns, lips pursing tightly, and leaves the room.

"Dammit!" The blonde woman switches the cup to her other hand and sucks her now free - and probably scalded - hand into her mouth, then shakes it off, all the while walking swiftly away.

My hands float out, a silent request for explanation.

Angela, smiling, resumes pouring her coffee. "That's Mr. Cullen's assistant." She

pours in enough sugar to trigger early onset diabetes and leans back on the counter. "Well, for now."

"Oh, she's been having trouble?" That explains why she seemed so nervous, why everyone got out of her way.

"Heck no. She's doing well. Almost a month. She may set a record."

I decide I need to stay far, far away from this Cullen person.

2:58pm

"Pay up." A thin, young man leans over Angela's cubicle wall with his palm up.

"Hold your horses there." Angela is chewing on a marker and looking over a colorful chart. "Yep, it's you." She looks up at the guy and then hands him an envelope from her desk.

I do my best to acclimate myself to this new computer program, but their exchange has definitely piqued my interest.

"Sweet!" He fist pumps and then looks back at me rather shamefacedly. "Oh, you must be Bella. I'm Eric Riley." He extends his hand and I shake it. "You also must think I'm terribly morbid, benefitting from the misfortune of others."

My mouth opens, but I don't really even know what to say. Out of the loop here.

Angela rolls closer to me and whispers conspiratorially. "We have a betting pool for how long Cullen's assistants last."

My head pulls back. That is rather cold-hearted. Eric fans through several larger bills.

Cold-hearted...and profitable. I have loans to pay.

"How does this work?" I ask, but suddenly everyone seems to have heard some cue that I've missed. They straighten and begin a flutter of activity.

Self-preservation instincts are not kicking in; I stand up to see what's going on. I imagine that I stick out like a sore, red thumb over the tops of everyone else.

That's when I see him.

Whoever he is.

Except, I know.

I just know.

Oh my good God.

There are no words. Beautiful.

Ineffable.

He's a few feet from a set of large, dark wooden doors in the far corner. The desk outside that office is empty. He moves smoothly past it and scans the room.

His eyes fall on me. I'm incapable of movement under his gaze. Held. Matador. Bull.

He straightens his collar, never falters in his long strides. Looks away from me.

And then he's gone.

Everyone resumes their normal lives and conversations and I am left standing still and dumbstruck while the world happens around me.

## **EDWARD'S POV**

7:58am

There are definite reasons I arrive at work before everyone else and this little sojourn into metal box Hell is a prime example.

*Marketing trials are 85% positive for the new labeling designs. If we...*

Smashed into the far corner of an elevator - and forced to interact and *smell* people with whom I would cheerfully go to my grave never having encountered - is not a great start to the day.

*Only 72% for the teen target market. There has to be a way to re-package...*

*Is that my phone? No.*

But, finding that my assistant had failed to bind the reports and distribute them yesterday was no way to start either.

*That Nebraska printing company's bid was so far below everyone else's. Need to verify that they have the specs right.*

*That was definitely my phone this...*

"Good morning, Mr. Cullen."

I nod once. "Morning." *Whoever you are.*

I grab my phone and scroll through items while more people load and shift around like tiles in a child's puzzle game.

*What would improve the percentages?*

*Conference at 4:00 today.*

*Dinner meeting at 6:30 with the Germans.*

*Need the counter bids for-*

Everyone shifts and I go flush against the back wall. Then, they shift again, no doubt allowing yet another person onto the elevator. If we don't all plunge to the sweet release of our deaths it will be a certified miracle.

Grand. The person now in front of me is nearly on top of me.

*What the fuck?*

*Is that?*

Yes, it is.

That is someone's ass pressed up against my dick.

Round, pliant, warm.

She's brunette and comes up to my chin. That's about all there is to say. She's all wavy, long tresses and a red dress of the simple elegant variety. I don't seem to recognize her. I also can't see her face. That doesn't really mean anything as I don't



really dedicate much grey matter to employees of the other businesses that share this building.

I might've willfully opted to reserve a few brain cells for this particular ass though.

"Sorry." I barely hear her voice. As the elevator starts its climb, her hand braces against my thigh and I doubt she even realizes she's done so.

