Marked Complete

by LyriclKris

Summary

Falling in love is effortless. Falling into a life together is harder. Love is a many splendored thing. Love lifts us up where we belong. But eventually, we all have to come down to reality. When love is a whirlwind, is there such thing as balance? A sequel to Marked.
Chapter 1

A/N: Okay, this is going to be longer than originally intended because I actually found a coherent storyline. (MINA. I see that smirk from here, damn you). I hope you enjoy!

Zafrina Ibori was an incredible woman. Bella was trying hard to keep her mask of professionalism up when, really, she was fangirling inside. When Eric had handed her the interview, she’d been so excited she’d jumped into his arms.

The woman was an incredible artist and philanthropist who’d had a diverse and interesting career. At sixty-three, she was being honored with a lifetime achievement award—an honor which she joked about resenting. “Are they under the impression I’m done? That, at sixty-three, I am incapable of producing my most famous work?”

She was easier to interview than Bella expected; friendly and open as they talked over coffee. If it wasn’t for the recorder glowing green between them, Bella could have believed she was merely out with a friend.

This, being able to meet people like Zafrina, get to know even a small piece of them, was one of the millions of reasons Bella loved her job.

She sighed, glancing through her notes. “Let me see here. I think we’re about done,” she said, trying to keep the pang of disappointment out of her voice. She could have talked to Zafrina forever, but the interview had to end sometime.

Zafrina tilted her head, giving Bella a knowing look. “Oh, really? Aren’t you forgetting a question?”

Bella shuffled through her notes again, hoping that she hadn’t forgotten a recent event. “I’m sure I forgot a lot of questions,” she said with a small laugh, hoping she didn’t sound too nervous. “I’m sure I could write a whole series of books on your life if I got to ask you every question I have. A single article is almost an injustice.”

“Oh, I like you.” Zafrina chuckled and fixed her with a soft smile. “You’re not going to ask about my lovelife? You don’t want to see my tattoos?”

It was, as the current journalistic climate went, a valid question. Zafrina was among the rare artists in the public eye. Beyond that, throughout her life, she’d been linked with a number of high-profile people and celebrities, including one of Hollywood’s most eligible bachelors at the time. Though that particular relationship had ended almost two decades before, Bella knew for a fact Zafrina still got questions about it.

She pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth, considering her words carefully. Her opinions about celebrity culture and what the public thought they deserved from complete strangers—particularly women—were loud and vehement. She wanted to remain composed and professional. “While I would, of course, welcome any personal anecdotes you want to share, I find those kinds of personal questions invasive and rude. Maybe if I was your good friend, your relationships would be some of my business, but we’re not.”

Zafrina sat back in her chair, considering Bella for a long moment before she broke out in a grin. “Stunning, isn’t it? Our obsession with these tattoos. As an artist, it’s my instinct to embrace the beauty of the idea. These tattoos are proof we’ve loved, and under any circumstance, I think the
essence of love is seeing the wonder of another person. Love is the most intensely personal concept—a magical connection with another human being.

“However, our tendency as a society is to make it something crass. Really, what does love mean? Some of us fall in and out of love with the wind. There should be nothing wrong with that, yet those people wear their tattoos like scarlet letters. We, as a society, fall all over ourselves trying to judge the way we love.”

Bella nodded enthusiastically. “And it’s not just limited to the ever-present tattoo-watch. I’m sure you’re aware, I’ve seen countless articles on the jewelry you wear—the possible significance of certain pieces you wear repeatedly. That’s crazy.”

Zafrina threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, yes. I’m very aware.” She leaned forward over the table, cradling her cup of coffee between her hands. “However, the tattoos take precedence. They’re proof positive of love, whatever anyone thinks that means. Do you know, I’ve had people try to lift my shirt, my skirt, looking for my tattoos?”

Bella shook her head. “That’s terrible.”

“Yes. Whenever I was with someone new, that was the one question. Do I have their tattoo? As though the tattoo makes my relationship with that person more valid, important, or real. It’s my life. I assure you, all my relationships are real.”

Zafrina leaned in again, her eyes intent on Bella. “You want the answer to the most asked question I get? Yes, absolutely, I have his tattoo.”

Bella’s heart skipped a beat in spite of herself. As much as she honestly and truly believed Zafrina’s personal life and relationships were none of her business, she was also aware that what the woman had given her was big news. She was talking about her most famous relationship. She’d just given Bella the answer to the question everyone who gave a single damn about celebrities wanted to know, and judging by the mischievous look in her eyes, she knew exactly what she’d done.

She laughed and put her hand over Bella’s. “It’s okay. I’m telling you, because I want to. Most reporters—they want the dirt, the story that sells. The fact I will always be more known for my relationships than my body of work is something I’ve grudgingly accepted. Perhaps I’m getting naive in my old age, but I think you’re honest in your aims. I think you get it. You will never know me. Behind closed doors, I may be the most horrendous person on the planet. I might berate my husband. I might kick my dog. You would never know.

“What you may admire me for is my work. That’s all you know, because I want to. Most reporters—they want the dirt, the story that sells. The fact I will always be more known for my relationships than my body of work is something I’ve grudgingly accepted. Perhaps I’m getting naive in my old age, but I think you’re honest in your aims. I think you get it. You will never know me. Behind closed doors, I may be the most horrendous person on the planet. I might berate my husband. I might kick my dog. You would never know.

“What you may admire me for is my work. That’s all you know, because that’s all you have proof of. I think you understand that, so I don’t mind telling you that yes, I have his tattoo. Which means, yes, my love for him was true, despite the fact that, yes, I broke his heart. You will never know what our relationship was, what he was behind closed doors. It’s easy for us to imagine these celebrities as people without flaws, but that’s not the case. Which isn’t to say he is a horrible person. He very much is not. There’s a reason I loved him, after all. But that reason, love itself, is not magical. The proof of that love is part of me, written on my skin, and I’m not sorry for it. Nor will I apologize for the fact loving him was not enough to promise a happy life.”

“Yes. I understand that, believe me,” Bella said. “I grew up with a mother who didn’t fall in love that often, but it happened a few times. Still, once, she fell in love with an abusive man. And after that, she knew herself well enough to know she wasn’t the type to settle down. Yet, she still fell in love.”
“Imagine that. She’s still capable of love even though she has no interest in permanence. And I’d be willing to bet plenty of people find something wrong in that.”

Bella snorted. “Oh, of course. Though, as it turned out, my mother wasn’t the perfect example of someone who could find love without commitment. She’s been happily married for a long while now.”

“To a person I assume she not only loved, but fit her lifestyle.”

“Exactly.”

Zafrina smiled and nodded. “You know why this is, in my opinion? It is because we get caught up in the magic and mysticism of those tattoos—of love. And what people miss is love is not all you need, it’s also not the most important thing you need. At least, not that kind of love; the kind the tattoos represent. The ‘in love’ kind of love.

“Which isn’t to say love ain’t grand. Oh, the story of, the glory of love.” Zafrina laughed wryly. “It is a beautiful and devastating thing, isn’t it? The up and down. The extreme joy, always coupled with the fact these people—these flawed, perfectly imperfect people—have the power to hurt us in soul-wrenching ways. Love is everything that people say it is. A roller coaster. The highest of highs. The lows so horrid that, for hours, or days, or years, you entertain the thought death just might be preferable.

“Darling, who has time for that?” Zafrina laughed again, this time more boisterous. “I love being in love. I do. It’s fantastic, but it’s also consuming and exhausting. I lose sight of so much else when I’m in love, and I have more important things to do. There’s much more I want to accomplish. Would you like to know another terrible secret of mine?”

“If I said no, you’d know I was lying,” Bella said with a smirk.

“Ha. Yes. Here’s my secret. My husband? The only one of my lovers who I’ve promised to love, honor, and cherish until love parts us? I don’t have his tattoo and he doesn’t have mine.”

Bella blinked, stunned.

Zafrina laughed. “I know. Difficult to conceive of, isn’t it? Oh, I do love him, and he loves me. But it’s this steady, quiet love. Friendship and companionship. It’s true, I don’t get the high, the adrenaline of being in love, but I prefer that. I spread my passion across many things, and I’m no less happy for it. In fact, there is often more peace in my life than there has been when I was madly in love. My marriage is so very happy and warm. Our lives match, and that makes me happier than any one of the tattoos I’ll carry to my grave.”

For a long, quiet handful of moments, neither woman spoke. Bella sipped her lukewarm coffee, processing Zafrina’s words and wisdom. Surely she should have some kind of follow up, but she wasn’t as quick on her feet as she normally would have been.

Zafrina patted her hand. “Well, my dear. You have all my secrets now. Don’t you have to get back to your office?”

“Oh, yes.” Bella cleared her throat, getting her head back in the game. “Listen, I can’t tell you what an honor it’s been to speak with you. I’m honored that you’d be so open and honest. Don’t worry. I’ll keep your privacy.”

“My dear, you’ll do no such thing,” Zafrina said, her tone stern but her eyes twinkling. “I gave this interview of my own free will, and I am well aware of every word I’ve spoken. Use them.”
“But...that’s your business. Your personal business,” Bella said, utterly shocked. “You’ve never spoken about your personal relationships.”

The woman shrugged. “As we’ve spoken about, no matter what I accomplish, the general public will always be more concerned with whose tattoos I have and what they think that means in terms of how they can judge me. One of the benefits of being my age is that, to use one of my favorite expressions of your generation, I have so very few fucks to give. I’m not ashamed of who I am, who I’ve loved, who I haven’t loved, and the mistakes I’ve made along the way. We’ve all made mistakes. We’ve all caused heartbreak and hurt the people we’ve loved. Every one of us. I’ve learned. I’ve grown. I like the person I am.”

Her smile gentled as she looked at Bella. “I’m not unaware of what will happen if you publish what I’ve told you. You are a very young woman, Bella. And talented. Oh, yes,” she said, nodding at the look on Bella’s face. “I’ve read some of your work. I won’t talk to reporters unless I’ve read their work. Eric knew that. I learned a long time ago that talent exists in abundance, though. It’s perseverance, skill, and plain luck that actually puts people ahead in their careers.

“So, today is your lucky day. You’ve said all the right things, and made an old woman believe you’re exactly what journalism needs in these days of sensationalism and judgment. You have the talent to tell my story the way I want it told. So, tell it. We need more voices like yours in this industry.

“Best of luck, Bella. May your career be as long and wonderful as mine.”

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“Well, it’s done,” Bella said.

Edward, who had been sitting across from her, his feet propped up on her desk as he thumbed through an architecture journal, stood instantly. He went around to her side of the desk. He took her hand, guiding her to her feet, and sat down in her chair. He pulled her back down onto his lap and reached for her mouse, scrolling to the top of the article.

As he read, Bella rested her head on his shoulder, breathing in the smell of him. She was, as always, nervous. Of course, she wanted him to enjoy her article, and there was always that question—wondering if she’d gotten it right. But beyond that, she also loved this part.

Whenever she had a deadline she had to meet that kept her in the office late, Edward tended to drift over. He never bothered her, sitting across from her and doing his own thing until she finished. Bella always found his presence soothing, but it was this part she loved.

She loved the way he was always eager to be the first person to read her work. She loved coming down from the adrenaline of writing by lounging in his arms like this. She loved how he kept one hand on the mouse while the other strummed her back. She loved that she could feel the vibration of his grunts and chuckles as he read.

Bella loved this man with an intensity that rocked her every time.

“This is great, Bella,” Edward said when he was done. He kissed her forehead. “Really, honestly stupendous. I didn’t know much about Zafrina going into this article, but you’ve made her seem so fascinating.”

“She is fascinating,” Bella said. “Easily one of the top twenty women of all time that I look up to.”

“Your passion shows through.” His fingers curled in her hair as he spoke, and his smile was
adoring when he looked at her. “You have a gift, love. The way you make me see the essence of a person or of a situation—I love that about your work.”

Warmth spread through Bella, and she tilted her head up, inviting his kiss. He obliged, cupping her cheek as he kissed her soft and slow. “I’m so proud of you,” he said, the words rumbling against his lips. “This is going to be a great thing.”

“Yeah,” Bella said, ducking her head and looking away.

“What’s wrong?”

Bella grimaced. “I know this was what Zafrina wanted, but I hate the fact this might just make my name.” She pressed her lips together, fighting dissatisfaction. “Not all the other things in the article. Not her art—the way she’s able to capture the souls of people and cities. Not her work—what she’s done for people in need. No one will care about all that. I’m going to be the reporter who got Zafrina Ibori to open up about her tattoos.”

“Hmm.” Edward ran the tip of his nose along her cheekbone. “I imagine it’s as frustrating as Zafrina feels. What she said about the fact she will always be more well known for breaking a famous actor’s heart than she will be for what she gave to the world. Her art. Her charity.” He pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “Yet, her work is obviously appreciated. She’s getting this award. There are plenty of people like you who appreciate the good she’s done, the beauty she’s brought. Your article will help others find her, too. And, more importantly to me, it will help people find you.

“So, maybe you will be most known for being that reporter who got Zafrina to spill a decades old secret. What matters is the people who will see more. The ones who will remember everything else you said about Zafrina. The ones who will be as impressed as I am at the way you bring a person to life. Take the chance, Bella. You deserve it, whether you got it how you expected or not.”

Bella smiled and looped her arms around his neck. “You really think it’s a good article?”

“One of your best. Tied for first place with that story you did about the guy who got stuck in the Easter bunny suit.”

She giggled and smacked his chest. He caught her hand and kissed her.

“Now come on,” he said, his voice gone low and gravelly. “Send the damn thing to your editor so I can get you out of here. I want to fuck you before you decide a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist shouldn’t be seen with the likes of me.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she said, getting to her feet.

He stood, wrapping an arm around her waist. “What does that make you for falling in love with me?”

She sighed. “A nincompoop,” she quipped, leaning over to send the article and shut down her computer.

In the early hours of the morning, well after Edward had fallen asleep, one arm thrown haphazardly around her bare midriff, Bella lay awake. She couldn’t stop thinking about everything Zafrina had said about love—the in-love kind of love. The stuff tattoos were made of.

Consuming, Zafrina had said. I lose sight of so much else when I’m in love, and I have more important things to do.
Bella looked over at Edward. She ran her fingers through his hair, filled as she always was with warmth, tenderness, and passion. Consumed with love. Good god, she understood Zafrina’s sentiment. So much of her life was wrapped up in this beautiful man.

Given how much of her passion, her desires and wants, lay elsewhere, Bella couldn’t help but worry. After all, the women she admired most—Zafrina and Edward’s ex-wife Tanya among them—tended to put love second. What did that say about her?

What did that say about her future with this wonderful man?

A/N: How we doing out there, kids?

Don’t worry too much. This isn’t an angst story.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Some of us think that people who don’t want to prioritize a relationship have sad, empty, “half-lives”. Let me assure you, my life is full and wonderful, and the idea of being in a relationship repels me. Different strokes for different folks. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Technically, they’d been together a year.

A year ago, Bella had returned from Israel, and they’d finally talked about what they wanted. Love, after all, was just an emotion. It was an amazing, humbling thing to love someone. Love had the tendency to color everything else in life.

Bella didn’t like to talk about the time she spent alone in love; when she thought her love would forever go unrequited. Her life then was shrouded in darkness, with the only points of pure light being the time she spent with him. The light of loving him was always dimmed when she remembered she was reveling in that love alone, because he wasn’t hers. Her excitement over her job, her full and happy life, got turned down several notches. It wasn’t that she didn’t feel those good things. She was happy with her friends, eager about work, and looking forward to a brilliant career. Yet her heart broke over and over again, even when he wasn’t right in front of her.

Over the last year, though, Edward had gotten to see her embracing this new facet of her life she hadn’t planned for herself. He knew she had her moments of doubt and uncertainty. She’d seen all the ways tattoos and love could screw a person over; the horrible things people went through for love; the way it could make them blind to the bad things. He did his best to prove to her every day that it was worth it. What they had was beautiful, and while love didn’t guarantee one person was good for another, he and Bella together were stardust.

The last year had been a revelation for both of them. Edward had never been in the beginnings of an adult relationship. In a lot of ways, he’d never been in a relationship in the classic sense—the work of figuring out how two people with two very different lives fit together. He and Tanya were together before they knew very much about the people they were going to be and the lives they wanted to lead.

It was more of a challenge than Edward expected. He’d always defined himself as part of a unit. He’d never been just him—Edward Cullen and his life.

In an ideal world, he’d have figured out he and Tanya were a bad match years before. They’d have divorced—hopefully amicably—and he would have had time to figure himself out as a singular entity before he met Bella. But the world insisted on being what it always was—inconsistent on making things complicated.

But that was another way Bella was good for him. Young as she was, she was also firm in her own beliefs. He had the tendency to get too serious about them. If she’d wanted to be married the day his divorce went through, he gladly would have agreed. Bella had insisted that balance was as much about space as it was about inclusiveness. She still lived with Jake and Embry. She made it a point to see her friends both with and without Edward there. She encouraged him to have a life
outside of her.

After all, Bella had pointed out, this was not only the first year they were together, but it was his first year apart from Tanya. He needed at least some room to really reconfigure his life.

“And if you figure out that I’m not what you want, we’ll know sooner than later,” Bella had said, trying her best to be grown up about the idea.

He’d pulled her close to him and kissed her neck. “While not impossible, it’s about as likely as the Pope declaring himself an atheist,” he’d said.

Grudgingly, he’d come to appreciate the space Bella insisted on. It was nice being able to reorient himself. He’d taken a trip to England, where his father was born, with his father and brother. He’d gone to New Orleans on his own—both things he’d wanted to do for most of his life and hadn’t gotten around to because Tanya had never made the time. At home, alone on the nights Bella wasn’t with him or he with her, Edward had time to think.

Edward had filled his own apartment with things he liked—his sofas, his art, his books on the shelves. He had more red meat in his fridge and freezer, because he liked red meat more than chicken and fish. He had to get used to the idea of telling Bella when he went out with his friends on his own rather than asking if they had anything going on.

But it had been a year, and he wanted to start to think about his and Bella’s life together.

He didn’t know if she realized the date. Bella wasn’t a romantic. She wasn’t the type to go for arbitrary anniversaries. And really, Edward wasn’t that guy either. Not romantic enough that he thought they should make a production of it. Just romantic enough that he wanted to recognize the time, celebrate the love he’d never known existed.

It wasn’t exactly difficult to get her to stay over. However, he didn’t mind staying at her place. He liked the novelty of having to be quiet. He and Tanya hadn’t exactly had even the typical college experience of trying to get it on without alerting the roommates, seeing as they were married in a home of their own. Edward liked to play a game. Whenever Bella shushed him, he made it a point to try and make her scream.

That morning, the morning of their non-anniversary, Edward woke Bella with kisses and a song. He liked to sing to her. He really didn’t know why. It was something that came naturally; as though just seeing her brought music to his life.

“No New Year’s Day to celebrate. No chocolate-covered candy hearts to give away.” He nuzzled her neck, kissing up to her throat, her chin, along her jaw. “No first of spring. No song to sing. In fact, here’s just another ordinary day.”

Her eyelashes fluttered open, her sleepy look tender as she focused on him. “You think I don’t know what today is?”

He kissed her then, and he didn’t stop kissing her for a long while. They weren’t kisses meant to lead to anything. He doubted he’d ever be tired of touching her, but this...this was good, too. Just enjoying the feel of her mouth moving with his, her sigh against his lips, and her fingers in his hair.

When he pulled back, they were wrapped in each other’s arms, just staring. Happy.

“If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?” he asked after a few minutes.

She sighed, stretching her arms out, drawing his eyes for a moment down the lines of her body,
covered though they were by the night shirt she wore. “Where wouldn’t I go?” She looked at him, smiling as she reached up to run her fingers along his chin. He’d figured out a long time ago how much she loved his stubble. “I don’t know that I have a list. I really never got the chance to travel. My list of places I’ve been include the Pacific coast, Arizona, Vegas, and Israel.”

He balked. “Really?”

She poked him in the belly several times, teasing. “We’ve had this discussion before.”

“Have we?”

Her expression grew more cautious as she nodded. “You were telling me about all the places you planned to go.”

With his wife, she didn’t add. Edward grimaced and shook his head, ducking to kiss her once. “I don’t care about that list anymore. I want a new list. One for us.”

Her fingertips played at the sparse hair on his chest, and a smile tugged at her lips. “Oh, the places we will go? My dad got me that book when I graduated from college.”

“What’s the first thing that comes to mind? If you could go anywhere.”

“With you?”

His grin spread wide over his cheeks. He loved the idea, the possibility of traveling with her. “Yes, with me. You and me.”

“And if I said I wanted to go to Disneyland?” she asked, waggling her eyebrows playfully.

“It’s the mouse ears, right? You want to see me in the mouse ears?”

Bella put her hands up on either side of his head, imitating mouse ears. “I think I want to see if you scream on the roller coasters.”