"Not your fault." I hear my own voice like that of a stranger.

Now, I'm at a loss as to why I would say that, why I would try to make her comfortable. It most assuredly is her fault. She's groping me and not respecting personal space. Crowded or not, there are some things one simply does not do.

One does not rub against strangers in elevators or grab onto legs in close proximity to dicks that have been in recent contact with lovely asses.

*Lovely...*

I shake my head and clear this train of thought utilizing my phone as a suitable distraction while scanning and forwarding emails.

*Percentages are-*

*Market tria-*

It's hopeless. I can't think clearly with her pressed against me.

And it pisses me off.

The elevator ride with her can't be over fast enough. My floor is next and it is still taking far too long.

I resolve to never take the elevator again so that I can avoid this distracting person henceforth.

The doors open and I make to move around her...but I can't. I can't move around her because she is already gone and taken her pretty ass and what I now see are red heels along with her, passing through the doors onto my floor and into our open office area.

Well, this is terribly inconvenient.

The doors close and we're up another two floors before it registers that I've failed to exit.

2:58pm

*Letterhead currently says "Limited Liability Corporation" not "Company." No such thing. Fix that.*

*KC company is ripe for merger or buyout.*

*Conference call in one hour.*

*Dinner reservations confir-*

That last thing I need to see when I leave my office is the first thing – the only thing – I manage to see.

She's standing up among the cubicles. Volumes of hair and her red dress practically a bullseye in my line of vision. Charts and banners and everything fade away, heeding to the contrast of porcelain skin against auburn waves. The whole room is mere concentric circles leading toward her face.

And, of course, even from this distance I can tell she's rather pretty. The fact that she's not a hag with a comely figure is par for the day.

She's probably ugly on the inside. I'll cling to that hope.

*Crap. What was I leaving my office for?* I keep walking steadily, not letting the thoughts tripping my mind find their way to my feet.

I realize I'm still looking at her as I begin to turn down the hall. I blink away. Alright. The sooner I ferret out her flaws and irritating habits, the sooner I can get back on task.

# Chptr 75 Day 660 5:07pm OuttakeSnapshot

I wrote this 'moment' and could not think of anything more to go with it. So, I guess it's a snippet of their lives at this point.

I am aware that it is short - I hope that its brevity is not a source of irritation. A spectacularly unscientific poll on Facebook said that people would not mind it as is.

So, here's what Planella and Pineapple/Planward are up to today:

...

...

Day 660

5:07pm

In the great, green room

there is a telephone and red platforms

and a picture of...

...his stepmom.

Um, check that shit.

His effing stepmother. Right there. On the dresser.

The dresser in which I still do not have a drawer.

Next to the bathroom in which I have only a travel toothbrush.

I've never met her, but she is ever-present in our relationship.

Overseeing. Supervising.

Silently critiquing with her flat eyes.

Did you like the mount-up I did on your boy last night?

Yes, yes. I've been stretching. Trying to keep limber.

Today is our anniversary. Of what I'm not sure.

At least, Edward says it is.

I recall no extraordinarily special event happening on the 30th of any of the months we've been together.

First time we went on an actual date: January 7th.

Mutually agreed we are a couple: January 9th

First sleepover - his place: January 12th

First sleepover - my place: January 13th

Said "I Love You" genuinely and without reservation or reference to 'probably' or other qualifier? February 4th

Observed the age-old ritual of rubbing our happiness in the face of those less fortunate? February 14th

But, 'anniversary' with Edward always translates to some variant of 'wall sex' so...well...who am I to quibble with trivial matters such as accuracy and facts?

We have been enjoying a little celebratory SOS - Shoes On Sex.

They say practice makes perfect, but that doesn't seem to apply. If so, I'd have a doctorate. An FMP PhD.

It isn't Valentine's Day, but that doesn't stop my heels from piercing Edward's heart.

If by 'heart,' one means 'dick.'

"Are you prepping me for some sort of genital piercing? At least let's discuss that sort of thing first."

"Do you mean an apadravya?" I try not to snort at the idea of Edward with such an

ornamentation.

"Apadravya? Any intent to plunge a steel rod through...there...best begin with 'Abracadabra.'" He exhales sharply, cupping himself like a baby bird fallen from the nest, and shudders. "Better yet, just go straight for 'Avada Kedvara."