He fixed her with a look. “You really want to go to Disneyland.”

“I’ve never been.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “How is that possible? Didn’t you live in Southern California?”

“For a bit. You do remember the part where I said we never had a lot of money? Disneyland was out of control even then.”

“You really want to go to Disneyland?”

“Yes, but I’m not limited to that.” She scooted closer to him so their heads were on the same pillow. “Where do you want to go?” Her cheeks tinted pink and she ducked her head almost shyly. “With me.”

“Hmmm.” He let his hand travel the lines of her back, pressing the shape of her shoulder blade against his palm. “I want to learn to flamenco dance in Spain.”

“Oh huh. You think I’m going to get dressed up with fan and that thing in my hair, don’t you?”

“No,” he lied. “But I do want to dance with you again.” She’d fallen in love with him after they danced all night, and he wanted the benefit of dancing with a woman he loved.
“In Spain.”

He shrugged. “Anywhere.”

“Where else do you want to take me?”

“Oh, no. It’s your turn.”

“I want to see the Great Barrier Reef,” she said after a few moments thought. Then she laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m just picturing you in snorkeling gear.”

“I’ve never been snorkeling. Australia, hmm? I hear they have awesome spiders.”

She shuddered. “You love me, right?”

He smiled and kissed the tip of her nose. “As it happens, I do.”

“Then if we ever go to Australia, you’ll make sure all the spiders are gone, right?”

He laughed. “Of course, princess.”

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They emerged from Bella’s room an hour later at the sound of raised voices. Edward wasn’t surprised to see Alice and Jasper there. What was surprising was that Jacob and Alice were in some kind of face off. Alice could be a little frightening when she was upset, so Edward found himself edging to where Jasper and Embry were standing, watching the carnage.

“Like it isn’t bad enough you stepped on my proposal, now this?” Alice demanded, shaking a finger at Jacob.

Edward should have known. Alice and Jacob had been at odds since Jacob stepped over her elaborate proposal to Jasper by proposing to Embry.

“I thought you were kidding. Come on. The guy proposes to the girl. That’s the way the world works.”

Even Edward palmed his forehead at that remark. “Oh, babe,” Embry said under his breath, shaking his head.

“Hey, genius. You’re engaged to another man,” Alice said, exasperated as all of them. “You’re supposed to understand convention has nothing to do with anything.”

“Whoa, okay.” Bella stepped up to her arguing friends, putting a hand on each of their stomachs and pushing them apart as she stood between them. “What’s going on here? What are we arguing about?”

“You,” Jacob and Alice said together.


Jacob pointed an accusatory finger at Alice. “She came over here to ask you to be her maid of honor.”
“What is wrong with you?” Alice cried, stamping her foot. “It was supposed to be a surprise.”

“Surprise! I’ve known her longer,” Jacob said, pointing at himself. “She’s going to be my maid of honor. Just because you had to pick the wrong date—”

“The date actually has some meaning to us,” Alice said, gesturing between herself and Jasper.

“Oh, my God. Stop,” Bella said. “What is going on?”

“Seems Jasper and Alice picked the same date Jake and I did. To get married,” Embry said. “Which one would think would be a problem because they couldn’t go to each other’s weddings, and they’re good friends.” He said the words, looking pointedly at Jake, as though reminding his fiance that he’d forgotten that fact. “But they’re fighting over you instead,” he finished, looking at Bella.

“Oh.” She looked to Alice. “And you came over to ask me?”

Alice wrinkled her nose, pouting ever so slightly. “He ruined it. I had this whole thing planned out. A proposal. You propose to your bridemaids.” She put a box in Bella’s hands. “Here.”

Edward watched, bemused, as Bella opened a small box to find a Ring Pop inside.

“I was going to get down on one knee and everything,” Alice said with a sigh.

“Oh, honey.” Bella tucked Alice under her arm and laughed. “You never do anything halfass, do you?”

At that, Jacob finally looked sheepish. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have spoiled that for you.” He grimaced. “Just, when we told you we set the date, the first thing you said was we have to change it. Like it was a forgone conclusion.”

Alice frowned. “I was just startled about it; that’s all. I’m a little bit stressed. You know, if we didn’t do it February tenth of next year, we’d have to put it off for a whole other year. But that only leaves me a few months to plan. That’s so little time to do all the things I want to do. This is the first thing, and already it’s gone wrong.” Crossing her arms, Alice sat on the couch with a huff.

“Why February tenth?” Bella asked.

Jasper walked over to stand behind Alice. He put his hands on her shoulders. “It’s the day we met.”

“And what is it for you?” Bella asked.

Jake sighed. “The day after my vacation time kicks in at work.”

Edward had to cover his mouth with his hand to hide his amusement this time.

Jasper cleared his throat. “You know, sugar, maybe it’s a sign. You’re right. It’s too soon, and next year is too far. Maybe it’s time we give ourself a different important date to celebrate.”

“No.” Jacob rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. He looked to Embry and extended a hand. “You wanted a more meaningful date. I was just kind of in a rush to marry you.” His lip twitched. “You know. Gotta strike while the iron’s hot. Before you come to your senses.”

Embry wound his arm around Jacob’s waist. “Jackass,” he said affectionately.

They shared a quick kiss before Jacob turned back to Alice. “Take February. Plus, Em is right. I
want to be there.”

“Who says you’re invited?” Alice asked, but it was obvious she was teasing. Everyone smiled.

“So, are you going to be my maid of honor or what?” Alice asked, turning her attention to Bella.

“What if I want my proposal?”

“Ah, maybe I should leave that up to your boyfriend.” Alice winked at Edward.

Edward had to work to keep his smile down. The idea of proposing to Bella had, of course, crossed his mind before. He reached out and took Bella’s hand, giving it a squeeze.

It would happen some day. He was sure of that.

How funny that Bella’s friends were at the same spot in the journey of their relationships. Despite him being the oldest of all of them, he and Bella were at the newest stage. Still, Edward could hardly begrudge them that. Today, he had an answer to the first of many questions about their life together—the places they wanted to go. It was enough.

For now.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Step, step, steppin’.

Where’s a good place to celebrate New Year’s? (Don’t say NYC)
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

A/N: Writing, communicating your thoughts and ideas effectively, is a learning process. I’ve never written a couple who has already gotten together, so bear with me through my mistakes and pitfalls.

When I wrote that Bella made room for her friends both with and without Edward, I never dreamed anyone would read that as she never made room for just Edward. When I wrote that Edward had, over the past year, learned he didn’t have to wait to do all the things he’d been putting off doing for seventeen years, that was meant to be a positive thing. When I didn’t fill in the blanks of what Edward and Bella did as a couple over the last year, I never dreamed anyone would fill it with emptiness.

So let me clarify. Edward and Bella are a happy, one-year-old couple (aka, they are not at the point where they would be considering starting a family anyway). Yes, they make time for their friends and family, but they are devoted to each other. Bella is dedicated at work, and a lot of her time goes to proving herself, being as she’s a brand new reporter, but Edward is not neglected. Edward is the most important person in Bella’s life. He is simply not the only person in Bella’s life. We established in Marked that even when she has deadlines, Bella knows when to prioritize the people in her life—including Edward. They still spend most nights chilling together, watching their TV shows the same way they did when Edward was married. They take day trips and the occasional weekend trip to nearby destinations. They’ve been to museums and art galleries together. Edward took her to his company’s spring banquet and summer party. Bella goes to family dinners, and Edward has met her parents. Most days of the week, they sleep over at one of their places, and still have copious quantities of athletic sex.

Seriously, kids. This is not an angst fic. I hope that helps.>

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Last year, their first new year together, Edward had taken her to see her father in Washington. He’d rented a boat on the water and they’d watched the fireworks over the Space Needle. She remembered well the chill that went down her spine as he wound his arms around her, pulling her backward against his chest so he could whisper in her ear.

“Happy New Year.”

And that was when it hit her how much her life had changed. Her life was upside down and unrecognizable to what it had been, what she expected it to be, the year before. She’d been thrust into a reporting job much sooner than she’d expected. She was, for the first time since she was six years old, not spending the evening with her best friend. And she was in love. Blissfully, head over heels in love with a man whose divorce had been finalized only two days before.
Life. It was rarely how one imagined it, and it sounded so sordid when you weren’t the one living it.

It was early December now, and he hadn’t brought up New Year’s yet. She could bet he had any number of plans for them, but they’d been on a lot of weekend trips the past year. Bella had a funny idea in her head. She wondered how easy it would be to convince him to go with it.

They were at his place, out on his porch overlooking the city. An early snow flurry was falling, and she liked to watch from the comfort of his covered porch. Except for her nearly frozen cheeks, she was actually quite warm. They were lounging together on one of the deck chairs. Bella was sitting on Edward’s lap, reclining so every inch of her body was tucked up against him, her head under his chin. A blanket covered both of them, but it was Edward’s arms around her, his warm body beneath hers, that really kept her nice and toasty.

“You know, at some point, we will freeze out here,” Edward said, dropping kisses at her crown.

“We’ll make a pretty icicle then.”

“This is true.”

Bella rubbed her socked foot along his feet. “So, I have something to ask you.”

“Uh oh. You got me all liquored up, too.”

“Well, that was so we don’t freeze. Also, I want to get in your pants.”

He snorted and moved his hands around to slip under the waistband of her pants. “I don’t think you need alcohol for that.”

“I know, but it’s fun.”

“This is also true.”

“You’re distracting me on purpose.”

“I’m sorry, love. You said you had something to ask me.”

“About New Year’s Eve.” She tilted her head up to kiss the underside of his jaw. “I made us reservations at a fancy restaurant in town.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. It’s a nice place. You dress up.” She cupped his cheek. “There’s a dance floor.”

His eyebrows quirked. “Oh. Dancing.”

“It’s not as fancy as a ball, but I think it’d be nice.”

“It would be nice.” He squeezed her sides. “Will you wear a slinky dress?”

“Would you like that?”

“Bella, I’d like you in a plastic garbage bag.” He chuckled and kissed her neck. “But, yes, I do want to see you all dressed up again.” His hands slid up, tickling her belly. “So you want to stay in.”
“The boys and everyone will be gone. It’d be no one but us.” Not that she didn’t like ringing in the New Year with friends and family, but she thought it would be nice to begin her year wrapped up in Edward.

His arms tightened around her. “I like the sound of that.”

Edward found a great joy in the fact he could plan events again. Though he tried not to overdo it, he liked making a fuss of things on occasion. Planning something special for Bella’s birthday—the first of her birthdays they’d spent together—had been the highlight of his year. So yes, he’d had some flashy ideas about what they could do on New Year’s.

Still, he wasn’t disappointed with the idea of a quiet New Year’s in the slightest, especially if it meant he could dance with Bella again. It had been a hectic holiday season given that Bella’s parents were separated and lived in different states. That, and Bella was beginning to get more work, more important stories since Zafrina’s interview. She’d been hoping to be assigned a rare interview that might have kept her out of town until the first of the year, but it had gone to a more senior reporter. Edward, while disappointed, had been happy for them as a couple.

Since Jacob and Seth had jetted off to spend New Year’s in Vegas, Edward had spent most of the time at Bella’s place. “Take advantage of being able to have sex on the couch,” she’d teased.

They’d had sex on the couch, the living room floor, over the kitchen table, and once up against the wall in the hallway. Edward was nothing if not thorough.

He’d returned home long enough to get into a suit and splash on the cologne Bella had gotten for him. The one that made her stick her nose at his neck and breathe him in. He liked when she did that.

“Honey, I’m home,” he called as he let himself into her apartment.

“Five more minutes,” Bella called from her bedroom.

As promised, Bella emerged from the hallway five minutes later. When his eyes fell on her, Edward’s breath caught in his throat.

Bella was always beautiful, but this… She was perfection. Her cocktail dress wasn’t ballroom fancy, but it was elegant. Red and long in a classic cut. Her hair hung down, styled into a full-bodied wave that curled around the edges. Her lips were painted ruby red. She was stunning, and he couldn’t believe she was his. He always knew he was the luckiest man in any room he went into, but with this vision on his arm, everyone would know it.

“How much time do we have before we have to be at the restaurant?”

“Not enough time for me to get out of and back into this dress,” she said warningly.

He laughed—a strangled sound given that his cock twitched in his pants. “Well, I don’t need quite that much time. Although…” He moved his hand from the small of her back down to touch the swell of her ass. “It wouldn’t take so much to hike this up, and—”

“Edward.”
“Right.” He cleared his throat. “But we have ten minutes?”

“Probably twenty before we really start to push it.”

He nodded and took a step back, already rummaging through his jacket pocket. He took out his phone and found the playlist he wanted. He’d put it together on a whim some time ago—soft music to dance to or make love to. He hadn’t had cause to use it yet.

Lady in Red, one of the songs they’d danced to the night Bella fell in love with him, came on. He set the phone on coffee table, took Bella’s hand, and pulled her into his arms.

Bella’s smile gentled as she wrapped her arms around his neck, falling into step with him as they swayed. “The dance floor at the restaurant is a lot fancier than this.”

“Yes, but I’m impatient.” He kissed her, ruining her perfect makeup.

She didn’t complain. She kissed him back and danced with him around the room.

~0~

They could have stayed at the restaurant to ring in the New Year.

It had been a great time. The food was fancy, each course more delectable than the last. It hadn’t felt nearly as ridiculous as she imagined when Edward offered her a bite of his scallop and she’d leaned across the table to take it directly from his fork. There was plenty of booze—wine, champagne, and martinis. The music wasn’t as refined as Bella had imagined. Once everyone was up and dancing, the band had struck up the Macarena. A bunch of people hopping around in tuxedos and cocktail dresses was a sight Bella wasn’t going to forget anytime soon.

But around eleven, during a slow dance, Edward pulled her close to him and kissed a trail up to her ear. “Let’s get out of here,” he whispered, and the words sent a delicious chill down her spine.

Half an hour later, Bella thought she was going to go out of her mind, she was that eager to be skin to skin with Edward. She was in the zone—that wonderful, high-flying space where there was nothing and no one in the world except Edward.

She had her arms around him, kissing his cheek and neck as he tried to get the key in the lock at his apartment. When he finally got the door open, he growled, pulling her inside and into a bone-crushing embracing. His hands were everywhere, his mouth was on hers, pushing into her even as she pushed back.

He sat on the couch and she straddled him, keeping up their fervent kisses as her hands loosened his tie and unbuttoned his dress shirt.

Bella loved the feel of his body beneath her hands. She loved the hard contours of his chest and, of course, seeing her mark there over his heart. She kissed along his jaw and then to his neck. There was a spot she loved to suck there because it made him whimper every time. She rolled her hips, but her dress was too confining for what she really wanted.

Breaking their kiss, Bella slid backward, off his lap and onto her knees before him.

“Bella,” he whispered reverently. He cupped her cheek tenderly and bit his lip as she opened his fly. “Oh, hell,” he said on a breath.

Edward always kept his hands on Bella when she was on her knees for him. And talking. Oh, god, he was a babbler in the sweetest way. “Do you know how good this is, baby?” he asked, punctuating his question with a groan. “Oh, god. You make love with your mouth. Fuck.” He
bucked up ever so slightly, obviously keeping himself from pumping.

Sex, in all its forms, was different with Edward. She knew his body so well. She kissed his cock like she kissed his lips, teasing the tip of it with her tongue before enveloping it in her mouth. She licked every line, every crevice as she took him deeper, and she stroked him with a firm but tender touch. She rolled his balls in her palm, tickling and pressing until his words fell away to guttural grunts and high pitched groans. His fingers curled in her hair, tugging just hard enough that she moaned as well.

“Bella.” He tugged on her ear. “Come… Oh, Jesus. Come up here.”

Releasing him from her mouth with a gentle pop, Bella stood. She kept her eyes locked on his. She licked her lips, watched him watch her taste him there. His eyes, dark with desire, widened. His nostrils flared. He licked his lips as though he was ravenous.

Reaching behind her, Bella pulled down the zipper of her dress. She didn’t break his gaze as she let the dress puddle at her feet. His breath left him in a gust.

“Get over here,” he said, his voice rough with want. He reached out, taking her wrist and bringing her to him. He paused only long enough to pull her panties down. Bella straddled him again, raising up and taking him inside her.

They rocked together, his strong hands spread wide on her back as she rode him. She arched her head back, and he dropped wet kisses across her collarbone. She cried out as he thrust up deep inside her, calling his name in both plea and praise.

They reached climax, together, just as the fireworks outside exploded over the Chicago skyline. Bella collapsed forward, her arms around Edward. As soon as she could breathe again, she started to giggle.

He laughed too, the sound rich in her ear. He hugged her close, stroking her back. “Happy New Year, Bella.”

She pulled back, cupping his face in her hands, and kissed him, softly and sweetly. “Happy New Year, my love.”

They kissed languidly to the sound of the fireworks. When Bella’s phone rang, she groaned, burying her face at Edward’s neck. She breathed him in—the wonderful scent of her favorite cologne and the musk of his sweat-slicked skin.

The phone continued to ring, and Bella sighed. She slid off Edward’s lap and hurried to figure out where her handbag had been thrown. Just as well. Edward’s phone started to ring then.

Bella finally found her bag and her phone. The missed call was from Jake, as she’d expected. She called him back as she slipped into Edward’s suit jacket, chilly now.

“You forgot to call me,” Jake said by way of greeting.

“Hello to you too, Jake. Happy New Year,” Bella said.

“It was New Year an hour ago for us.”

“I was otherwise occupied.”

“Excuses.”
“You sound wide awake anyway,” Bella said, rolling her eyes. “And it’s loud where you are.”

“Give me that,” another voice said. “Hey, baby Bella.”

“Embry, I’m older than you,” Bella said, smiling. She sat on the arm of the couch, stroking Edward’s hair as he spoke to his family. “How’s the year treating you so far?”

“Oooooohhhhh, about that. We have some news for you.”

“Give me that,” Jake said, wrestling the phone back. “Let me tell her.”

“Tell me what?” Bella asked.

“Bella, I hope you weren’t going to throw me a kick-ass bachelor party.”

“Why? Did you see that Thunder From Down Under show? I’m pretty sure I can’t top that.”

“Nope.” He sounded buoyant. “I’m not a bachelor anymore. We got married.”

“What?” Bella had no idea why, but she was shocked. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“It was so tacky,” Embry said, laughing. “Elvis, Bella. Elvis officiated.”

“You’re serious,” she said, still incredulous.

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line. “Are you mad?” Jake said after a minute. “We just decided we didn’t want a big thing. It was getting out of hand as it is, and—”


“Yeah. I know it’s cheesy, but it was the right thing for us,” Jake said. With the tenderness in his voice, Bella could easily picture him looking at Embry with those goo-goo eyes like they did sometimes.

She smiled, genuinely happy. “Then it’s perfect. I’m happy for you guys.”

“Bella.” Edward tugged gently on a strand of her hair to get her attention. “Mom and Dad want to say hello.”

Some twenty minutes later, everyone had been called and wished Happy New Year. The house was quiet again.

Edward took her hand and lead her to his bed. “You’re quiet,” he observed.

She made an effort to come out of her own thoughts. “For some reason, Jake and Embry’s announcement threw me.”

“Why?”

“I kind of had this feeling like things were going to change, you know? Not just for them, but for me. I just thought I had a couple more months to figure out what was going to happen.”

He pressed his thumb to the divot of her chin. “What’s going to happen?”
She shrugged. “Don’t you think a married couple should start off life on their own?”

“Hmm.” He looked at her, kissing her once. “Move in with me.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “You still want me? All the time? Scary, morning-breath me?”

“Bella.” He kissed her again and shifted, gathering her closer. “Move in with me.”

She sighed, wrapping an arm around him and pulling herself closer. “Okay.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

He rolled over her then, pinning her beneath him and he kissed her, and Bella smiled wider.

Happy New Year indeed.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Happy Mother’s Day to all you mothers out there. Hope you’re having/have had a fabulous day. Happy birthday to Conni Bee. Sorry, babette. I tried to have Cops and Vloggers done for you, but life got the better of me.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

A/N: Welcome back! Let’s get down to business. (... to defeat...the huns… ahem, nevermind).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Edward watched Bella. It was far and away his favorite pastime: watching her. He watched her walk around his apartment—almost theirs—touching this, picking things up, putting them down.

“What are you thinking?” he asked when the silence had stretched on too long. He extended a hand for her.

With a tender smile, she took his hand, letting him draw her to him, down onto the couch. He draped an arm around her shoulder, and she rested her head on his chest. “I was thinking about what this place looked like a year ago. So barren. Look at it now.”

“It’s been interesting. I didn’t think I would care, you know? I never really thought about what I wanted on my walls. The color of the chairs. The damn dishes.” He laughed. “It was more satisfying than I expected. Seeing it all come together has been interesting.”

He felt the rise and fall of her shoulders as she took a deep breath. “And yet you want to invite me and my tastes in? Are you sure?”

For a handful of moments, he studied her closely. He pressed a finger to the upside down v between her eyes. He’d long ago figured out she made that face when she was fretting about something. Deadlines, minor arguments with her parents, and now, he guessed she was worried about them.

He readjusted them so he could look in her eyes. “Bella, you gave me my life back. I know that wasn’t what you intended to do, but you did. I was standing still. Stagnant, and because of you, I’m living again.

“It took a while for me to figure out I didn’t need to wait for my wife to do the things I wanted to do. It’s been good for me. I could live a good, full life alone, but that’s not what I want. All of this?” He gestured around them. “Yeah, it’s who I am. It’s a lot of things I forgot about myself and a lot I’m just figuring out. But a lot of me has stayed the same too. I’ve never wanted to be alone. That was never part of my life plan.” He ran a hand along the underside of her chin, wondering if he’d ever told her how he loved the feel of her soft skin beneath his fingertips.

“I love you,” he said, tracing the planes of her face. “I love the mornings I can wake up with you in my bed. I want to look around here and see our things. Our bed.” He cocked his head, looking at her. “If that’s not what you want…”

“No,” she said quickly. Then she looked down—not the best of signs. “I want you. I want to be here with you.”

“But?” he prodded gently.
She took his hands, playing with his fingers as she spoke. “What if I’m not doing right by you?”

That caught him off guard. “What?”

“Follow me on this.” She sat up straighter, facing him on the couch. “You said your life was at a standstill. Stagnant, but what’s going to change if you’re with me?”

“I...am not following.”

She reached for his hands again. “I’m working toward a goal. And you’re supporting me, a hundred percent, because that’s what a good boyfriend does.” She pressed her lips together, looking uncharacteristically tortured. “But what goals am I helping you reach?”

Edward blinked a few times. “Are you saying I have no ambition?”

“You do have ambition.” She took a deep breath. “It’s just not for something I can give you right away.”

It dawned on him then what the hell she was talking about. “You mean you’re not ready to pop out a half dozen youngsters.”

Bella’s eyes bulged. “I... what... How the hell many kids do you want?”

Edward chuckled and brought her hand to his mouth, kissing her knuckles. “Negotiable. But that’s what you’re saying right?”

Studying him a moment, she nodded.

“Hmm.” He sat back, keeping one hand in hers but stroking his chin with the other as he considered. “Have you considered that, in a manner of speaking, I have been working toward that goal. And so have you?”

She raised an eyebrow.

He sighed. “You’re talking the romance out of this. You know that right? What do you think a relationship is? We’re working on something together; you and I. And it has been hard work, you know. I would have jumped straight to marriage if you’d have let me, but you didn’t. That’s good, because I would have wrapped myself up in you; it’s what I did before.

“So, I figured out how to be me, and you figured out how to want this whole love debacle that you spent your life convincing yourself was awful.”

She made a face, but some of the worry left her eyes. Edward cupped her cheek. “Now, we're at a new stage. Next week, this will be our place, and that'll be a new adjustment. And we have our list. In a few more months, we'll take our first big trip together. That takes planning too. See, we’ve figured out what you want and what I want; now we get to figure out what we want.”

“I know,” she said. “And I’m here for that. I’m working for us too.”

He nodded. “Yes. See this whole thing we’re doing here? Communication? Checking in?” He winked at her. “This is important.”

Bella cracked a smile at that. But she sighed and ducked her head again. “I just would hate it if you ended up resenting me. You were ready to have kids a solid decade ago.”

Edward scooted closer, picking up her legs so they were draped over his lap and holding her in his
arms. “Do you remember what made me fall in love with you? The final straw?”

“When you saw me interview that woman.”

“Exactly. Your passion, your drive, your love of your job—I love that about you. I’m not going to resent you for something that made me fall in love with you. I love you for everything you are, Isabella Swan. Yes, I was ready for a family a long time ago, but that’s not the point. Or rather, it’s only one half of the point. This relationship isn’t only about me.”

He rubbed her back as he searched for the right words. “I don’t want any kids. I want your kids.” He shivered because, yes, god yes, he dreamed about the day he would hold a child of theirs in his arms. A sweetheart of a girl with her eyes. A boy with the same kind smile. “Besides, think about it. Say I lost my damn mind and agreed that I needed to leave you to find a woman who would drop everything else in her life to give me kids. You think I would find that from one day to the next?”

Bella scrunched up her nose. “Well, I think you’d be surprised what you could accomplish with a well-placed Craigslist ad.”

“I see. Hmm. Maybe you’re right. Maybe we should reconsider this whole moving in thing,” he said, beginning to press tiny kisses near her ear. “If you don’t know me well enough by now to know I would never have kids with a woman I didn’t know…”

Bella shifted, lying back and bringing him down with her on the couch. “So, you’d have to get to know them,” she said with a tone of mock seriousness. “And that could take a while.”

“Depending on the person?” He kissed the underside of her chin. “Could take years.”

“And then all the steps.”


She sighed, her hand coming up to cup the back of his neck, stroking the fine hairs there. “You’re right. You’re actually closer to having kids if you stick with me.” She ran her heel along the back of his leg. “Guess you’re stuck with me.”

He sighed. “Life can be cruel sometimes.”

She gave his ass a sharp smack, and he growled, attacking her neck until she squealed. Then, he kissed her, smothering the sound of her protest with his lips.

“Edward,” she said in between kisses, her voice breathless.

“Huh?” he asked eloquently. By that point, they were way too naked for him to think clearly.

She took his face in her hands, looking him in the eyes. “If you want six kids, you’re going to have to figure out how to birth them. That can be your goal.”

He blinked and then chortled. “Don’t worry,” he said, kissing her again. “There’s always adoption.”

Bella groaned, but the noise turned into a gasp as he pushed her legs back and entered her with one swift stroke.

~0~
“Hey, Bells. Do you remember when we got the hell out of Arizona and we were thrilled that our family was so far away?”

Bella looked up from her task, unpacking another box, at her best friend. “You were more relieved than I was,” she said.

He scoffed. “Yeah, I didn’t mind getting away from all the ass kickings. But you were glad too.”

She sighed. “That’s true.”

He draped a sweaty, smelly arm around her shoulders and gestured with his chin at the milling crowd. “So how is it that you ended up with a man with that much family?”

Bella pressed her lips into a thin line, trying not to laugh. Edward’s family had showed up en force to help her move into his apartment. All of them, even Emmett’s kids, were there.

“They do know you gave us most of the furniture, right?” Jake asked. “It’s not like you have that much to move.”

Bella grabbed his hand and shoved it off her shoulder, taking a step away from him. “You know the Cullens by now, Jakey. They’ll take any excuse to party.”

“I’ve noticed how much Esme likes to feed everyone.”

Bella grinned. “Oh, man. You should have seen us on Thanksgiving. It’s been awhile since I’ve been able to cook, so between the two of us, we had a feast.”

“Sorry I missed that.” He tilted his head, considering. “Although, Embry’s family feeds me well. If Embry had gotten any of his dad’s cooking talent, I’d be fat, fat, fat. Happy. But fat.”

“Speaking of loners who fell into a good family…”

Jake grinned. “Yeah, but I don’t have to see my in-laws every other weekend.” He looked at her. “You’re happy?”

Bella looked over to where Edward stood next to his silver-haired father, both of them handsome as sin and dear to her. “It’s been nicer than I would have thought to have family so close. I like weekends. I like going to the kids’ events. I liked that it took me forever to shop for Christmas last year.”

Jake whistled. “With a group like that? That must have put a dent in your wallet.”

“It did. But they’re good to me, so it’s worth it.”

“Hey, Bella!” Emmett called from the living room.

Bella pushed to her feet and headed out. “What’s up?”

“Check this out. I might have a solution to the shelving problem you guys have.”

The space in the living room was such that there was only room for three shelves. The problem was, both Edward and Bella had an extensive collection of books. Bella was all for some kind of unique shelving like she’d seen on Pinterest, but there was a limit of what they could do in an apartment.

“Did you guys realize you have a lot of the same books?” Emmett asked, holding one of Bella’s
books up to the ones already on Edward’s shelf.

Bella frowned. “They’re not the same. A lot of mine are special editions or signed by the author.”

“Bella’s more of a bibliophile than I am,” Edward said, coming up behind Bella and putting his hands on her shoulders.

“How are you guys not figuring this out?” Emmett looked amused. “They’re still the same book. Toss Edward’s books if Bella’s are unique in some way.”

“Oh, that could be cute,” Esme said, joining the fray.

“Cute?” Bella asked.

“Yes. You could do a theme if you wanted.” She pointed to the each shelf in turn. “Yours. Mine. Ours.”

Bella opened her mouth to protest and then shut it again, realizing what she was about to say was ridiculous. She saw the shelves as Edward’s and didn’t think he should have to change it. But this was her place too. She knew she had to be represented. She liked the idea of having a shelf all to herself and one she could share with Edward—what she wanted and what they wanted together living in harmony.

“What is it?” Edward asked when she scoffed.

“These shelves are becoming too symbolic.” She craned her neck, looking up at him. “How do you feel about that?”

“I’m not attached to those specific books. It works for me.”

“Done and done. Easy.” Emmett said, and then he called one of his kids to assign them the task of setting aside the duplicates.

Later that night, when all of Bella’s things were unpacked, put away, or at least in the vague area they should have been, the family gathered around the living room, scarfing down the amazing meal Esme and Carlisle had prepared for everyone. There was ice cold beer—lemonade for the kids—and a cheesecake Rosalie had brought from her favorite bakery.

Bella still found it jarring that the family kept up on her career. Both families—Carlisle and Emmett—subscribed to the magazine she wrote for, and they always knew when she had a story.

“It’s a little nerve-wracking,” Bella said, after some careful prodding from Rosalie. “I didn’t get Zafrina’s secrets because I’m such a great reporter. She gave them to me.”

“Because you impressed her,” Edward said.

“But the point is, they expect me to duplicate that performance. Right now, I’m most concerned that I’m going to get pigeonholed into entertainment, which isn’t where I want to be. Trying to get actors and actresses to admit to who they date?” Bella rolled her eyes. “Yeah, no.”

“So where do you want to end up?” Rosalie asked. “Ultimately, what kind of journalism do you want to do?”

Bella thought for a moment. “Well, right now I’ve mostly narrowed down what I don’t want to do: entertainment and politics. I think investigative reporting might be fun. You know, uncover the
wrongdoings that no one actually cares about.”

“Ah, I’ve seen movies about that,” Emmett said. “Better be careful. The reporter always gets killed.”

Beside her, Bella felt Edward tense. She squeezed his knee to warn him not to be ridiculous. She’d be fine.

Another hour later and everyone was gone, leaving Edward and Bella in peace. No sooner had the door closed then Edward had swept Bella up into his arms. She gasped, scrambling to find a hold on his neck. He smiled at her, his eyes bright with happiness and satisfaction. “Welcome home,” he said, his voice a low rumble before he found her lips.

He carried her to his room—their room—and laid her down on the bed, climbing over her. “I’m so glad I get to come home to you every night.”

“I like waking up with you best,” Bella said, tugging at his shirt.

“Yeah?”

“Yes. I especially like it when I wake up right after you get out of bed in the morning so I can see your ass before you reach the bathroom.” She wagged her eyebrows. She loved the view of his backside—his ass and the flame tattoo that licked all the way up the back of his leg. “What a way to start the day.”

“Hmm.” He sat up, taking his shirt off and tossing it at the floor. “You want to know my favorite way of starting the day?”

“What’s that?” she asked, moving her hands up his torso.

“The same way I intend to end it today,” he said, pulling her up with him. “You just have to be more naked for both.”

Bella sighed happily, giving in to the flurry of clothes being removed between kisses and touches.

Welcome home.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Heheheh. Mina is unhappy with the idea of book murdering. Calm down, Mina. They’ll send the spare books to good homes. Sick children. Something like that.

Aside from the potential book murders, how are ya doing, kiddos?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

A/N: *waggles eyebrows*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh, no. Hell no. You can’t do this to me Eric.”

Eric Yorkie, Bella’s boss and editor, raised an eyebrow. “Uh, Bella? You specifically signed a contract that says you want me to give you work. Like this assignment. Which is a good assignment, by the way.”

Bella sighed, scrubbing her hands over her eyes. “I know that. I’m sorry.” She grimaced. “Edward is going to kill me. We’ve been planning this trip for months.”

“Hey, I remembered the days off you wanted. You’ll be done by Tuesday night.”

“My flight leaves on Tuesday night. From O’Hare.” Bella picked up the plane tickets Eric had handed her along with the rest of the information she needed for this particular assignment. “So I’ll be on a plane back from Missouri about the same time my boyfriend will be three hours into a thirteen hour flight to Greece. Crap.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah. That might not go over very well.”

“You have no idea,” Bella muttered under her breath, drumming the desktop.

“I have some idea.”

“What?” Bella shook her head. “Nevermind. There’s a solution here.” She pulled her laptop over. “If I can switch my flight to leave from Missouri instead of Chicago, you think you can reimburse me for whatever that costs? It might even be cheaper than a full ticket.”

“That can be arranged.” Eric sat back, a satisfied grin on his face. “This is what I like about you, Bella. You think on your feet.”

~0~

Bella sat across from Edward, gnawing on her lower lip. He wondered absently if she knew she looked about twelve years old at that moment—chewing on her lip, her brown eyes wide with nerves.

“Please don’t be angry,” she said. “I—”

“I’m not angry.” He took a deep breath and reached for her hand, taking it over the table. “Really, I’m not.”

She squinted at him. “You look pissed.”

“No,” he said more firmly. “I’m not angry.” He squeezed her hand. “I’m disappointed. It’s a long
flight, and I wanted to spend it with you.” He took another breath, shaking off any petulant responses. “But we’ll have the flight back, and eight nights and seven days in Greece. Sixteen hours of separation isn’t ideal, but it beats canceling the trip altogether.” That was exactly what would have happened with Tanya. He’d been down this road before.

“I just...I couldn’t say no to this assignment. This is a good assignment.” She winced. “And I couldn’t say no anyway. It’s my job, you know?”

“I do know. Seriously. It’s okay. You already solved the problem.”

“I really hate that you have to hear things like that again. You shouldn’t have to think about it.”

“And you shouldn’t have to be worried that your boyfriend will be pissed off because you have to do your job. A lot of people have demanding jobs, Bella. It’s fine.” He stroked the backs of her hands. “The whole idea behind compromise is it’s not supposed to be perfect for either of us. That’s normal.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him. “Are you telling me or yourself?”

His answering smile was rueful. “Both.” He pulled his hand back, and looked down at the delicious dinner she’d made that was rapidly cooling. He made a point of picking his silverware up again, so she would know he was really okay. “So, when are you actually supposed to write the story if your plane leaves practically the minute the event is over?”

“Eric has the follow-up interviews scheduled two weeks later. It’s not supposed to be a current events piece.”

“Does that mean you’re leaving again less than a week after we get back?”

She glanced at him. “For two days,” she said carefully.

He smiled at her. “And Alice’s wedding is the day before you leave for Missouri. Busy bee, you are.”

Edward could see when the tension drained out of her features. She smiled and picked up the fork again. “No rest for the wicked.”

~0~

All told, with wait times and customs, they were apart for the first eighteen hours of their first big vacation together. But they figured out a way around that. The planes were equipped with wi-fi. They both got on their laptops and chatted online, watching the same movies and television shows the plane offered as entertainment for the long flight.

Bella missed him. She wished he was there beside her, so she could rest her head on his shoulder and he could whisper in her ear as they watched together. It would be like home except a little more cramped, and probably they wouldn’t have to restart the show because they were too busy making out to pay attention.

Was that the difference, she wondered. She could see how like Tanya she was, how she could lose herself in her job. But now that she had Edward, she wasn’t so single-minded. He was always with her. She was always eager to return to the comfort of his arms, and she was always excited to share her day with him.

By the time Bella was free of customs, she was practically vibrating out of her skin. Unfortunately,
there was a crowd in front of the stairs. She was forced to take the escalator. Of course, the people in front of her, blocking her path. The lower floor came into view.

He was there. Of course, he was there. Just as he had been when she came back from Israel. Her heartbeat sped. Her chest ached in that wonderful way, as though her heart were pushing at the insides of her ribcage. His hair was disheveled from a long day’s travel, which only made him more attractive. His eyes found hers and that gorgeous grin lit his face. He’d missed her too; she could read it in the way his whole body seemed to perk up when he saw her.

It took all of her willpower not to elbow the people in front of her out of the way when she finally got to the bottom of the escalator. He was standing just out of the way of the rush—he’d learned from last time—far enough away that she could dart the last few steps to him. She dropped her carryon at his side, wrapped her arms around his neck, and caught his kiss as he bent his head to her.

Bella squeaked and laughed into his mouth when Edward lifted her right off her feet. When he set her down, he didn’t let her go, and she didn’t try to step away from him. She buried her face in the crook of his neck.

“Welcome to Greece,” Edward said.

“We’re not in Greece yet. This is the airport. Airports don’t count.”

He offered his arm. “Then let’s go get your luggage so we can get out of here.”

It took another half hour, but finally, they were in the cab on their way to the Royal Olympic Hotel. Forty minutes after that, they had arrived. The moment they got inside, Bella knew Edward had gone over the top. Of course he had. The man wasn’t rich, but he was on the high side of comfortable. Still, this was extravagant. But, she’d known what to expect when she left him in charge of the planning, so she didn’t say anything.

When they got to the room, Edward gestured that she should enter ahead of him. She did, and her breath left her in a gust. “Oh, Edward.”

The room itself was long—decked in royal blue and gold. But that wasn’t the main attraction. No. The main attraction was the ginormous panoramic window. Outside the window was a perfect view of the ruins of the Temple of Zeus.

Bella stumbled forward and had to stop herself from pressing her nose against the glass.

When Edward had asked, all those months before, where she most wanted to travel in the world, Greece had been at the top of her list. As a school girl, she’d been fascinated with Greek gods and myths. She had a natural disdain for all things Roman, because they’d stolen the Greeks’ gods, among other things. She had once accompanied her mother to a fair where a psychic told her she’d been a priestess in her past life, with a serpent tattoo that wound all the way around one leg, and a live snake she carried at her bosom.

While she didn’t really believe in past lives, Bella was overcome by the well of emotion that rose in her as she looked out at the ancient structure. She tried to think if she’d ever laid eyes on something as old. Behind them, on the opposite side of the hotel, had to be the Acropolis.

She started when she felt arms wrap around her from behind, but after that one, skipped heartbeat, she leaned back into Edward’s embrace. “This is amazing,” she whispered.

“It’s beautiful.” He kissed her cheek and the side of her hair, holding her close. “Though, a
thousand times more so because you’re standing in front of it.”

Bella closed her eyes, warmth rushing through her veins. She tilted her head, shivering as he kissed the side of her neck. He ran his hands along the edge of her jeans, and she sighed. “We’ve been traveling for almost an entire day,” she reminded him.

“Hmmm.” The sound vibrated against her skin, making her nipples go pebble hard. “I have an idea then.”

He stepped away from her, but took her hand. “Come see the rest of the room,” he said.

The rest of the room was just a bathroom, but good lord, what a bathroom. Opulent. That was the only word for it. The room was wall to wall white marble with a long tub at the end. It was slim—designed to fit two people, one on each end.

Edward sat on the edge and started the water, holding his hands under the tap until he found the right temperature. Then, he left the tub to fill and went to her, pulling her into his arms again.

She took his face in her hands, looking up at him. For a moment, a fear hit her that this couldn’t possibly be her life. She couldn’t be here in this gorgeous city, in a fancy hotel, with ancient ruins right outside her window. She couldn’t really be here with this man. But he was there, real in her arms, his gaze adoring as he swayed them gently back and forth.

“I’m glad I’m here with you,” she said. There wasn’t anyone in the world she would rather share this with.

“Bella, you have no idea.” He kissed her once, twice, and sighed. “I’m going to see if the mini bar has wine. We can relax and unwind a bit before we go scrounge up dinner, okay?”

They stayed in the tub for a good hour, talking and sipping at a delicious white wine with the Temple of Zeus still visible from where they lounged. But after their bath, they didn’t head out to dinner. No, Edward scooped Bella up and carried her to the room. He laid her down on the huge bed, on top of a golden comforter, and made slow love to her with the ancient ruins and sparkling city as a backdrop.

~0~

It was the third day of their vacation when Eric called. He wanted Bella on a conference call between collaborating reporters. Edward was careful to keep his face neutral as Bella argued with her boss. But after a few minutes, she hung up, tossing the phone at the bed and glaring at it.

“What’s the verdict?” Edward said with an air of nonchalance he didn’t feel.

She sighed. “He’s offering me three hours of overtime for what he promises will be a one-hour call. It’s at seven pm our time. It’s a series of related stories, you know? And the timeline of one of the events I’m not covering was moved up. We have to be on the same page.” She laid back on the bed, looking disgruntled. “Edward—”

He leaned over her and put his hand over her mouth. “Don’t say you’re sorry.”