This isn't anything I really want, but I can't help myself when he's like this.

"I hear it's very pleasurable," I say as innocently as possible, running two fingers over the sheet in slow, swirly patterns. His eyes follow their trek.

"It's done in one quick session when they pierce the mea-"

"Bella, I swear to God, if you finish that sentence, we are never having intercourse again."

Oh, dear. Quick onset laryngitis.

# Outtake Day 13 & 14

A/N: This is an outtake that I donated to Fandom for LLS recently. Hope you enjoy it

Thank you all for all the lovely things you've had to say about The Plan over this past year.

...

The Plan - Outtake

Day of Employment: 13

6:35pm

Dinner: Being eaten on sofa

Roommate: Inquisitor, it seems

"So," I say, sounding too deliberately casual to my own ears, "there's this guy I keep seeing at work-"

"A guy? What guy? You never mentioned a guy." Alice stops mid-carrot bite. "You're seeing a guy at work?"

"I *see* him at work. Not 'seeing' him." My fork runs through the rice. I like Alice's idea better.

I think.

"Aren't there a lot of guys on your floor?" Alice talks around a mouthful of food. Somehow, she's still cute. I would look like a cow with a cud.

"Not like...not like him. They are guys. He's a, well..." I hadn't really thought about this before. Guys wear ball caps. Sometimes backwards. This is cannot picture. Guys swill beer and slap buds on the back and often can be observed being pleasant and have even been known to smile. I've never seen this man smile. "He's a man."

"Man." Alice hums the word.

Silence. I don't know why I brought this up. Why I couldn't contain it.

"I don't work with him." We interrupt this message to Thank God. "He's got a corner office and a commanding presence and wears suits so very, very well."

Alice quirks an eyebrow.

Another bite. Alice squirms in her seat. "Go on. What makes this one so special?"

I shrug. "He's not special. He's an asshole."

"Oh, yeah. Assholes aren't special, Bella. Assholes are your specialty."

I chuck a snow pea at her. But it's true.

She lobs it back to me.

"Probably not my Prince Charming then, you think?" I smile.

"You know, Bella, you kiss enough frogs you end up with HPV."

"Pretty sure that's just toads and warts."

...

Day of Employment 14

10:30am

Dress: Same red as my first day. Thus begins the repeat cycle.

Desk: Clutter-free

Cactus: Withering away

"Already?" I am in shock. I didn't even get to place a bet on this last one.

"You snooze, you lose," Eric says, fanning himself with the small handful of bills and looking disturbing akin to a cotillion darling.

Across the floor, a sniffly blonde packs up her belongings from the desk outside Edward Cullen's closed office door. Not her desk. The desk. No one has it long enough to lay claim.

"I wasn't 'snoozing.' I was discussing the P&L with Rosalie."

Eric remains unruffled. "Snooze, schmooze. Same diff. All I know is I'm gonna be buying some new shoes and you're still gonna be wearing those BOGOs." He looks askance at my feet.

Well, perhaps he's always a tad ruffly.

But, I note my shoes definitely are of the sensible heel variety.

I smooth my skirt and tuck my feet under my desk.

...

1:03pm

"Whoa." Eric nudges Angela. "Somebody skipped lunch." He points toward me.

She looks down. "Ooo, nice shoes. You went shopping? Without me?" She feigns hurt.

Spinning a quarter turn in my chair, I allow myself a moment to admire my shiny, distinctly non-sensible shoes, then I head to give Rosalie the reports before her meeting.

Unfortunately, she is not in her office.

She's also not to be found in the supply room, copy room, or bathroom. By the time my search reaches our deserted break room, I regret not breaking in the new shoes before wearing them at work.

I take a moment to lean over a table and take the weight off my feet. Just a second. Please. Ugh. A moment of relief, that's all I'm asking.

I'm sure I look a sight. My face on the cool table and my ass up in the air, feet swinging in the wind.

*Thunk.*



One heel slips to the floor.

My toes fumble around until I feel the leather, twist into it, and oh-so-carefully lift it behind me like a crane until I can reach back and put it on again.