Her eyes found his. She looked sorry. He moved his hand down and kissed her. “I know what you’re worried about, and I know why you’re worried,” he said, tracing the shape of her lips. “This isn’t the same thing. At all.” He took a deep breath, dispelling his annoyance as well as he could. He knew damn well it was more related to what he’d been through with Tanya than anything. He had an automatic reaction to work interfering with personal time, but he also understood that Bella
didn’t have the kind of job that kept steady hours. “You’re here with me. We don’t have plans for a tour. I can call the restaurant and push our dinner reservation a half hour so we won’t be late. It’ll hardly be a blip.”

A tentative smile tugged at her lips as she looked up at him, searching his eyes. “You’re being so understanding.”

“There’s nothing to not be understanding about. We were just going to chill for an hour before dinner. It’s not interrupting anything.”

“And he promised this was all he needs from me. Really. He swore he wouldn’t bother us again on pain of death.” She blew out a breath, relaxing slightly. “I really hate these conference calls. There are usually so many of us, that everyone only actually contributes five minutes to the conversation. The rest of the time, you’re sitting there bored.”

With one last sigh, Bella sat up. “I’m going to take a shower now, so I can get dressed right after the call.”

While Bella showered, Edward shifted their plans a bit. It was different, he reminded himself again. It had been a great few days, and Bella had been nothing but attentive. She was there with him—present. More than present, she was as wide-eyed as a child on Christmas. She was as immersed in soaking up the sights and history of Athens as she usually was with work.

Not the same at all, Edward thought. Letting go of his old defenses wasn’t as easy as he wanted it to be, but Bella was cognizant of that too. Tanya, when she apologized for yet another ruined plan, had never been so sincere. Edward honestly believed Bella would make sure the separate aspects of her life never overlapped if she could. But such was life. It wasn’t neat, and that was okay as long as they were both aware of each other’s needs.

When Bella came out of the shower, Edward gave her a quick kiss before he headed in. When he was clean, he put on his pants, but opted to leave the shirt for the time being, and headed out into the main room.

Bella’s laptop was open, voices chattering away. She was, as she promised, simply sitting, listening with a glassy-eyed stare. Not a video call then. She was looking out the window—she never tired of the view of Zeus’s temple, especially now that they’d toured the grounds.

Edward leaned against the wall, watching her for the moment. She was still in her robe, her hair hanging down damp and loose. Her feet were propped on another chair, and a notepad lay on the desk at her side. She pressed a key on her keyboard, contributed a few observations to the conversation, and pressed the button again. Mute, he realized.

Hmm. Mute.

A wicked idea formed in Edward’s head, and before he could dissuade himself, he strode forward. The movement caught Bella’s attention. Light and warmth came to Bella’s eyes, and she reached a hand out to greet him. “Hey, you.”

“Hey.”

She took her feet from the chair opposite her and waved a hand. “Sit down. They’ll start to wrap up soon.”

Edward hummed a response, but he didn’t sit. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles as he knelt in front of her. He let his fingers trace up the vine that marked her from ankle
almost all the way up to her knee.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her brows furrowed.

He merely looked up at her with a smirk as he grasped her ankle and lifted her leg up to his shoulder.

She gasped. “Edward. What—”

“Shhh.” He let his fingers play at her inner thigh, pleased to find she wasn’t wearing panties beneath her robe. “You’re going to need to concentrate.”

“But— Whoa.” She gasped again as he pulled her forward a bit. “Oh, hell.”

Edward ducked his head and licked the long line of her pussy, teasing without entering. Her hand landed in his hair, her fingers flexing against his scalp.

“This is… I…. Oh, hell,” she muttered again when his tongue found her clit.

He used his fingers to spread her slightly, giving him better access. He pressed his tongue flat against her clit, licking her slowly, slowly as the voices droned on.

“This is…” Bella gulped, her leg twitching against his shoulder as he quickened his pace.

“Oh...tawdry. This is tawdry.”

He snickered but didn’t answer. His tongue was too busy exploring her entrance. He knew her body, knew what she liked. He knew when to use his fingers and exactly how to use his mouth.

“Fuck. Oh. Ungh,” Bella moaned. She whimpered, her fingers running along his scalp, her hips raising every once in awhile to meet the thrust of his tongue. “Shit,” she hissed, and he heard her bang haphazardly on her keyboard. “Um, yeah. I can forward you those notes in just a… Just a minute.”

“Are you okay, Bella?” a voice asked. “You sound kind of winded”.

Bella’s fingers curled in his hair, but she didn’t tug him away. Edward took that as an invitation to keep at it. “Yeah, I’m fine,” Bella said, winded indeed. “Just… I need to…um. I need to sneeze, and it won’t happen.” She banged on the mute button just in time because her moan just then was loud and wanton.

Sneeze his ass. She needed to come.

“More. Please. Oh, hell, please.” Her body was arched, her head thrown back against the chair.

Edward redoubled his efforts, bringing her to the edge and pulling her over. Her walls contracted around his fingers, and he lapped the taste of her up as she came down. He could hear the others getting ready to end the conference call, and he sat back, ridiculously pleased with himself.

Bella, still sprawled and flushed, groaned as she slapped at the mute button. “Yeah. All that sounds good. I’ll forward you the research I did, and a copy of the, um… The interview. I’ll catch up with you all when I’m stateside.” She opened one eye, found him looking up at her, and smiled. She shook her head.

“Thanks, everyone,” a voice recognized as Eric said. “Okay, Bella. Feel free to forget about us for a few more days, okay?”
“Who the hell are you?” Bella asked. “See you at the office.”

She disconnected the call and then lunged at Edward. He caught her around the waist as she began attacking his face with kisses. “You,” she said, pecking at his lips, his cheeks. “Are a fucking brat. You know that?”

He laughed, catching her lips with his and kissing her long and good. He cupped her cheek and stroked his thumb along her chin. “Seeing you work is a turn on for me.” He put a hand on her bare knee and drew his fingers up the inside of her robe, brushing the side of her breast. “And you were naked under this thing.”

“You know, I’m always naked under my clothes.”

“Now why would you tell me a thing like that, hmm?” He kissed her again, a quick kiss this time. “I can’t be expected to behave if I know things like that.”

“Brat,” she said again, pecking his lips once more.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Credit to Packy for finding the hotel and Iris for the lemon idea. :) Thanks to songster, MoH, Packy, and Barburella for making my doc wonderful.

FYI, I signed up to complete four classes in five weeks. Yes, I’m insane. But it means updates are going to be a bit sporadic for the next five weeks.

How you doin’, kiddos?
“Is there even a remote possibility, if I asked you something, you could promise not to make fun of me?”

Emmett blinked down at him. He was at the top of the ladder Edward was holding, cleaning out the gutters. Staring down, he cracked a wide grin. “How old are you?”

Edward narrowed his eyes. “You know how old I am.”

“I need you to say it out loud, brother, because you should know how this particular game is going to end.” Emmett rolled his eyes. “If you ask me something, and there’s a chance I’ll make fun of you, I’m going to make fun of you.”

“Fair enough.” Edward sighed. “I want to know how to be handy.”

Again, his brother stared down at him. Then he started to laugh. “Okay,” he said, descending the ladder. “What do you mean handy?”

“You know how anytime something went wrong with my house, we had to call you? Me and Tanya, I mean.” Edward took a step back as his brother landed on the ground. “I want to do all that myself.”

“You have an apartment now. That’s all up to your apartment manager.”

“Right, but I won’t always be in an apartment. I want to know how to do these things. And maybe more.”

Emmett quirked an eyebrow. “What kind of more?”

Edward rubbed the back of his neck. This was the part where he knew damn well his brother was going to make fun of him. “I kind of have this idea that when I do get another house, I want to build it myself. At least part of it.”

“Oh, yeah. You were never not going to get shit from me about this,” Emmett said, shaking his head. “You design houses all the time. You go to the sites, to make sure everything is going to plan. You haven’t ever hammered in a single nail in any of your creations.”

“I have,” Edward said, irritated. He’d hammered a lot of nails. First nails. Final nails. Just not the ones in between. “Look, I’m not on the construction crew.”

“You do all this charity work. You’re telling me you’ve never built a house? I thought that was a big thing for you people.”

“You people?”
“Charity types. You know your kind.”

Edward shook his head. “Are you going to help me?"

“Well, being handy is kind of a broad subject, isn’t it? You’re handy with cars, like Rosie.” Emmett cracked another smile. “Maybe you should see if you can put a birdhouse together first, and then graduate up. Birdhouse. Dollhouse. Playhouse. Real house.”

Emmett was kidding, but Edward was struck by the idea. “Hmm. That’s not a bad plan. It’s a start.”

“What the hell has gotten into you anyway?” Emmett said, clearly amused. “This is kind of out of the blue.”

“Not really.” They turned and headed inside. “Bella essentially told me I had no ambition.”

Emmett whistled. “Are you kidding?”

“No. And she wasn’t wrong. It’s been a long time since I’ve had a goal, you know? Something solid to work for. Not just getting my head on straight after leaving Tanya. Not figuring out who I would have been if I hadn’t married her straight out of childhood. Not planning all the things I want to do with Bella. Something to accomplish.”

For the first time in the conversation, Emmett looked serious. “I can see that. It’s the nice thing about owning my own business. There’s always something I’m moving toward. Something on the horizon. Something I’m setting up where I might not see the benefit for years.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, you know the home improvement stores usually have beginners classes. Lowes and Home Depot. Just to get your feet wet.” He shrugged. “And Mom has some stuff she wants done. She’s been bugging me for months to get a few trellises set up for her garden. Things like that. Handy things.” He chuckled. “So what else did you think of before you settled on building your own house?”

Edward thought about denying it, but his brother knew him well. “Music. You remember I used to play?”

“Oh, sure. If you let Mom tell it, you played like the angels themselves.” Emmett rolled his eyes again. “So, why not music?”

“I like the idea of creating something. From start to finish. From design to the last nail.”

“Heh.” Emmett offered him a beer. “Just for the record, it would make me very happy if you couldn’t put so much as a birdhouse together.”

~0~

“Oh, I know you weren’t about to walk away from me for a whole week without saying goodbye.”

Bella yawned, untangling her arm from their sheets. She extended a hand, taking Edward’s as he came back and sat on the bed. “Sorry,” he said. “I thought you were asleep.” His grin turned wicked. “You did have a late night last night.”

She grinned back, and wound her fingers through his tie. She pulled him down to her. “So did
He hummed, the sound vibrating against her lips, sending shivers down her spine. “I’m going to be asleep as soon as I’m on the plane.” He cupped her cheek as he kissed her. “You have a deadline, don’t you?”

“Always,” she said with a sigh.

He’d begun to run his hands down her front. Bella gasped, arching up to meet his touch as he cupped her breast and rubbed a thumb over her nipple. “Oh god. Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

“I barely touched you,” he said, still kissing her. His fingers traced patterns over her belly. “And I would have thought you’d had enough after last night.”

“Enough?” She skimmed her hands down his chest over his shirt. “Never.”

He growled, his kiss more fervent. “Are you trying to make me late?”

She hooked a finger through his belt loops, bringing him down on top of her. “It never takes as long to get through security as you plan for.” Her fingers were already at the button of his pants.

“You’d have me look unprofessional?” he demanded, but he reached to rub between her legs. “All wrinkled?”

Bella muffled a moan against his mouth. “Everyone looks rumpled after travel.”

He gave in then, helping her push his pants down just enough. He pressed her legs back, entering her with quick, hard thrusts.

Never enough, she thought, tangling her fingers in his hair. Never.

~0~

As soon as Jacob heard Edward was going to be gone, he declared a friend date. So, after work the Monday Edward left for his business trip, Bella came home to wonderful smells wafting from the apartment. She’d given Jake a key when she and Edward went to Greece. Obviously, there was a reason he’d never given it back.

Sure enough, when she went in, she found Jacob in the kitchen. She slid her laptop bag from her shoulder and sat at the counter. “Jake. Jake, Jake, Jake. Tell me that is what I think it is.”

Jacob smirked. “Depends what you think it is.”

“Frybread?” Bella asked hopefully.

“Grandma Black’s recipe.”

Bella bounced in her seat with pleasure. Jacob had grown up on the Navajo Indian reservation in Arizona. Near enough to Bella’s little town that they’d gone to school together. Within the Navajo nation, the marriage equality debate still raged on. But while Bella hated what Jacob had gone through as a gay teenager, she did miss a lot about their rich culture.

“I didn’t know you could make frybread,” Bella said, peering around the counter to see if she could figure out whether they were going for sweet or savory. Frybread was typically served tostada style with meat, cheese, tomatoes, and lettuce. Either that or with honey and powdered sugar.
Jake, seeing Bella’s not-so-surreptitious peering, set the honey bear bottle of honey in front of her. Bella fist pumped. “Oh, baby that’s what I like.”

“I have something else you’ll like.”

“Jacob, coming from anyone but you, that would sound like a come on.” She got up and went to the fridge to see if they had anything to drink that wasn’t wine or water. “What else did you bring me?”

“You’ll find out.”

Twenty minutes later, they were curled up together on the couch with sticky fingers, giggling like little kids. Jacob had brought over his video and pictures from Alice’s wedding.

“Oh, my God. Is that her sister? Is that Cynthia?” Bella asked, pointing to a raven-haired woman on the screen who was getting down with her bad self.

“Of course it’s Cynthia. Do you know anyone else her age with that many tattoos?” Jacob tilted his head, considering her. “She’s going to be one of those old ladies without a single inch of unmarked skin, ruling the nursing home with her tales of love and adventure.”

Bella sighed. “Love is so fucking weird.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “Rationally, it’s so individual as to be virtually meaningless.” She picked up his hand, tracing the old outline of Paul’s tattoo. “For you, it was torture and fear, and finally beauty. Cynthia falls in love so easily, and out just as quickly. It’s painless for her, because she loves so much about so many people. Or virtually painless, anyway. She gets wrapped up in someone new all the time.”

“And you. It had to sneak up on you to get past your defenses.”

Bella nodded. “And all of it is love. We can’t say it’s not when the proof is written on our skin. Rationally, what does it mean? Not a damn thing. It doesn’t guarantee we’ll be in love forever. It doesn’t mean you’ve found your soulmate. It doesn’t mean that person won’t hurt you.”

“Rationally, love is meaningless,” Jacob repeated, sounding amused. “But irrationally…”

Jacob raised the control toward the TV, clicking through to the next video. Bella sucked in a breath at the sight on the screen.

There she was in her dark blue bridesmaid’s dress. Alice wasn’t the kind to have hideous dresses, so of course, it suited Bella perfectly. The right fit. The right color. Her hair was swept up into an elegant updo, adorned with delicate flowers.

Screen-Bella tilted her head back, laughing as Edward—devastatingly handsome in black tux—pulled her toward him. The camera zoomed in as he led her to the dance floor. They were literally nose to nose, swaying in a slow dance. They only had eyes for each other, each of them smiling that small, secretive smile of two people deeply in love. She tilted her head up, murmuring something only for him, and his grin widened. He tilted his head down to catch her lips.

To the individual, love was anything but meaningless. Edward looked at her like she was the most precious thing he’d ever laid eyes on, and she looked at him like he was the light of her world. She felt it even then—the enormity of the love she had for Edward. Frightening and exhilarating and…
Rising up her throat? No.

Bella realized almost too late that she was about to be sick. She bolted for the bathroom where she discovered frybread didn’t taste nearly as good the second time around.

“Guess that hit me the wrong way,” she said, somewhat sheepish as she exited the bathroom.

“Apparently.” Jacob was giving her an odd look. He patted his stomach. “I feel fine, and I had the same thing.”

Bella wrinkled her nose. “We all know your stomach isn’t a barometer. That thing is made of steel.”

Jacob laughed. “Fair enough. Go lay down, Bells. I’ll make you some tea.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’ll make me tea?”

“Shut up.” He gave her a gentle push toward the living room. “Embry makes me tea when I don’t feel well. It’s nice.”

“I’m not sure I know how to deal with married-man Jake. You’re so domestic. Making tea and frybread.”

“And I made you sick. I suck at the domesticity thing, apparently.”

“Well, it was damn tasty going down. I’d risk it again.” She grimaced. “In fact, I’m kind of hungry already.”

“Uh huh.”

“What?”

Jake just shook his head. “Nothing. Go lie down.”

“You don’t have to fuss over me. I’m fine.”

“If your doting boyfriend finds out I didn’t, I’ll never hear the end of it. Just humor me, Bella.”

“Fine.” Actually, while her stomach felt fine, Bella did feel a little clammy. Maybe just the slightest bit dizzy. She went to lie on the couch.

“Can you open the door to the balcony?” Bella said when Jake reappeared a few minutes later. “It’s stuffy in here.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Maybe I have a fever. Maybe I’m coming down with something.” She opened one eye to peer at Jake. “Just crack it a minute. I need fresh air.”

“Okay.” Jake went to do as he was told. Then, he laughed. “Hey, Bella? Is there any specific reason you have a bunch of lopsided birdhouses out here?”

~0~

It was Thursday at noon when Edward got Jacob’s text message.
Come home now if you can. She’ll never admit it, but Bella needs you. Really. Not an emergency, but if you can.

He called Bella. She answered on the second ring. “Hey, you.”

There was something off about her voice. The tenderness was there as it always was, but something else too. Something that made her sound shaky. “Hey,” he said. “How are you?”

“I’m good.” She was lying. He felt it in his bones. “How’s work?”

“Ball’s rolling. I have a clear idea of what they’re looking for, and they like my initial ideas.” Though their conversation was mundane, his heart had begun to pound out of control. “Me and the boss are going to schmooze them a little bit at dinner.”

“And then your flight is right after breakfast?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll pick you up from the airport.”

“I thought you had to work.”

“I juggled a few things. I’ve missed you.” Despite the odd tone in her voice, Edward knew without a doubt that her words were nothing but the truth. It was, after all, the longest they’d been apart since Tanya’s enforced separation.

“I’ll see you soon, sweetheart.”

As he hung up the phone, Edward was positive Jacob was right. Something was going on. Something that had his stomach twisted up in knots.

Edward considered his options. His work was done. The clients who’d specifically asked for the firm’s top talents were impressed with Edward’s suggestions. The schmoozing was meant to make them comfortable, but Edward was confident his boss could take care of that part. Just because he was good at it didn’t mean it was necessary.

He made his excuses and hopped the first taxi to the airport. He found a suitable flight and arrived back in Chicago Thursday afternoon—almost twenty-four hours early. Just in time to get home before Bella. He could surprise her with a nice meal, or possibly some romantic mood lighting.

Jacob couldn’t be pressed into telling Edward what the hell he thought was wrong. He simply said that he had a feeling Bella needed him more than she was letting on. As a result, Edward didn’t know if it was something that was better fixed by a long, sweet-smelling bath or a home cooked meal of comfort food.

As it turned out, it didn’t matter. When the cab dropped him off, Edward saw Bella’s car in her spot. Nerves made his skin tingle. He took the stairs two at a time.

The first thing he heard when he got in the door was the heart-wrenching sound of sobs. Specifically, Bella’s sobs. Edward didn’t like hearing people cry. It made him feel helpless, among other things. Hearing Bella sob, though, made his heart and gut twist as his defenses went up. He wanted to gather her in his arms and kiss it better, and then he was going to kill the person who made her cry like this.

“Bella?” He found her easily enough in the living room.
She gave a little yelp, raising her head at the sound of his voice. Her face was red and splotchy. “Edward?” her voice cracked.

As he came around the couch, she launched herself at him. He wrapped his arms tightly around her. “What are you doing here?” she asked, breathless.

“I came home early to surprise you. What are you doing home?”

She didn’t answer. She clung to him, and he kept his arms strong and firm around her. But after a minute, she let out a shaky breath and released him. She wrapped her arms instead around herself, looking away.

“Bella?” He approached her slowly and touched her cheek. She flinched, closing her eyes. “Please tell me what’s wrong.”

She stepped backward, away from him again, her arms still wrapped around herself. She wasn’t looking at him, but at the ground. Her lower lip trembled, and she sucked in a breath, visibly trying to steady herself. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Edward felt like he was going to throw up, his anxiety was that palpable. He swallowed it down, trying to stay calm, still wanting to comfort her. “Why are you sorry?”

Another deep breath. “Because I know what this is to you.” Her voice shook, and she wiped a stray tear away. “And I’m going to ruin this moment for you. And I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, but I’m so scared.”

Despite her efforts, she dissolved into tears again, hiding her face behind her hands. He took a step toward her and put a hand to her back, not sure what to think. She was scaring the hell out of him. “I’m right here, Bella. Please tell me, so I can know how to help.”

Face still behind her hands, she turned and leaned into his embrace. He rubbed her back, and it seemed as though an eon passed before she spoke again. “What?” he asked, unable to decipher the whisper as her face was pressed against his chest.

She raised her head the barest inch. “I’m pregnant.”

Edward was sure his heart stopped, and when it restarted—when his brain restarted—he had no idea how to react.

His mouth twitched, as though he wanted to grin. He did want to grin. He wanted this moment so much with her. He wanted to scoop her up and whirl her around, whooping like a loon. Yet the tremulous sound of her voice as she said those words—the misery and fear he could feel coming off her body—set off every instinct he had to comfort and protect.

She shook in his arms, and when he didn’t say anything, she started to cry again. It was soft at first—sniffles in between whispered, “I’m sorry’s,” but it built to that point it had been when he walked in. The sound of her pain broke his heart, and that, more than anything kicked him into action.

“Shhh.” He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her with him onto the couch. She curled up, tucking herself against him. She was shaking so hard, it frightened him. “Shh, Bella. It’s okay.” He rubbed her back.

Comfort first. She was his priority. He needed to calm her down.

Everything else, anything he was feeling, could wait.
A/N: Many thanks to barburella, songster, mina, MoH, packy, and jfka.

*cracks knuckles* Bring it, anons. The rest of you, how you doing out there?
A/N: Hello, friends. This is a mini-chap, but I think you'll like it.

Jacob left the pregnancy test on the bathroom counter the day before Edward was supposed to get back. Bella had taken one look at it and didn’t need to take it to know what it would say. All the symptoms—her tender breasts, the intermittent sickness that had plagued her all that week—fell into place with a snug snick in her head.

Her period was late. She’d been so busy she hadn’t noticed until then.

As realization sunk in, her head got loud. Loud but wordless. She went about her day in a daze until her phone rang to Edward’s ring tone. Lady in Red. The song they’d slow-danced to the night she fell in love with him. Hearing it, her heart always skipped a beat. Her lips turned up, and excitement raced through her. It was an automatic reaction, and it cut through the fog.

She missed him so much right then, the ache was physically painful. When she heard his voice all she knew was that she needed him. She needed his arms around her. She opened her mouth to beg him to come home and only barely caught herself.

His call had been the beginning of a dizzying spiral. Then, he appeared as though he’d heard her internal monologue of, “I need you, I need you, oh god, I need you.” But only when she was in his arms did she realize how fucked up the whole situation was. She needed his comfort desperately, but it was so warped.

In those quiet, intimate moments, when they lay in bed together, just staring at each other, Bella dreamed. She dreamed of moments she had no doubt were in their future. She dreamed of whispering those words to him. Or better yet, devising some clever set up to tell him they were going to have a baby. He would be over the moon, and she wanted to revel in his happiness.

Her dreams never looked like this.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered again as she got a handle on her tears. Some numb part of her wondered if she could blame the hormones already.

Edward cupped her face in his hands and wiped away her tears with the pads of his thumbs. “Stop saying you’re sorry,” he said, his voice gentle but firm. “Just talk to me.”

She was cradled on his lap, safe and secure despite her misery. She sniffled, calming further as she tried to find the right words. “It’s my fault, first of all. I’ve been going, going, going for what? Two months now? Work. Alice’s wedding. Greece. I guess I wasn’t great about my birth control.”

He readjusted them so there was more space between them. Just a little—enough that he could look her in the eyes. He smoothed her hair back. “Tell me why you’re scared.”

At that, she gave a huff of laughter. She traced a finger along the collar of his shirt. “Being with you isn’t a struggle, okay? You need to know that. I love you, and I love our life together. It’s just
so full. I wouldn’t have it any other way, but what is this going to do?”

Once she started, everything came out in a torrent of words she couldn’t stop. “And it’s not only
that I don’t know what a pregnancy is going to do to our already full life. I just started getting more
assignments at work. Important assignments. People are beginning to know my name, which is an
incredible thing for a journalist. Doors are opening everywhere, and all of it depends on my ability
to keep up the pace. Now is the time to be flexible at work. If I’m big and pregnant…” She shook
her head and bit her lip because she didn’t know. She didn’t know what was going to happen.

Edward ran his fingers through her hair. “It’s not that you don’t want a baby at all?”

“No,” she said quickly, looking up. “I…” Her heart twisted, heavy in her chest, and she closed her
eyes. “You have no idea how badly I want to want this right now.” She opened her eyes and
pressed her palm to his cheek. “I want everything with you. And maybe that’s the problem. I want
everything. I want to be yours. I want to have your beautiful babies. But I also want to be an
amazing journalist. It’s just that there’s only so much of me to go around. I’m at a point in my
career that when I get handed a story, I say yes. I get up and go and I do it no matter what the
circumstances are. I prove that I can do anything so I can get to the point where I can choose what I
want to do, what kind of journalist I want to be.

“That was when I figured we’d have kids. When it got to the point where there are long stretches
that I can breathe. Take a few easy stories because the right people already know who I am. I’ve
had so many advantages, Edward. Working for Tanya, her throwing me into the deep side of the
pool on my first assignment, Zafrina making sure my interviewing skills would be noticed. But I’m
still new to the game. It’s so fucking ironic, really, because in normal careers, I might have had
time while I languished on the fashion column or something like that. It might have been years
before I caught a break. Hell, I may never have caught a break, and having a baby then wouldn’t
have been a big deal.

“But I’m on the fast track, and I’m terrified of what will happen if I can’t take advantage of it. This
is going to set me back, and I’m scared of what that means.”

Bella winced. This should have been the simplest, most wonderful thing in the world. She was in
love with an amazing man, and they were going to have a baby. This was a lot of people’s
definition of happily ever after.

To his credit, Edward kept his face open. He took her hands, brought her knuckles to his lips, and
pressed a long kiss there. “You know, I watched Rosalie go through four pregnancies. Each one of
them was different. I’m not going to say pregnancy is easy. Rosalie is tough as nails, but Vera
knocked the wind out of her in a major way. Emmett told me once that after what she went through
with Vera, she was terrified when she got pregnant with Joey.” He laughed. “But then her
pregnancy with Joey was so easy, she wasn’t scared by the time she had Abby.”

He wrapped his arms around her, bringing her onto his lap again and brushing her nose with his.
“You’re the strongest person I know, Bella, and this isn’t the 1800’s. It’s not even the 1950’s.
There’s nothing saying you have to put your feet up and relax when you’re pregnant. You can be
just as busy a bee if that’s what you want to do. And yes, I know there’s always that possibility
you’ll have a difficult pregnancy and not be able to work. But anything is possible, you know what
I mean? Any number of things could have happened to us. What if I had gotten into an accident,
hmm? You would have had to give up everything to nurse me back to health.”

She tightened her arms around his neck reflexively. “Edward,” she admonished, even though she
knew he was teasing her.
“The point is, a lot of things can happen, and the outcome isn’t as good as a baby. I’m not going to lie to you. It might be a setback,” he said, rubbing her back with a gentle pressure. “There are always going to be setbacks. You’re smart, Bella, and you’re talented. You’re going to get where you’re going one way or another. That’s a foregone conclusion.”

He chuckled again, and the look in his eyes was so inexplicably tender, it made Bella’s heart ache. Not the bad way this time. The good way. “Bella,” he whispered, brushing his lips against hers. “Don’t be afraid. I’m going to take such good care of you.” He kissed her again, a firmer kiss this time. “We’re having a baby.”

Bella’s heartbeat picked up, but for the first time since that morning, she detected a cautious twinge of excitement.

Edward shifted, keeping one arm braced around her and settling the other over her flat belly. He looked at her, and she could see unadulterated adoration there. More than that, she could see the light of an intense, overwhelming joy.

They were going to have a baby. The reality of it hit her full force then. Fear, yes. She was still terrified, but oh god, she wanted this. A little boy with his green eyes and his smile. A little girl with bronze curls. A new life created of the beautiful love they shared.

“Holy crow,” she said on a breath. “We’re going to have a baby.”

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He fought it, but within seconds he was beaming. He kissed her once, twice, again. Then he sucked in a breath. “I’m going to be a daddy?”

And that was nothing but a good thing. Seeing Edward with his nieces and nephews made her happy and wistful. Thinking of Edward with his own child—their baby—filled Bella was a pleasure she’d never known before. She laughed. No. She giggled. “You’re going to be a daddy,” she whispered.

He gathered her close and started to pepper her face with fervent kisses. Then he buried his head at her neck and laughed. It was a deep chuckle that vibrated against her skin. He got up, squeezing her almost too tightly as he spun her around. “We’re going to have a baby!”

Finally, he set her down. He took her face in his hands and kissed her. It was a serious kind of kiss, building in intensity. She whimpered as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

“I love you,” he said when they were both breathless. He put his hand to her belly and grinned. The wide, goofy grin of an expectant father. “I love you both.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I want to take a moment to send love out to all of you. Today is a day marred with such hate. Sometimes, it’s hard to see past the hate around us. But I’m a firm believer that there’s more good in the world than bad.

I want you guys, my readers, to know, you’re part of the proof of good in my world. Thank you.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

A/N: Why is it 10:30 PM on Sunday? I do not concur.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Edward, what are you doing?”

Edward looked up, a little bleary-eyed. “Huh?”

Bella smirked. He was out on their balcony with his birdhouses spread out all around him. But she’d been watching him for a few minutes. He was out of it, which made sense, seeing as it was three in the morning. She tightened her robe around her as he blinked fully awake.

He opened his arms, and Bella sat on his lap, shivering against the chill in the way-too-early May morning. He wrapped his arms around her. She hissed as he slipped his hands under her nightshirt and spread them side by side over her belly.

She smiled, warmth spreading through her veins. It had been a week since they’d found out, and he couldn’t stop touching her. He was obsessed with her body. He’d made it his personal mission to catalogue any change he could. Which, at this point, mainly meant that he enjoyed figuring out exactly how sensitive her breasts were.

“Sorry,” he said, kissing her shoulder. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Why are you hanging out on the balcony at three in the morning?”

He grumbled. The sound vibrated against her skin sending a pleasant sensation through her. “Couldn’t sleep.”

She ran the tip of her nose along his cheek. Neither of them had been sleeping well, both grappling with this thing that had happened; the irrevocable change on the horizon.

Bella knew she would love their baby and would never regret him or her even for an instant. But it was a vague kind of knowledge; the same hazy truth everyone knew when they fell in love for what they thought would be the last time. It was a someday kind of knowledge. She wanted to be a mother. Someday.

But the fact her motherhood now had a due date hadn’t sunk into her in any real way. Now, the baby was a set of symptoms she couldn’t shake. She’d been nauseated and dizzy all week long; hardly able to concentrate. Though she hadn’t been to the doctor yet—she had an appointment for the following week—she knew well enough that the nausea usually didn’t last forever, but it worried her that this pregnancy was already affecting her job.

On the other hand, Edward was grappling with what would come after the pregnancy. The baby. He’d wanted to be a father for so long, but that dream had always been out of reach. He’d never had a reason really consider the logistics.

“You couldn’t sleep,” Bella said, kissing his cheek. “So you decided to come outside and stare at
your birdhouses?"

He wasn’t staring so much as glaring with furrowed eyebrows. “It should be the simplest thing in
the world. I create complex buildings, Bella. Why can’t I do this?”

“Why does it matter?” she asked, not unkindly.

He ducked his head again, nuzzling her shoulder. “Because I want to build our kid a playhouse. Or
a fort. Or a boxcar.”

Bella tilted his head up, a smile tugging at her lips because this man was so unbearably good. “You
know it’s going to be like, almost eight months until the kid’s born, right? And after that, it takes a
while before they want things like forts. And besides, we don’t even have a yard.”

At that, he made a face. “We will, won’t we? You don’t want to stay in this apartment forever, do
you?”

Her heart began to pound harder. There were so many ‘someday’ ideas that suddenly seemed so
pressing. “I haven’t really thought about it, but a house makes sense. Eventually.”

“Eventually,” he agreed. He tilted his head, studying her a moment. He twirled a strand of her hair
around and around his finger. “Eventually a lot of things.”

She ducked her head. “Can I ask you something without you making fun of me?”

“When do I make fun of you?”

“Teasing.”

He smiled and kissed her lips sweetly. “I won’t tease you.”

“I’m just kind of surprised that you…” She huffed, feeling her cheeks burn. “Never mind. Forget I
said anything.”

“Right. Like that’s going to happen.” He gave her a little shake, his arms wrapping more firmly
around her. “Tell me.”

She made an effort to smile, as though she were the one teasing him. “I’m a little surprised that you
didn’t propose pretty much the second I told you I was pregnant.”

A tender, if bemused, smile came over his face. He stroked her cheek. “Why didn't you ask me?”

It was a fair point. Sauce for the goose, and all that. He was calling her on the fact that she didn't
necessarily want to get married. She just figured he would use it as an excuse.

“I don’t want it to be a reaction to the baby,” she said finally.

“I didn’t want you to think it was a reaction to the baby.”

She eyed him. “So you did think about it.”

He smirked and then tilted his head down to kiss her shoulder. “You’re the love of my life, Bella
Swan. I don’t ever want to be without you. Marriage was a foregone conclusion as far as I’m
concerned.” His smile fell, and he considered her more seriously. “Where are you at with that?”

Bella took a deep breath and let it out again. “I don’t ever want to be without you.” In fact, it had
occurred to her recently that the idea of losing him was her very worst fear. Over everything—her job, her parents—it felt as though losing him would kill her. “Marriage...it’s a symbol. Words and a party aren’t going to change how I feel about you. I love you; I’m committed to you, and I know you’re committed to me. I’ve never needed that symbol to know that.”

“People make symbolic gestures all the time.” He let his hand trail along the back of her leg down to caress her ankle. “You modified the tattoo you were born with to symbolize you were your own person.”

She kissed the tip of his nose. “I didn’t say it was a bad symbol. I didn’t say I was against it.”

“If I’d have asked?”

She ducked her head, ridiculously shy at the thought. “I’d have said yes.” She raised her head again to look at him. “But not until after the baby is born.”

“Because of what people would think?”

“No. Because I don’t want to have to buy a dress from the tent and awning company.”

He grinned, moving his hand down to stroke her belly again. “We could always head down to the courthouse,” he said, teasing.

“Ha.” She eyed him. “You want a wedding,” she accused.

He tilted his head, watching her a moment. There was a strange look in his eyes—not quite sadness, not quite regret. “More symbols,” he said with a small smile. “I’ve been married before, so I can never say you’re my only wife.”

“You know that doesn’t bother me, right?” She wasn’t jealous of Tanya or the life he’d had with her. It always seemed silly to her to begrudge him the fact he’d had a whole other life before she came around and accidentally knocked it on its ass, for better or worse.

“I know that, love. But I do like the idea I can give you something, have something with you, that I never shared with Tanya. I like the idea of vows, of throwing a big party to celebrate that I found you.” He waggled his eyebrows. “And you know I’d take any excuse to dance with you.”

She laughed at that and kissed him. “Ask me someday,” she murmured against his lips. “After we’ve figured out how this all turns out.”

He hummed into her mouth, kissing her eagerly. “You could ask me too, you know. I’m a progressive man, after all.”

“I could. But I figured I’d give you the option of doing something grandiose and ridiculous.”

“Ha.” He kissed her again—a slow, serious kiss. “You don’t like grand gestures.” He trailed a line of kisses at the corner of her mouth. “But I’ll make you this deal. When I ask you to marry me, I won’t make a production of it if…”

She was getting breathless with bliss at his kisses and the feel of his fingers skimming along her skin. “If?”

He cupped a hand over her belly. “If you help me do a big reveal when we tell my family.”

Bella laughed. “What did you have in mind?”
“Are you ready for this?” Edward asked.

Bella’s smile was wan as she looked back at him. Poor girl. She was drawn and tired, as she had been for two weeks. Three, if he counted the week he’d been traveling. He clucked his tongue and tucked her under his arm. He kissed her forehead.

“This is silly,” he said. “You should go rest. I’ll talk to my family.”

“No. I want to be here.” She took a deep breath and made an effort to stand up straighter. “It’s not like I have to do much more than stand there looking queasy.”

Edward’s lip twitched. “Dad might take one look at you and know.”

“Your dad’s a surgeon. He doesn’t deal with many pregnant women.” She made a face. “I hope.”

“Not many,” he assured, giving her another squeeze.

Minutes later, their apartment was a lot more active. Edward’s parents, Emmett, Rosalie, and their two youngest children came in with their usual hugs and clamor. Abby, his almost-four-year-old niece, jumped right into his arms but Joey, his five-year-old nephew went for Bella. Edward had to bite his lip to keep from protesting at the way he barrelled into her.

“What are we having for dessert?” Joey asked. It was his favorite question.

Bella was prepared with an answer. “Pickles and ice cream,” she said, perfectly deadpan.

“Eww,” both the kids said in unison.

“Oh, there’s M&M’s over here,” Abby said, spotting the bowl on the coffee table and heading for it.

Rosalie caught her by the hood of her sweater. “Is this your house, Abby?”

“No.” Abby looked over at Edward, her eyes wide. The dreaded look. “Please, Uncle, can we have some?”

“Not enough to spoil your dinner,” Edward said.

“We can have five,” Joey decided, settling on his knees in front of the couch, his sister beside him. “Well, maybe you can have five, cuz you’re littler. But I can have seven.”

“Four.” Rosalie said.

By then, Joey was distracted. “Hey, Unc? You don’t have any red ones.” He made a face. “You only have blue in here. And pink. Weird.”

“There are pink M&M’s now?” Esme asked. She kissed Edward’s cheek in greeting.

“They have them on Valentine’s Day,” Bella said, her expression the picture of innocence.

Edward had to hide his grin behind his hand. He cleared his throat, putting his game face on. “Beer?” he asked.

He served Emmett first, and by the time he handed Bella her bottle of water, his brother was
staring at his glass with a perplexed look on his face. Edward’s heartbeat spiked in anticipation. “What are you looking at, Em?”

“I was just trying to remember when the hell I got this for you,” he said, turning the glass around so everyone could see.

It said: World’s Most Mediocre Uncle.

“Did you give it to me?” Edward asked, feigning the same innocence Bella had earlier.

“That is his sense of humor,” Rosalie said dryly. “But I don’t remember that one either.”

Edward hummed nonchalantly.

“Do you need help with anything in the kitchen?” Carlisle asked, and Edward had to fight a smirk. He was wondering when someone was going to notice that there were no delicious smells permeating the room.

“Ah, Edward had to run an emergency redesign up to the office this morning, and I’ve been feeling a little under the weather,” Bella said. Both of those things were nothing but the truth. “We ordered barbeque from that place you like. They deliver.”

Rosalie’s face brightened. “The one with the great baby back ribs?”

Again, Edward had to bite the inside of his lip. By that point, even Bella looked amused. “That’s the one,” she said.

“Are you feeling okay now, Bella?” Esme asked, her brows knitted in concern. “You do look a little pale.”

“I was nauseated this morning.” Also the truth. “But I’m okay now.”

The kids ran off to watch TV in Edward’s room, and the adults got to talking. When Edward got the notification that their meal was out for delivery, he got up and went to the fridge. “Hey, Mom.” He was pleased his voice didn’t shake, as he was getting excited again. “We do have one thing we want to warm up. You think you can turn the oven on for me?”

When they were little, Emmett and Edward—bratty boys they were—had gone through a phase where they shoved all kinds of things in the oven. Esme and Carlisle both had taken to checking the oven before they turned it on to avert disaster. Edward knew for a fact his mother still did it out of habit.

So, it was no surprise when, before she turned the oven on, she opened it to make sure it was clear. She laughed. “You two,” she said in a scolding voice. “Did you know there’s a bun in your oven?”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth she gasped and whirled, her hands to her mouth. “No,” she said.

Edward didn’t try to hide his grin then. He let it spread so wide it hurt his cheeks. His mother’s eyes lit up and she started to vibrate in place.

Carlisle stood up. “What’s going on?”

“There’s a bun. A bun!” Esme exclaimed.

Now, Edward had to bite his lip to keep from laughing as his father stared at his mother as though
she’d gone out of her mind. “What?”

“You’re pregnant?” Rosalie asked Bella, catching on now.

“Wait, what?” Emmett said.

And all hell broke loose. There was shouting and hugs and Emmett thwacked Edward’s back hard enough his eyes watered.

“That glass is my gift to you, by the way,” Edward said with great satisfaction.

His brother chortled. “Okay, little brother. Well played.”

All the yelling and screaming brought the kids running. Edward told them they were going to be cousins. When they didn’t understand what that meant, he told them he and Bella were going to have a baby. That resulted in a new round of yelling, screaming, and jumping, but with higher-pitched voices. Both of them tag teamed Bella, wrapping her in a bouncing little kid hug. Then, they turned their attention to Edward. He wrapped his arms around them both, lifting them up off the ground so their legs dangled.