I stretch and grunt and twist and probably channel all the grace of Cloris Leachman performing Swan Lake.

Well, that was certainly relaxing.

Grabbing the reports, I leave just in time to see Edward Cullen round the corner, gorgeous jaw clenched.

All the air squeezes from my lungs.

He doesn't spare me a glance.

Whew. A few moments earlier and that would've been really embarrassing.

...

4:45pm

Email: Empty

Spreadsheets: Done

Mind: Preoccupied. To say the least.

Edward Cullen.

His door stares back at me.

I watched him go there about five minutes ago.

Or twenty.

Navy suit, sky blue tie.

Outline of his frame burned into my retinas.

"...Bella? You okay?" Angela peers over her cubicle wall.

"Hmm? Oh...oh, yes. Yes, I'm fine." Shake the cobwebs from my head. I need to do the same for other parts of me. "Long day."

"They all are," Angela says, and shuts down. "I'm heading out after I run over to HR with the picture that PA left today."

"She was in a hurry to get outta here, huh?"

"More likely, to get away from Cullen," she laughs. On the betting pool chart, she makes a winning mark for the day under Eric's name. "Be ready tomorrow, Bella. Eric is taking us to the cleaners."

She's right. Eric is winning all the time. He must have a system.

Or - I think back to his comment about my shoes, my whereabouts, everyone's happenings - he's just observant as Hell.

Hell, I can be observant.

I look at the closed, hardwood door.

There are worse things to look at.

Oh, I'll be ready tomorrow.

Thinking about Cullen, I'm ready now.

Angela leaves.

The office sounds fade away.

No clicks. No buzzes. No chatter.

Nothing but me and that unforgiving door.

Clearly, I've been reading far, far too many trashy romances - because I cannot help myself. I imagine it opening.

Cullen would emerge. Starched white shirt. Crisp.

Jacket over his arm. Hair...doing whatever the fuck it is that it does.

I'd be at my desk.

Fans blowing my hair back. No. No, that's a bit much. Scratch the fan.

I'd be at my desk. Pretending to work.

Pretending not to hear him approach.

"Miss...Swan, isn't it?" His voice spills over my shoulder, warm like coffee along my neck.

I shiver at the thought alone.

I spin, look up at him through my lashes. Suppress the urge to say I'll be whoever he wants me to be.

"Yes. Mr. Cullen, is it?" As if I don't know.

He looks down at me. Tongue darts. Lips glisten.

"I'm told you handle..." Steps so close I can feel the heat of him. "...spread..." Hand runs along my chair. "...sheets."

"Yes, I do." I cross my arms, push my breast together. Subtle.

Or maybe not. "Anything you want me to handle, you can put in my box."

"I need to whip it out by five."

"Well, that'll be hard." My eyes dart to his zipper. "I'll need it on my desk now."

I want to assume an entry-level position.

He looks around the empty office and then to me. Like a predatory cat, he makes a final move forward, leans around my body, breathes into my hair, and his white linen arm sweeps the papers from my desk.

His hand goes under my hair, fingers dig into my neck, bends me, bows my back. I crush into him, part my lips and breathe in the scent of him. He leans in, searches my face, eyes to lips to neck, then he's on me. Covers my mouth with his. Again. I'm open and swallowed up.

Underneath his tongue is smooth and sweet.

My ankle wraps around his leg and he lifts me against him before pushing me down against the desk that I shall henceforth never be able to look at again without thoughts of Edward Cullen.

Hands everywhere. I feel him at my ribs.

I fumble with his buttons, he tears mine free.

I touch his face. He wraps my legs around his waist, grinds into me. Deep. Hard.

Even through clothes it's better than any of my real sex.

One hand at my throat, thumb under my jaw, lips parted and panting down on me, his fingers tear through my hosiery, slipping-

"Bella?"

Wha-?

"It's after five." Rosalie looks at me questioningly. "Are you having trouble? I haven't overloaded you, have I?"

"I'm fine." Load-free even. Regrettably so.

We both turn to the sound of Cullen's door opening. He looks to Rosalie briefly then goes on his way.

I feel my cheeks burn.

It's no big deal.

One office daydream.

Not like I'm going to let myself get obsessed with him.

I clock out.