Esme had begun to pepper Bella with all sorts of questions, obviously overwhelming her in her excitement. Before Edward could rescue his queasy girlfriend, Rosalie took over. When he was assured his sister-in-law would protect Bella from his overzealous mother, Edward turned to find his father standing beside him.

Strange. For a man in his late thirties, standing beside his father, he felt like a tiny boy again—a little uncertain, as though maybe he might have done something wrong, and desperate for his approval. Carlisle’s ecstatic grin quieted a worry Edward hadn’t even known he’d had until that very moment. His father pulled him into a hug.

“Congratulations,” he said. “This is great news. Was this planned?”

Edward huffed and ducked his head as he stepped out of his father’s embrace. “Not even a little.”

He’d been surprised how hard it hit him that night Bella told him. Yes, he was excited. Beyond excited, he was thrilled and overjoyed. He didn’t have the words. But oh, god. In the quiet of the night that first night, when Bella had drifted into an exhausted sleep, Edward lay awake for hours.

Was there ever such thing as ready?

Carlisle squeezed his shoulder. “Well, if this baby is anything like you or your brother, I’d recommend investing in a strong anti-anxiety medication, and perhaps anger management classes.”

Edward rolled his eyes. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Karma’s a bitch.” His eyes twinkled, but his tone was more serious when he spoke again. “You’re going to be a wonderful father, Edward.”

“I know,” Edward said, his tone soft. “I had you.”

~0~

As the evening went on, Bella got more and more quiet. It worried Edward, but he didn’t say anything until his family was on their way home.

Bella was sitting on the couch, staring off into space when Edward came back from seeing his
parents to their car. He sat beside her and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back against his chest. “Where are you, love?”

“Here,” she said, relaxing back against him. “It got a lot more real today.”

“Did it?” he asked gently, hoping she was going to elaborate.

“Everyone had so many questions. So many things I haven’t thought about yet.”

“Bella.” He nuzzled her, breathing her in. “It’s so early. There’s not much you have to think of yet. Maybe this, and not superstition, is exactly why people wait until the second trimester to say anything.”

She hummed. “They were so happy,” she said after another moment, chuckling. “The look on your mother’s face was one of the best things I’ve ever seen.”

“Yes,” Edward said, hiding his own grin in her hair.

Bella turned in his arms. “I love you, you know. And this crazy family you dragged me into.”

“Takes one to know one,” he said and stuck his tongue out at her.

She rolled her eyes, but her lips quirked up in a grin. “So mature, Edward. You’re going to have to work on that. You’re going to be a father, you know.”

He wondered how long it would take for those words not to send a thrill through him. He kissed her. Enthusiastically. “I know.” He kissed her again. “See, we both have things to work on before the baby comes.”

“A lot of things.”

He kissed her again. And again. And again.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Many thanks to Mina, Packy, MoH, barburella, and songster. Hope those of you who celebrate had a wonderful fabulous with your fathers/baby daddies.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Good day, friends. Happy Birthday Steve Rogers!!

And America.

Anyway. Ready for some fireworks?

It didn’t look like a baby. Not yet.

Bella should have been working. Instead, she was staring. She rested her head on her desk—she was still so tired—and ran her fingers over the image. They told her this little thing was inside her. She couldn’t quite believe it even though she’d watched the shape appear on the monitor. It looked like a newborn baby rodent. She imagined it, hairless and pink, wiggling in her belly. That was a bad idea. The nausea came back with a vengeance.

“Brilliant, Bella,” she groaned, resting her forehead on her desk. “Imagining a naked mouse in your stomach was a good call.”

A knock on her cubicle wall drew her attention, and she raised her head too quickly. She caught her head between her hands and rubbed her temples. “Hey, Eric.”

“You okay, Bella?” her boss asked as he sat in the chair across from her.

Not really. I’m pregnant, and I don’t have time for it. Not this week. Try me again next week. She made a concerted effort to sit up straighter and smile. “Yeah. Just a little tired.”

“It’s been a hectic week, and it’s going to be a busy weekend, too,” Eric said, stroking his chin. “But the end is in sight. I have a nice, cozy fluff piece on the horizon. Mostly research, because he hates when reporters don’t know everything about him. Pretentious prick.” He drummed his fingers on her desk, a far off look on his face. “After that, though, I’m about ninety percent sure I want you on a pretty intense story.”

Bella cocked her head, interested and dismayed at the same time. She was so tired these days. “What kind of assignment?”

Eric waved a hand, all smiles again. “Never mind that. I have to work out a few kinks before I can get anyone on it.”

“Okay.” Bella felt a twinge of impatience. She wanted to rest her head on the desk for a minute. Just a minute. If her head would stop spinning, that would be a bonus. “You came in here to talk to me about something?”

“Right. Do you know the Correspondents’ Dinner?”

Bella perked up, excitement making her heart skip a beat. “The one that the who’s who of Chicago news and reporting attend? The one that frequently hosts big wigs from New York City and Los
Angeles? No, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Eric chuckled. “It’s time we get your face out there to the right people. I want to take you. A couple of others, but you too.”

Bella couldn’t help it. She gave a single bounce in her chair and squeaked.

“Here’s the thing I want to talk to you about though,” Eric said.

Bella’s face fell. That didn’t sound good.

“It’s not a big deal. Well.” He rolled his eyes. “At least not to me, but Katie, my ex, always said I was bad at gauging these things.” He shook his head. “Here’s the thing. I’ve been seeing Tanya for a few months.”

“What?” Bella blinked, sure she wasn’t understanding. “Tanya Cullen?”

Holding her gaze, Eric nodded. “I figured it was only fair to warn you since I plan to take her to the dinner as my plus one.”

“Oh huh.” Bella bit the inside of her cheek. “What does Tanya have to say about that?”

“You’re my priority at the moment.” Eric grinned. “Which is probably why I’m divorced.”

At that, Bella snorted. “Oh, man. Don’t tell Tanya that. I’m pretty sure if you tell her another man prioritized me above her, she’d kill all three of us.”

Eric threw his head back. “Ah, I don’t think you’re wrong.”

“Tanya. Wow.”

“The news business is nothing if not incestuous. You’ll figure that out soon enough.”

“Yeah, but Edward and Tanya at the same table?” Bella rubbed her forehead. “I don’t think they’ve seen each other in a year.” And that hadn’t been pretty.

“Well, I know it’s going to be awkward. But you and Tanya run in the same circles. It was bound to happen sometime.”

“True.” Bella ran a hand through her hair and smiled at her boss. “At least we know it’s going to be an interesting night.”

~0~

Edward stared at her when she told him. Bella grimaced and tried not to squirm like a child in trouble. The silence stretched on. “Okay. We don’t have to go,” she said in a rush.

That broke his stare. He blinked and shook his head. “Bella. We’re going to go.” He pushed up from where he was sitting and went to join her on the couch. “Of course we’re going to go. This thing is a big deal.” His lips curled up in a sardonic smirk. “Believe me, I remember.”

“Right. Because you’ve been there with Tanya. And now you’re going to be there again. With Tanya.” Bella scrunched her nose. “Christ, this is going to be awkward. We really don’t have to go.”

He took her by the arms. “We’re going. I’m not afraid of my ex-wife.”
“Are you sure?” Bella squinted. “She’s kind of scary.”

Edward laughed and kissed her forehead tenderly. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ll be there to help you slay the scary dragon.”

“Oh, the dragon. Her tattoo is super appropriate.” She sighed and draped her legs over his. “I was robbed, you know. I should have had something fierce. Something scary. Dragons symbolize power and mysticism. You know what vines symbolize?”

“I don’t, actually.”

Bella made a face. “Fertility.”

Edward snorted and splayed a hand over her belly, stroking her there. “Well, I guess we should have seen this coming, then.”

Bella crossed her arms over her chest and harrumphed.

“So what would you have gotten?”

“Symbolically or for pure badassness?”

“Badass, of course.”

“I’ve always wanted to have eyes instead of vines. But not regular eyes, you know? Really creepy eyes. The kind you would expect to see in a horror movie just peering out at you from a dark and creepy forest.” She made clawing motions at his face.

Obligingly, he cowered in mock fright before he chuckled and caught her hands in his. He kissed her knuckles. “You’re plenty fierce, Bella. All on your own.” He dropped his hand to her leg and let his fingers tease the underside of her leg. “Besides. I love your tattoo.”

“Hmm.” She pursed her lips, trying to cover a wicked smile. “It is useful sometimes. In my job.”

He quirked an eyebrow, taking the bait. “What do you mean? How is the vine running all the way up your leg useful in your job?”

She tilted her head, fixing him with a coquettish grin. “You know.” She ran her foot along his leg. “When I wear the right skirt, that tattoo has its advantages with guys. Distraction is a good way to get a guy’s guard down and get the answers you want.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Oh, is it?”

“For the stubborn ones. Sure.”

His hand clamped down on her ankle. He brought her leg back up, hitching it around his waist and pulling her closer. Her breath caught. “Are you trying to drive me out of my mind?” Edward asked, his voice a low, dangerous rumble.

A shiver shot down her spine. “Is it working?”

He scoffed, drawing her closer, his hand firm on her back. He kissed her. A good kiss—one with power and conviction in it, claiming what was his. “You drove me crazy a long time ago, witch.” He kissed her again. “There’s no sense in doing it again.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” She pushed on his chest, and when he obeyed, laying back on the couch
with his hands on her waist, she straddled him. There was no more talk of tattoos and the angry dragon after that.

~0~

Edward had never seen Bella so concerned about what she was wearing. She had Alice and Embry in their bathroom with her. It was like the counsel of hair and makeup.

The problem was twofold. Bella’s body was changing, and she didn’t find it easy to deal with. Personally, Edward loved the changes. He loved touching her—finding all the new ways she was sensitive and responsive. The swell of her pregnancy was perceptible, though not to a casual observer.

But her body was also thicker, and that was making her self-conscious. Especially because she was hyper aware she’d be interacting with Tanya tonight. If anything, she was glowing. Edward had never seen her look so attractive, but it was no use telling her that. So he chatted with Jacob while the other two enhanced Bella’s natural beauty.

“Is any of this weird for you?” Jacob asked.

“What do you mean?”

The other man shrugged. “I’d hate to hang out with my exes. Any of them. Granted, they’re all assholes, but still. It has to be awkward.”

Edward considered this. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t thought about it in the three weeks since he’d known about the dinner. He’d considered texting her. Maybe having a conversation before the dinner. But he’d reached out to her several times since their divorce was finalized. She’d shut him down each and every time.

“I don’t hate Tanya. I never did. That wasn’t why we ended,” he said. “Given how it ended, I wouldn’t have blamed her if I never saw her again. That just isn’t our reality, though. She and Bella are colleagues, so we were going to have to get this over with sooner than later.”

“Still might suck,” Jacob said. “And not in the good way.”

“They're professionals. They'll survive.”

“And you?”

“You mean will one or both of them tear me apart instead?” Edward straightened his tie. “I'll survive too, somehow.”

Jacob grunted. “Bella would win in a cat fight, you know,” he said after a minute.

Edward snickered. “I'd say you're right, but I'm not sure her doctor would approve of fighting during pregnancy.”

“Even then…”

The door down the hallway opened, and Edward stood, eager to see the result of all the fuss. He didn’t think he would ever get sick of seeing Bella dressed up, of knowing he would be dancing with the most beautiful woman in the room.

But it was Embry who emerged. “Hold on a second, honey,” he called over his shoulder. “I need to
get your last accessory.” He reached out and took Edward by the hand, giving him the once over.
“Hmm.” He reached up, tousled Edward’s hair, looked him over again and sighed. “Well, it’ll have
to do. Come along.”

Bemused, Edward let the other man lead him to where the hallway met the living room. He turned
him around, facing away from the door to the bedroom. “Hey,” Edward protested.

“Settle down,” Embry admonished, buttoning the bottom of Edward’s suit jacket. “Your role
tonight is decorative arm candy.”

Edward rolled his eyes but let Embry fuss over him. “Okay, arm candy,” Embry said, straightening
his jacket one more time and brushing off imaginary lint. “Keep your face forward and present
your arm.” He brought Edward’s arm out at the elbow, propping it so Bella could slide her arm
through his.

“Face forward,” Embry said again when Edward peered over his shoulder. “Come on out, Bella.”

Impatient with a boyish excitement to see his beautiful girl, Edward had to struggle not to wiggle.
He heard her footsteps in the hall, the swish of a dress against her ankles, and smiled as her warm
arm looped through his. He grinned, bringing his other hand over to touch hers.

Embry came to stand in front of them, hands on his hips, surveying his work. Behind him, Jacob
grinned indulgently. Jake looked to Bella, mouthed, “wow,” and flashed two thumbs up. “You’ll
do,” Embry said with a satisfied nod.

Finally, Edward looked to the woman on his arm. His breath caught.

She was, as always, a vision. Her hair was down—sleek and straight. Her dress didn’t emphasize
her curves but flowed down. Blue. She knew he liked her in dark blue. She looked like a woman
ready to own the room, but when her eyes met his her expression softened.

“You’re exquisite,” he said with a sigh and leaned down to kiss her cheek. “Are you ready?”

Bella laughed. “Not even a little bit, but let’s go anyway.”

~0~

It was awkward. There was no getting around that. Here was the thing—news people were natural
gossips, and they were shameless about it. There was no getting around the fact many people in the
room were used to seeing Edward—on Tanya’s arm. It hadn’t been that long ago that he’d been
Tanya’s decorative arm candy.

Of course they couldn’t help but be curious. He wasn’t the one in the business, and yet he was
here, without Tanya, on the arm of a virtual unknown. They started slinking in his direction almost
the moment he came in the door.

Edward reached over, absently stroking Bella’s back as one man not-so-subtly dug for details.
“You have some balls, my friend,” Garrett Larson, a local news personality, said with a laugh.
“Keeping it in the family, I mean. How did you two meet, then?”

“I made the rookie mistake of leaving my handsome husband alone with my pretty assistant.”

Edward stiffened. He turned to find his ex-wife had materialized behind him. She flashed him a
sweet smile, her blue eyes glinting. “Hello, Edward. It’s good to see you again.” Before he could
answer, her eyes flicked to Bella. “And you, Bella. That’s a stunning dress.”
Without letting them speak, Tanya stepped closer to Garrett. “I always have been able to pick talent out of the crowd. That’s why I turned to management instead of staying in the reporting field. Bella is no exception. She’s the one responsible for that wonderful interview with Zafrina Ibori last year. Do you remember?”

His eyes darting between all of them, Garrett nodded. “Yes. You got her to open up like a flower. It was incredible.”

“She’s good,” Tanya said with a nod. She patted Garrett’s arm. “Anyhow, it’s good to see you.” And with that, she was off.

Edward blew out a breath through his nose and looked to Bella. She looked paler than she had been a few moments before. Irritation flicked in her eyes. Beside them, Garrett laughed and whistled. “That woman is a hurricane force, isn’t she?” He chuckled. “Well, good luck to both of you tonight.”

~0~

“If she leaves it at that, leave it alone,” Bella had told him. “Her ex-husband is here with a younger woman. A woman her boyfriend is endorsing. I’ll take the one hit if it makes her feel better.”

Having dealt the first blow was obviously all Tanya needed. When they sat down at their table together, she was relaxed and serene. The conversation wasn’t comfortable at first. Tanya wouldn’t look at Edward, but she wasn’t being rude either.

Edward had almost let his guard down when Eric cleared his throat. “Well, come on, Bella. I made the rounds with Tyler and Austin. It’s your turn.”

Bella turned to Edward who smiled encouragingly at her. He reached up to squeeze her hand. “Remember, it’s bad form to let someone woo you away to a different paper in front of your boss.” He winked.

She grinned, some of the nervousness fading from her eyes. “I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

He watched her for a long moment until a sharp smack to his arm drew his attention. “Ow. What the hell?” He looked up to find Tanya standing over him.

“You’re a selfish asshole, you know that?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Sit down,” he said, glancing around. Tyler and Austin were both mingling away from the table just then, and no one seemed to be looking their way. “What’s your problem?”

Tanya scoffed, dropping into the seat next to him. “Luckily for me, you’re no longer my problem. And I suppose I should be vindictively pleased that you’re so damn selfish, but it’s a shitty thing to do. Your little girlfriend’s career is just taking off. Did you think about that at all?”

“Are you going to start making sense, or is this amusing to you?” Edward asked, thoroughly irritated now.

She leveled him with an icy glare. “She’s pregnant, isn’t she?”

A jolt of shock went down Edward’s spine and in spite of himself, his lips quirked downward. Tanya pointed at him. “I knew it. She’s...she’s fucking glowing. And she must have turned down Eric’s offer of alcohol five times. You don’t turn down your boss when he wants to have a drink with you. Christ.”
“Tanya, just because it’s not what you wanted doesn’t mean it’s a horrible thing.”

“Oh, give me a break.” His ex-wife fixed him with a withering stare. “We’re divorced. You don’t get to guilt me over that anymore. This isn’t about me. This is about what you did to her. I used to like her; we used to be friends, or something like it. I know what she wanted out of her life, out of her career. What is it—did you use up all your patience with me, and now you’re just going to get what you want, fuck her? It’s not fair, Edward.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but this pregnancy wasn’t planned. By either of us.”

Tanya snorted derisively. “Right. We managed not to get pregnant for twenty years, but it just happened accidentally a little more than a year after you got with her? And it was the reason you divorced me?”

“That isn’t the reason I divorced you,” Edward said, hissing under his breath now. “I didn’t... “ He shook his head. The idea he’d done this to Bella on purpose was beyond insulting. “It happened. That’s all there is to it. Why this has to affect her career is beyond me.”

“Of course it’s beyond you. All those years you got to pretend you were the understanding husband, keeping the home fires burning while I did what I had to do. You got all the praise in public while in private I got to put up with your pouting and your constant guilt. But I did it, and here I am. I have a solid career, a great reputation, and I’m not lonely. Where will she be?”

“Out in the field doing exactly what she’s doing now, but with a baby to come home to.”

“You’re so fucking short sighted. You don’t get it. You don’t get it at all. This is already affecting her career. You don’t know the assignment Eric was planning to send her on. I do.”

Edward frowned. “She’s at work. She can still work. Why would this affect whether or not he gives her an assignment?”

“Because you don’t send a pregnant woman on an assignment like this.”

“A what?” another voice said.

Dread went down Edward’s spine like someone had poured ice down his back. He closed his eyes briefly before he turned to find Eric and Bella standing beside the table.

“What’s going on here?” Eric asked, looking between Tanya and Edward.

Tanya stood up. “Nothing. You should know your star reporter is pregnant. I’m going to get a drink.”

Eric turned to Bella. “You’re pregnant?” he asked just as Tyler and Austin returned to the table. Their eyes widened.

Edward ran a hand over his mouth, watching Tanya’s retreating figure. Hurricane Tanya indeed.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: WELP...that happened.
This did not receive full beta from songster, so all mistakes are mine. Packy, Eleanor, and Mina caught a fair few though!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you for your patience, duckies! Let’s get to it.

Eric did Bella the solid of meeting her for lunch the day after the disastrous dinner. She didn’t feel much like eating—her stomach was twisting too badly with nerves—but she ordered something to drink anyway. She didn’t want her boss thinking she felt sick because of the pregnancy.

“I guess I want to apologize,” she began as soon as the waiter had walked away. “I should have told you—”

Eric held up a hand. “You know as well as I do, as well as Tanya does, for that matter, that you had every right to keep that information from me. When you told me has always been your prerogative, Bella, and I’m sorry it came out the way it did.” He hesitated a moment. “I don’t like to speak for other people, but I feel like maybe this is one of those times I should. It’s not that I’m trying to make excuses for Tanya. That’s not my place, and I don’t agree with how she handled the situation.” He huffed. “Then again, I know she didn’t agree either. Last night didn’t go the way any of us would have wanted, but I do believe she was genuinely upset on your behalf.”

Bella’s stomach twisted again, and she struggled to keep her expression neutral. “I guess the part I don’t understand is what she thinks this is going to cost me. You weren’t planning on sending me into the middle of the Zika virus outbreak, were you?”

His lip twitched. “No, nothing like that.” He studied her a moment. “Before we go on, let me say again, congratulations. Children are a good thing. How are you feeling?”

“Good. Thank you.” Bella sat up straighter in her seat. “Everything is fine. Nothing that’s affected my work.” Yet, she didn’t add.

“I have no complaints,” he assured, looking her in the eyes.

Their drinks came, and they took a moment to order their lunch. When the waiter walked away, Eric’s expression was contemplative. “From my perspective, I’m not sure why your, ah, condition needs to affect your ability to do this assignment. But as you might imagine, I’m not the leading authority on all things pregnancy.”

“I guess that would depend on the job,” Bella said, trying not to show her impatience.

“I’ll get to the point. I want to do a series of reports on love tattoos.”

Bella’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. She gave a small laugh. “Tattoos? What can be said that hasn’t already been said?” And what the hell did that have to do with her pregnancy?

“And yet people love reading about them. It’s always a big seller.” He leaned on the table, steepling his fingers. “I’m looking to do something slightly more taboo, though.”

Bella was instantly intrigued. “Okay.”
“It’s nice to concentrate on the beautiful side of love. Man, ain’t it grand, all of that. Love can be beautiful, but we like to forget that it can also be terrible.”

Bella scoffed, and Eric nodded. “This is one of the reasons I knew I wanted you on the series,” he said. “You don’t romanticize love. You never have. I know we’ve had discussions about your best friend and your mother. In fact, cases like your mother’s are some of what I want to highlight.” He frowned. “I knew a woman when I was in college. Abusive boyfriend. You know the drill.” He took a deep, steadying breath, obviously still affected all these years later. “Whenever I pressed her, she would always say, ‘He loves me. I know he loves me. It’s written on his skin.’”

This time, Bella’s stomach twisted for a whole other reason. “Love doesn’t make people incapable of hurting each other,” she said.

Eric nodded. “Exactly. The science behind our tattoos is elusive. People do whatever they can to separate the beautiful love they feel from anything ugly. They say it’s not real love, not true love, if this, that, or the other. Yet the existence of those tattoos is proof that there’s nothing inherently good about the emotion of love. The worst monsters of history—Hitler, Mussolini, you name it—all have others’ tattoos. We’re all capable of it.”

“Against our will, even,” Bella murmured, nodding.

She would never, could never, regret falling in love with Edward. Finding him was worth all the pain and complications, but she never would have made the choice to fall in love with her mentor’s husband—a married man, ten years older than her. Love wasn’t rational. That was her biggest problem with it.

“Yes,” Eric said. “History gives us so many examples of what may happen if you fall in love with the wrong person at the wrong time. Love doesn’t discriminate, even if it’s unrequited. One way connections are common.” He sat back, drumming his fingertips on the tabletop. “There are many ways I want to take this series, but among them is the darkest side of love. The abusers, yes—the men and women who die with their murderer’s tattoos on their body, and their murderers with theirs—but also the most disturbing marks of love.”

Bella was riveted.

“I want to talk about people like serial stalkers,” Eric said. “I want to talk about the number of times the courts have failed to convict a rapist because he had his victim’s tattoo, and therefore, they must have done something to get it there.” He paused as though to make sure she was following along. “I want to talk about some of these serial murderers.” Another pause. “I’m this close to securing an interview with Aro Scarpinato.”

A chill went down Bella’s spine at the name. “The serial killer?”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Eric’s lip curled in disgust. “He stalked, kidnapped, raped, and killed five little boys before they caught him.”

“And he has their tattoos.” Bella shivered. “All in a row up his arm. I remember the reports from the courtroom said he seemed to like taunting the families of his victims by rolling up his sleeves. I thought it was terrible—for the parents to have to see their dead baby’s mark on him. To know he must have loved them, as twisted and warped as that love was.”

She eyed her boss carefully, disgust and excitement warring in her. “Are you telling me that’s the interview you want to give me?”
It was beyond a huge opportunity. Aro Scarpinato was infamous. The piece would, no doubt, generate controversy no matter what direction Eric wanted to take it. As long as she didn’t take up some ludicrous position that would piss everyone off, the attention could only mean good things for her. And besides that, it was a fascinating topic.

“Not just Scarpinato,” Eric said. “Marcus Betaluci and James Hunter.”

Bella’s eyes made for her hairline. “Marcus the Mangler?” Twisted soul. He’d been desperately in love with a girl as a teenager. Had stalked her. Ultimately, had murdered her. The act appeared to have sent him over the edge as he’d repeated the process too many times with women who bore a resemblance to his first victim. It was the tattoo that set him off. When their tattoo would appear on his body—a tattoo that didn’t match the first victim, he’d get angry. “But what’s the connection with Hunter?”

“James Hunter, by all accounts, has no soul. There’s no rhyme or reason to his madness. His choice of victim seemed completely random. The only thing consistent was that the person he took suffered greatly and died screaming.”

Bella shuddered. “Christ, that’s terrible.”

“And yet, he has a tattoo. He’s loved someone, though he won’t tell anyone who it is.”

“I see.” Bella furrowed her brow. “But what the hell does any of that have to do with me being pregnant? They’re not going to be loose, right? I’d assume all three of them would be in cuffs and all that, so they’re no danger.”

They paused again while their lunch was served. Bella found her appetite had improved considerably. She wasn’t in trouble, and there was an exciting story on the horizon. She could convince Eric to give it to her. She wanted that story.

“As I said, I’m not so familiar with pregnancy,” Eric said. “I’ve heard the term delicate condition, and I’m not sure how far that goes. Tanya’s concern is the stress.”

“The stress?” Bella arched an eyebrow.

“Serial killers are fascinating, but they’re not fun to work with, Bella,” Eric said, his voice quiet. “The research itself is sickening. You’ll need to know the details of the crime scenes, and believe me when I say it’s not something that helps anyone sleep well at night. Then, there’s being able to talk to them.”

He frowned, drumming his fingertips on the table. “You’d be surprised at how normal they seem at first. But they’re really deranged, and that makes them dangerous. Scarpinato in particular is smart. I trust you’ll understand I don’t mean this as an insult, but he’s smarter than you. He’s smarter than most of us. He can and will get under your skin.”

By the end of that little speech, Bella’s skin was crawling. She didn’t like the idea of a man like Aro Scarpinato being in her head.

Eric spread his hands wide. “So you see the dilemma here. It’s a challenging story to begin with, but it comes with the added bonus of sleepless nights and the stress of a good, old-fashioned mindfuck. I want you on the story. You’re levelheaded, adapt well, and you’ve been good in stressful situations before. I want you to have the story, but not at the cost of your or your baby’s health, of course.”

Bella frowned. Her automatic reaction was to deny that conversations, even with three of the
biggest assholes the world had to offer, wouldn’t affect her pregnancy. Stress, though unpleasant, hadn’t ever plagued her the way it did so many people. Stress for her didn’t come with anxiety.

But then again, the last time she’d been super-stressed about a project had been when Tanya sent her to Israel. That had been crazy—being put on a plane to go to a country she didn’t know much about with only a few hours notice? Having to be most of the world away from Edward when she’d just discovered he loved her, that he’d asked his wife for a divorce? Not knowing what the hell was going to happen—with her job or with Edward—when she came back? Yeah, that had been stressful. Stressful enough that she’d missed a period for the first time in her life.

If stress messed with her body enough to throw her cycle off track, what would it do to a growing and developing fetus? It wasn’t that she was paranoid; she was simply ignorant. She’d been keeping away from the long list of delicious things she could no longer eat, but stress and sleeplessness? She’d been stressed and sleepless over finding herself pregnant in the first place.

“I’ll talk to my doctor. Just in case. But I think it would be fine,” she said in a rush. “I mean, women have healthy babies in stressful situations all the time. Everything should be fine.”

“Talk to your doctor,” Eric said. “And let me know when you’re sure.”

~0~

Bella bounced her leg as she stared at Edward from the opposite side of the couch. “You’re angry,” she said when a minute went by and he hadn’t said a word.

He made an effort to smile. “Not angry. Worried.” He scooted closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders. “Of course, I’m worried. That’s a daddy’s job.”

“Does that mean you think I don’t worry?” She put her hand over the little bump—imperceptible through her clothes—that she could feel beneath her skin. “I worry. It’s not like I don’t think about it. About him. Or her.”

“Bella.” He kissed her forehead, smiling ruefully. “I don’t like the idea of you being in the same room as a serial killer, let alone three. You can’t tell me it’s a comfortable idea to you.”

Comfortable wasn’t the right word for it. “Part of what drew me to this profession was the possibility of meeting fascinating people, knowing fascinating things. Those fascinating things aren’t always going to be pleasant or easy to deal with.”

“No.” His brows were furrowed, and he didn’t look at her as he said it.

“You are angry,” she said. “You don’t want me to take the assignment.”

“Of course I don’t want you to take it, but again, that has more to do with the fact I don’t want those animals anywhere near you.” Edward sighed. “Bella, I’m not telling you not to take it. I would never do that.” He raised his finger and began to trace the shape of her lips. “I know how quickly your job description can change when you’re not interested in a column. You’re a human interest reporter.” He pressed his lips together, hiding a wry smile. “Of course, I wish the humans you’re interested in would all be as benign as Zafrina. Being the supportive boyfriend isn’t always going to be easy.”

“I’m not going to be in any danger,” she said, as much to herself as him. “And I talked to the doctor. He said as long as I monitor my stress level, there’s no reason to think any of this should have a bad effect on the pregnancy.”
“I know. And all things considered, I know I should be glad you don’t want to be a field reporter, off in the middle of wars for six months at a time.” He pressed his thumb against her lips, studying her with worried eyes. “I do want to ask something of you, though.”

“Of course,” she said with a hint of caution. She wanted Edward’s support, but not at the cost of being able to do her job well.

“Let me be a little clingy. Let me bring you your meals, so I know you’re eating. Let me rub your shoulders when you’re hunched over your computer. Let me be there for you for whatever silly thing you need.”

“In other words, you want to help me with as much stress as you can?” Bella asked with a small smile. She did adore this man.

“Yes. I don’t want to annoy you by being there as much as I can, but I promise I won’t get in the way.” He paused a moment, and when she didn’t protest, he continued. “I’d like it if you talked to me about what you’re researching.” Another pause. “And I’d really love it if Eric could arrange for you to talk to a professional.”

Bella furrowed her brow. “You mean, like a shrink?”

“Maybe, but not necessarily for you. I mean someone who might be able to prepare you for what it’ll be like to talk to men like these.”

“I think all of that makes sense, and it’s more than reasonable.” She shifted and threw her legs over his lap. “You’re good to me, do you know that?”

He fixed her with a faux put-out expression. “You do make it difficult sometimes. You know, most people have enough sense not to strike up conversations with serial killers.”

“Yes. I know. You wish you’d fallen in love with someone with a sedate job. Like architecture. You don’t design murder houses.” She picked up his hand and brought it to her lips, carefully kissing the jagged cut there. “Your hobbies, on the other hand, have gotten way more dangerous than talking to incarcerated serial killers.”

“But the birdhouse was straight this time, wasn’t it?”

He sounded so triumphant Bella couldn’t help but be charmed. “Yes. But can you do it without ripping your hand open next time?”

“I’m done with bird houses,” Edward said.

“Oh, good. Because I like your hands.”

“I’m going to try a bench next.”

Bella quirked an eyebrow. “A bench?”

“A very small one. A child’s bench.” His smile became tender as he moved his hand down to her belly. “For our child to sit on.”

She nuzzled his cheek. “Well, there’s time before they can sit on a bench. Time for you to build one that won’t collapse.”

“Benches, especially very short ones, aren’t prone to collapsing. They’re fairly sturdy.”
“And bird houses are supposed to be easy to make.” She smiled sweetly at him. “You managed to mess that one up. I’m more than a little nervous about this project. No death traps, please.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Wëllllll.

How we doin’, folks?
Chapter Notes

A/N: Ahhhhh running late for a doctor’s appointment, but I wanted to get this to you asap. Thanks for your patience!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Edward woke up and reached out automatically for Bella. His hands met space. He didn’t open his eyes, but let his hands wander the sheets beside him. They were cold.

It wasn’t uncommon. The morning sickness made for a horrible alarm clock. The way Edward saw it, as long as Bella was up early, hard at work growing their baby, he had no business being in bed.

He did find her in the bathroom, but for once, she was no worse for the wear. In fact, he stopped short, because the sight of her left him breathless.

She was standing in front of the full length mirror in their bathroom, nude. She was a vision—perfect curves, long legs, a pert ass. He loved her lines, from the breadth of her shoulders to the divot at the small of her back. He knew every inch of her body intimately. Even now, watching her, he knew what it would feel like to trail his fingers from where her vine tattoo wound up from her ankle. How many times had he pressed his lips to her shoulder, breathless with love and satisfaction as he traced his flame tattoo with the tip of his tongue.

“Hey, creeper.”

Edward caught her eyes in the mirror. Her smile was soft and teasing. “What are you doing, peeping Tom?” She reached for her robe.

Moving quickly, he stepped forward to stop her, his hand on her wrist. “I’m looking at an unbelievably gorgeous woman.” He drew her back against him, wrapping his fingers around her shoulders. “And I wasn’t done.” He turned them so they were facing the mirror again and teased the undersides of her breasts. She sucked in a breath, and her nipples tightened as he brushed his thumb over her. “So tell me, beautiful. What were you doing?” He kissed her shoulder. “What are you looking at?”

She leaned back against him, her ass brushing against him through the thin fabric of his sleep pants. A thrill went down his spine, and then it was him sucking in a breath. It had been a while since Bella had been in the mood, not that he blamed her.

Bella took his hands and moved them down. “It gets easier to see every week,” she said, pressing his palms over her bump.

He huffed and nuzzled her cheek through her hair. “No one can see it yet, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Not worried.” She reached back, threading her fingers through his hair. “Just observing.” She tilted her head when he pushed her hair off one shoulder. “It’s still hard sometimes to believe this is my body.”
“Hmm.” Edward let his hands wander up and down her body, teasing her skin with his fingertips. “I love your body.” He drew circles around her belly. “And these extra inches are sexy as hell.”

She scoffed. “Sexy.”

He let his hands tease the curls above her pussy, gauging for receptiveness. She whimpered, her fingers tightening in his hair. “I love how you feel,” he murmured, his voice low and rough in her ear. “You glow. I didn't think it was possible for you to look better, but you prove me wrong. Every day, you prove me wrong.”

“Mm hmm.” She gyrated her hips, rubbing her ass back against him. “So your line is that I’m going to keep getting sexier as I get bigger and bigger? Do you have a pregnancy fetish you neglected tell me about?”

“I have a you fetish, but I’ve been very upfront about that.” He took her by the hips and turned her, then guided her hands to the counter. “Is this okay?”

She nodded. Her skin was flushed—warm to his touch. Her breasts were full and firm—heavy in his palms. “So, after I pop this kid out, I’ll just get uglier as I lose the baby weight?”

“Never.”

“Hmm.” She spread her legs, and pushed back against his questing hand. “You’re a liar, Edward Cullen.” Her voice was getting breathier.

“Am I?” He slid his fingers into her slick heat and kissed her neck.

“Either my extra inches make me sexier, and therefore, when I lose at least a few of them, I’ll be getting less sexy, or I was sexier without the extra inches. It’s one or the other. Ahhh.”

Edward breathed deep, trying to keep his cool. He pushed his pants down and rubbed his cock along her slit. “Sometimes, my brilliant Bella, you lack imagination.” He reached between them and guided himself inside her. “Those are the only two choices you see?”

She arched back, moving with him. “The simplest explanation is most often the truth.” She was teasing now. Her eyes were locked on his in the mirror—dark with lust and light with love. Another thrill went down his spine.

He cupped her cheek, his fingers running along the underside of her chin. “There’s nothing simple about the way I love you, or the million ways I see you.” He quickened the rhythm of his thrusts. He tilted her head up and pressed his cheek against hers. “Look at you, Bella. Did you know I fall in love with you all over again every single day?” He leaned over her, one hand around her waist, his fingers at her clit as he stroked into her. “And every day I look at you, the person I see is the sexiest woman in the world.”

“Oh, God.” She moaned, gripping the edge of the counter for dear life as she pushed back against his thrusts. “I love you,” she said, her voice breathless and shrill.

He leaned all the way over her, his hands on hers on the counter, and buried himself inside her until they both screamed their release.

Minutes later, they were sharing a shower—they’d be late for work if they didn’t.

Bella liked to shampoo his hair—a fact that always amused him. But far be it from him to argue. He liked the feel of her fingers massaging his scalp. In the meantime, he sudsed up his hands and
drew the shower poof along the line of her back. “So. Today is the big day, right?”

Her eyes sparked with a glint of excitement. “Eric said he’d have the details of the story today.”

Bella had been on tenterhooks for weeks now waiting for her boss to get his ducks in a row so she could start the story. She’d done as much research as she could—watched the old newscasts and dug through as much as she could of the archives. But Eric was doing his best to obtain the heavy stuff—the police tapes and interviews that hadn’t been shared with the press before.

“It’s kind of crazy, because if I was doing a report on any one of these assholes alone with that information, that would be newsworthy by itself,” she said. “But that was part of the guarantee between us and the inmates. They and the police would allow access to that information as long as we’re focusing on the tattoos.”

Edward hummed to indicate he was listening. He’d been doing a fair amount of research about each of these killers himself, and he couldn’t say he was comfortable with the thought of Bella being in the same room as any of them. They gave him the creeps, and he wished like hell he’d be allowed to accompany her.

Bella tilted his head back so the water could wash away the conditioner. She kissed his throat. “You’re still worried about me.”

He smiled—a tight smile. “I’m good at it.”

She reached behind him to turn off the water and opened the door to get their towels. He smiled and stroked her cheek tenderly as she wrapped the towel around his waist. She pressed a kiss to his chest. “I’ll be okay.”

He took the other towel from her arm and wrapped it around her waist, flashing her a devilish grin. He ducked down and pressed a kiss to each of her nipples. She laughed and mussed his wet hair. “Don’t start that again. We’re already running late.”

Two days after Eric officially put Bella on the story, Edward went to the afternoon wedding of a friend. It was one of those lavish affairs—held in the banquet hall of a downtown hotel. Edward planned on only being there long enough to make an appearance and offer his well wishes.

At the reception, before he could get to the bride and groom for a quick congratulations, he got caught in the mill of friends who hadn’t seen each other for months or even years. As things usually went, he found himself being passed from group to group. Then, very suddenly, he realized he was standing across from his ex-wife and Bella’s boss. He made a quick excuse to the rest of the group and headed in the direction of the bar.

Tanya appeared beside him. “Not going to say hello?”

“Hello,” he said curtly without looking at her.

“Bella isn’t here with you?”

Edward froze. He counted to ten in his head before he turned to look at his ex-wife. She was standing there with an open, innocent expression on her face that he knew better than to believe. “She’s at work, but seeing as you’re fucking her boss, I’m sure you already knew that.” He cocked his head, fixing her with a mock-innocent look of his own. “And you are here. Tell me. How many of our friends recognized you?”
Her easy smile fell a fraction. “Are we going to start this again? I made it out to one of these every once in awhile even when I was with you.”

“And Bella makes it to these kinds of things more often than not, only opting to work every once in awhile.” He knocked his knuckles on the bar. “I think I’ve decided I’m not thirsty.”

Tanya followed after him as he walked away from the bar. “Why are you acting like this? Weren’t you the one who wanted to be civil? Who wanted us to be friends?”

Edward whirled on her. “I did. Until you decided you couldn’t be in the same room with Bella without lashing out at her. After your stunning display of maturity a couple of weeks ago… Well. My parents taught me if I can’t say anything nice…”

At that, Tanya frowned. “Fine. I deserve that.”

Somewhat surprised, Edward glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. She grunted and crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s confusing. This whole situation between the three of us isn’t easy. I’m the ex-wife, Edward. It’s my job to hate the woman you replaced me with.”

“Tanya—”

She waved a hand. “I’m only human. I understand why we’re not together anymore, but that doesn’t make it easy to watch you with her.” Her frowned deepened and she turned slightly to stare away from him, out the window. “She makes you happy. Happier than I ever did, and it’s not like it was my aim to make you miserable, you know?”

“But you want to make her miserable.”

“No.” She turned to look at him and laughed. “Don’t you get it? I loved her. In fact, I loved her first. I had her first. My interns—those are my children. I choose them, I watch them, and I nurture them. I love that part of my job, Edward. Didn’t you ever wonder why I didn’t end up chasing a byline? I could have. You and I both know it.

“Instead, I built an empire, and one of the reasons I did it was so I could pull people like Bella up. So I could watch them grow. Do you have any idea how confusing this is? Bella is probably my most promising protégé. I’m so proud of her. I’m invested in her success. I can’t help it, but she’s also your girlfriend. The woman you knocked up about three seconds after we ended a seventeen year marriage.” She waved a frustrated hand.

“So, yeah. Nothing about that night turned out like I wanted it to. I knew Eric was going to hand her that story, and I was happy for her. The part of me who handpicked her to be where she is now is over the fucking moon about how well she’s done. That part of me knows how difficult it is for any woman in her position to be pregnant at this point in her career, let alone when there’s a stressful—but career-making—assignment on the line. So yes, my disappointment for her and my anger at you was all about her.”

“But then you outed her to her boss when you had no business to,” Edward said, not about to release her from her responsibility.

She laughed again, without humor. “Yeah, I did, and I’m sorry. As her ex-boss, I was heartbroken and scared for what this means for her career. But I’m also your ex-wife… “ She sighed and shook her head. “Tell me what you think it should have done to me. Between the two of us, she was the star of the show. Eric—my boyfriend—was talking to all our colleagues about how brilliant she is. And you had to have seen the way they looked at me, Edward. They looked at you and knew I’d
lost you to her. So when I opened my mouth, all the wrong words came out.”

Edward didn’t say anything to that, but as he turned over the words in his head, his anger dimmed. A little. “It’s not all about Bella, you know,” he said after a minute.

She glanced at him questioningly, and he huffed. “You’ve known me longer than almost everyone else in my life. How could you accuse me of getting her pregnant on purpose? You say you care about her career, and I believe that. I’ve seen you with your kids.” His lips twitched at the term. “But how can you possibly think I don’t care about her just as much, if not more?”

Her shoulders slumped a bit. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about our life. What I gave you, and what I didn’t. I started to think about the things you wanted. At first, I resented you for making me feel like I was wrong, unworthy of a loving husband just because I work hard. Then I realized, you want a family the way I want my work.” She paused a beat. “I’d have done almost anything to have what I have now. In fact, I sacrificed a lot of your life to get what I have.”

“You thought I’d do the same,” he concluded for her.

“I could see how it would happen.” She looked down at her hands. “I didn’t think I was a bad person.”

“You weren’t. You aren’t.”

They were both silent for a long while. “I’m sorry, you know,” she said, voice so quiet he almost couldn’t hear her over the din of the crowd. “I never meant to waste your time.”

Edward breathed in deep, and when he breathed out, his anger and annoyance toward Tanya had dimmed even more. “I know you didn’t, and I don’t think of it that way. It worked out, in any event. I’m happy.” He looked over his shoulder and nodded in Eric’s direction, aware the man was watching them. “Are you?”

Tanya’s lip twitched. “I’m satisfied,” she said after a minute. “We’re not even forty yet, Edward. We have a lot left to prove. The both of us.”

Edward smiled at that. After a moment, though, his smile fell. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“If you think so much of Bella, why were you so sure she couldn’t handle this assignment while pregnant?” This question had been weighing on him as he worried. He knew Tanya. He knew there was truth to what she said, even in her anger. “You’ve interviewed a serial killer before. You did fine.”

Tanya was uncharacteristically quiet at that. There was a far-off, twisted expression on her face. “I…” She swallowed hard. “That interview you’re talking about is probably the hardest one I’ve ever done.”

He stared at her. “What?”

“He got to me. Really bad.” Another swallow, and she wasn’t looking at him. “Christ, I don’t know what my boss was playing at giving me that story. I mean… I guess I do know. It was one of the stories that made me, but my talent wasn’t the only reason he put me on it.”

She took a deep breath, and to Edward’s surprise, she wrapped her arms around herself in a protective stance, as though she wanted to make herself smaller. “I fit the profile of the victims.” A
Edward’s heart had begun to pound fast, and his eyes went wide. “What? Why—”

“I don’t know why I didn’t tell you these things. I think I didn’t want to admit how badly it shook me. Even the research was difficult. The crime scenes…” She shook her head. “They were so gruesome, and seeing the twisted bodies of the victims, I couldn’t help but picture Katie and Irina lying there.” She shuddered. “It shook me up bad, and the worst part about it was when I finally talked to the guy.”

She’d gone so pale, Edward had to resist the impulse to put his arm around her. Her eyes were far away and filled with a blank terror he’d never seen in her before. “He knew,” she said, her voice hardly more than a whisper. “I don’t know how. It was like he could hear my thoughts. He knew I had pictured him doing those horrible things to my sisters.” She took a shaky breath. “And I knew if it weren’t for all the handcuffs and ankle cuffs and the fact we were being watched by a bunch of men with guns, he’d have done all sorts of horrible things to me. He was thinking about it—exactly what he wanted to do with me.”

“Hey.”

Unnerved by Tanya’s words and the look on her face, Edward jumped when Eric’s voice interrupted the moment. His throat was tight, his heart pounding, and he had to look away from the other man to compose himself.


When Edward looked back, Tanya had hand taken Eric’s arm and was smiling at him. It wasn’t a whole-hearted smile, but at least it was reassuring. “Don’t worry. Edward didn’t upset me. I upset myself.” She wiped at a stray tear at the corner of her eye. “Fuck. I have to freshen up.”

Before she excused herself, she looked to Edward again. “Look, I see a lot of myself in Bella. A lot. But at the same time, she isn’t me. She knows better than I do what she can handle.” She rolled her eyes. “And from what I’ve heard, she’s better at leaning on you than I was back then. If she says she’ll be fine, she will.”

She headed to the bathroom then, leaving Edward and Eric looking at her. Edward had to take several breaths before he looked at Bella’s boss. “There’s probably not much I can say right now that isn’t overstepping my boundaries and implying that Bella can’t take care of herself or make her own choices.” He grimaced. “So before I say the choice words in my head about the kind of person who would think up this god damned assignment in the first place, I think it’s time to make my excuses.”

Eric looked amused. He nodded. “Would it help if I told you we’re taking every precaution?”

“Unless one of those precautions prevents her from being in the same room as not one but three serial killers? No.”

“Fair enough,” Eric said with a nod.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Happy Monday, loves.
Chapter 12

The first was Marcus.

He was frail. Younger than he looked. He was only forty-five. His face was slack, and his eyes
dull. Bella didn't know what she expected, but Marcus wasn't it.

She was, of course, perfectly safe. Even if Marcus hadn't been benign as a house cat. They were in
room that held only two chairs and a table bolted to the floor. Marcus was in one chair. He was
handcuffed and his legs were chained both to the table and each other. There were two cops at the
door she'd come in and two at the door he had.

When they were across from each other, Bella smiled, mostly because it was what she always did.
She didn't want to lose sight of the fact these men, these murderers were still people, and deserving
of that much respect.

But they were devious people. The specialist she'd worked with to prepare for these interviews had
made sure she understood just how manipulative these kinds of killers could be.

So she smiled. Marcus smiled back in an odd way, like a child mimicking behavior—not his own.
“Hello, Mr. Betaluci. My name is Bella. Did they tell you I’d be coming by?”

“They?” Marcus giggled. “Do you think there are voices in my head?”

“No. I mean to say, do you know why I'm here?”

“You want to talk about the girls I killed. They always want to talk about the girls I killed.” He
seemed put out by that.

“Yes and no,” Bella said. “I'm more interested in talking about your tattoo.”

“Oh.” He stroked the top of his leg and cocked his head, looking at her curiously. “Do you mean
my real one?”

“You think the others aren't real?”

Marcus’s expression hardened. “Those girls… they tricked me.” His eyes glazed over. “And they
got what girls deserve when they lie.”

A chill went down Bella’s spine. She swallowed hard. “So, you falling in love with them was their
fault?”

He tilted his head, looking at her. “Look what they did.” The metallic clink of his chains dragging
across the metal table was loud in the small room. He turned his arms over, and Bella covered a
gasp.
On his arm were two tattoos. Or, they had been tattoos once. Now, they were a mangled mess of scarred skin. Burns, Bella thought. Self inflicted? She looked up at him. “Those girls did this?”

Marcus ducked his head. “Well. I couldn’t very well have their mark on me, now could I? It’s a damned lie. I only have but one true love, no matter what my skin says.”

“I see.” Bella was sure to keep her voice steady. “Will you tell me about her? Maybe how you fell in love?”

A fond smile came over his face. “How does anyone fall in love? We were teenagers. A teenage boy will fall in love with anyone who’s willing to let him touch her tits.” He grinned, but just as quickly, his smile fell. “But it got more serious than that. Oh yes, it did. Doesn’t it always?”

He sighed. “She was smart, and funny, and kind. It was one of those things. We were, quite simply, made for each other.”

“Mmhmm. I see your very first arrest was for stalking. Stalking the girl you claim is your true love.”

His features darkened. Then he shrugged with feigned nonchalance. “As I said, we were teenagers. She was playing silly games and pretending to be scared of me. She took it a bit too far. I tried to tell her I forgave her, but you know how sensitive girls can be. I think she thought I was angry.”

“And then you killed her.”

He slammed his fist on the table. Bella jumped. “No,” he said, his voice harsh and loud. She flinched.

“Hey,” one of the guards stepped forward, hand on his gun. “Calm your ass down, Betaluci.”

Marcus raised his hands and nodded. He took a deep breath and made an effort to smile at Bella. “No,” he said more calmly. “Of course I didn’t kill my beloved. How could I? If you love a person, you couldn’t kill them, could you? You couldn’t hurt them.”

He shook his head. “I know they say that I killed her, but that’s not true. That’s just not true. She’s still out there, and I still love her. I would never hurt her.”

“And the other girls?”

His eyes turned hard and ice cold again. “As I said. They got what they deserved.”

~0~

“The madness of love,” Bella said, sitting across the desk from her boss. “I’m beginning to see your angle here.”

Eric smiled and swept his hand out wide. “From a lot of the transcript I read, I’d have thought they’d go for an insanity defense.”

“He knows what he did. At least when it comes to everyone but the first.” Bella’s jaw went taut. “And he really, really believes he was incapable of hurting her, because he had proof he loved her.”

Eric nodded. “Proof of love has gotten a lot of people off with the right argument.”

Bella considered for a moment, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. “Are you okay, Bella?” Eric asked.
“Yes, I’ve just been thinking about what he said about love.” She shivered. “It’s just that. I understood him.”

“How’s that?”

“He talked about what it was to be in love with this woman he killed.” She took a deep breath. “I understood what he meant. The enormity of it. How it drives you to the edge of reason.”

There was a time, when Bella was desperately in love with Edward and the situation was hopeless, that she considered crazy things. If Tanya hadn’t been her friend, her mentor, what would she have done? She’d like to believe she would have held strong regardless—suffered in silence.

“Love isn’t easy.” Eric sat back, a wistful look on his face. “And it doesn’t make you the person you should be by a long shot. Although, I like to think most of us stop short of murder and other forms of destruction.”

“Yeah. Still, it’s not comfortable realizing you have something in common with a murderer.”

“We like to think of these people as monsters. Labeling them monsters is our attempt to distance ourselves, but they’re our species.”

Bella pursed her lips considering. “This is going to be an interesting piece.”

~Edward~

Half asleep, Edward rolled over, reaching automatically for Bella. She wasn’t there, and that woke him up a little. He blinked, disoriented, and tried to remember if he knew why his pregnant girlfriend wasn’t in bed at—he glanced at the clock—two in the morning.

Edward got out of bed and headed to the living room. He found Bella not there but at the kitchen table. She was hunched over her laptop, papers and folders spread all over. He yawned, scratching the back of his head.

Seeing Bella work usually made him smile. She was a passionate, brilliant woman. Plus, she got the cutest crinkle between her brows when she was concentrating.

The problem was how many nights this week she’d been up this late. This story was consuming her. It was what she did all day at work, and what she talked about at the dinner table.

He triple checked his logic. She wasn’t under a deadline. She was in the research stage for her second interview. There was no reason she’d have to work through the night at this point.

Edward stepped forward. She didn’t even look up. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. “Bella.”

“Hmm?” she asked, not looking away from the screen.

“It's two in the morning.”

Almost a full minute went by while she typed. “Oh, um. Yeah, I'll be there in a minute, babe.”

He didn't budge. He took another deep breath, preparing himself for an argument. “Bella,” he said again.

“Edward, I'll—”
“Bella.” He didn't raise his voice but he said her name sternly.

She finally looked up, clearly annoyed. She opened her mouth but then shut it, remembering, he thought, her promise to let him take care of her. Still, she warred with herself, her eyes darting between him and her computer.

“I promise it'll be there in the morning.” He extended a hand.

The way she slowly closed her laptop, staring at it with a forlorn expression, charmed him. She sighed, and took his hand, letting him pull her against him. He kissed her forehead, lingering a long moment before he led her to their bedroom.

Bella started chattering almost instantly. “I didn't mean to overdo it. It's just that I want to be really ready. The last interview got under my skin in a way I didn't expect. I didn't want to feel any kind of empathy for him at all. It bothered me, you know?”

He knew. She'd had a couple of nightmares—vague and mild as these things went—immediately following the interview. He didn't like the idea of these maniacs running amok in her head.

In their room, he sat on the bed with his back against the headboard and pulled her into his arms. She followed on autopilot, talking about James Hunter.

Edward clenched his jaw. Marcus Betaluci had been bad enough. James Hunter was a whole other level of psychopath. His crime scenes were downright brutal, and Bella had been living and breathing his heinous acts all week.

“He likes to get under people's skin, so I have to be ready,” Bella said, settling between his spread legs with her back against his chest. “I can't let him surprise me.”

He hummed an acknowledgment as he took her hands and guided them to the swell of her belly. She stopped talking almost instantly. He wrapped her tightly in his arms, moving his hands to cover more.

She was showing now—the roundness proud and growing bigger every day.

“It's a dark world you've been walking in tonight,” he murmured against her ear. He wanted her there with him for a little while. “Why don't you tell me what our boy did today.”

She snorted, but it was a fond noise. Early on, she'd subscribed to one of those pregnancy week-by-week trackers that broke down development milestones. “I didn't look yet, but I can tell you something. The kid loves peaches. I must have eaten ten of them, and that's not counting the little tin. You know, the ones that come in sugar syrup, thus negating all the nutritional value?”

“You hate peaches.”

“It wasn't me. It was the baby. Your kid is a weirdo.”

“Well, that was inevitable. Look who his mother is.”

She scoffed and tilted her head up to kiss him. “That's all you. Weirdo.”

~Bella~

James Hunter creeped Bella the hell out the instant he walked in the room. Unlike Marcus, who had looked rather pathetic as he shuffled in, chains clanking, James looked simply dangerous.
It was the eyes, Bella decided. They were ice blue and piercing. Like a sleek, jungle cat in captivity, she got the sense that only his chains and his handlers were keeping him from devouring her. He looked her in the eyes the moment he walked in the door—all alpha male. He was lethal. It was something she simply knew to the marrow of her bones.

But when he was seated across from her, he smiled. The predatory look in his eyes faded to something more open and curious. “Good morning, Miss Swan,” he said, his tone polite and pleasant.

Bella blinked, startled. Her skin crawled, and she thought about the men and women Hunter had lured to their deaths. She cleared her throat. “Good morning, Mr. Hunter.”

“Please. Call me, James.”

“Okay, James. Do you know—”

“I liked it when they let me hold them,” he said.

A curl of dread began churning in her stomach. “What?”

“It’s a strange thing, isn’t it?” His voice was as tranquil as though he were discussing cloud formations. “People’s need for affection, I mean. When they cried for someone, I knew I could have what I wanted. Most of them cried for their mothers. Sobbed like little babies, especially when they thought I couldn’t hear them. They curled into little balls, and I would tell them to come to me, to let me hold them, and they did. I rocked them and stroked their hair. Well.” The smallest twitch of his lips. “The ones who still had hair. Sometimes, I took it.”

A wave of nausea rolled over Bella, and she had to grip the arms of her chair to keep from swooning. She breathed in through her nose, trying to control her heart rate. James was watching her. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw the guards’ lips curl in distaste.

“You strike me as a daddy’s girl,” James continued, his tone still placid. “Or would you be one of the few who actually cried for their husbands and boyfriends? Safe, sheltering arms.”

Bella breathed in and out, in and out. She cleared her throat. “Mr. Hunter, I’m not terribly interested in your crimes I—”

“Oh, it was artwork,” he said wistfully. “Blood like painting. And their screams like a symphony.” He tilted his head back, his grin wide as he remembered. Then he looked at her again, and the difference was night and day. The predator was back. “You’re not interested in my crimes?”

Bella had to swallow hard past the lump in her throat. “No.”

“You’re lying.”

He was right, and they both knew it. She was horrified. Of course, she was horrified. And she was frightened despite the measures taken to keep him where he was. But, of course she wanted to know. She wanted to know why, and how anyone could talk about the heinous things James Hunter had done with no more inflection than other people talked about what they were going to make for dinner.

“I want to know what you did to the girl whose tattoo you have,” Bella said instead, pleased when her voice remained steady and strong. “Did you hold her while she cried for her mother?”

He glared, and the malevolence in his eyes in that moment made Bella want to cower on the floor.
It passed quickly though, and the evil gleam was back. “You want to hear the things I wanted to do to her? I wanted to—”

“So you didn’t hurt her.”

He faltered, thrown.

“You wanted to, but you didn’t,” Bella said, knowing she had a chance of taking back control of the conversation. “Because you loved her?”

James stared hard at her. But after a moment, he scoffed and settled back in his seat. “I had plans for her.” He smiled—it looked almost fond. “We were going to have so much fun together, her and I.” He turned his palm over and stroked the tattoo there. A snake, it seemed to Bella. “But she had plans of her own.”

“She was different,” Bella prompted, knowing she had to be careful now that she had a fish on the line. She reeled in slowly. Her fisherman father would be proud.

James huffed. “She was a pain in my ass. Love.” Another huff. “Who the fuck asked for it? And it comes with all these rules too.

“I used to like to fuck them. Especially the boys. Stupid assholes.” James scoffed and shook his head. “They’ll stick their cock in anything that moves, and they treat it like women should be thankful for the privilege. But they go to pieces at the idea of anything being inside them.”

Bella had to work hard to cover her shock at the sudden social commentary. But she didn’t have time to dwell. James was still talking. “But then she came along, and she ruined that kind of fun. She could smell it on me like a sixth sense.”

“So you didn’t want to love her?”

“Hell, no. What the hell did I need that kind of complication in my life for?”

~0~

After the interview, Bella took one step outside the interview room and collapsed onto a nearby chair, trembling hard. A bunch of cops were surrounding her in an instant.

“I’m okay,” she said, her voice shaky. She was okay, though. At least, she thought she was. Her brain had just hit maximum overload. Trying to keep up with the mental gymnastics James had put her through was exhausting. The last hour and a half, only sheer force of will had kept her responses calm and measured. It was clear he’d had a good time unsettling her. And she was unsettled. Deeply so.

The crime scenes. The blood and gore. The broken bodies and the smiling people his victims had once been. They all seemed to come to life when James spoke about them.

James was good at recognizing when a subject, however horrible, had piqued her interest. He always found a way of planting the seed that her flairs of curiosity, of anything besides absolute horror, connected them in some way.

“Ma’am, do you need an ambulance?” one of the officers said, eyeing her belly. Her bump wasn’t so noticeable, but some people were annoyingly observant. Well, he was a police officer after all.

Bella shook her head. “My boyfriend is in the lobby. Can you get him? I just...need him.”
As near as she could figure, her reaction likely had something to do with adrenaline. The last hour and a half had felt like survival of the fittest. Now that she was in a calm, safer place, the adrenaline had drained away, replaced by the overwhelming emotions she hadn’t let herself feel at the time.

“Bella?”

Relief flooded through her at the sound of his voice. She stood just as he got to her, and she all but fell against him. Edward kept one arm around her waist, but he pulled back, cupping her face with his other palm. “Are you okay? Do you need—”

“I’m okay,” she said, already feeling much better with him near. “I just need you to take me home.”

Home, for the moment, was a hotel room—James’s prison hadn’t been local. Bella was quiet on the drive and, bless him, Edward didn’t push. He held her hand as he drove and let her process in peace, except to ask if she wanted to pick up anything to eat. She didn’t. She wanted to be as far away from other people as they could get right then.

“Tell me what you need,” he said when they were finally closed off from the world, in a room to themselves. He took her face in his hands, concern etched on his features.

She loved him so much.

Like James, she hadn’t asked for love, hadn’t wanted it. Especially in those early days, in love on her own, she’d resented that love for existing at all. She hadn’t invited it, and she had no time or use for it.

Life is what happens when you’re busy making other plans, a wise man once said. And what a beautiful twist. He was a treasure. It was a gift that now, she could lay her weakness at his feet and know he would be there.

“Hold me,” she whispered, clinging to him. “I need you.”

Edward gathered her up in his arms without another word and carried her to the couch. There, he settled with her on his lap. Bella closed her eyes, shivering a little as he began to rock her and kiss her hair.

She knew. She knew that if she had been James Hunter’s victim, it would have been Edward she cried for when she was desperate for a safe place and warm, loving arms around her.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Little more stressful than she thought, poor love.

How you kids doing?
Chapter Notes

A/N: As you might guess, some of the conversation here can be considered disturbing. Please feel free to ask me if you have questions before you dive in.

Just before they finalized their travel plans for the final interview, Bella blurted out what she’d been thinking all that week. “After last time, you aren’t going to tell me you don’t want me to do this?”

Edward put his laptop to the side and angled his body to face her. He took her hands and smiled. “Let me ask you this. You were the one who had to be in the room with those creepers. You had to look them in the eyes and talk to them. You were the one who came out shaken and stressed. Do you want to do this last interview?”

“Yes,” Bella said without hesitation. “It’s terrible. Knowing they exist, hearing their voices in my head, makes my skin crawl.” She shuddered. “But the reality is that they do exist, you know? Terrible things exist, and I think these conversations are worthwhile to have. That’s what I love about my job. There’s a huge world full of ideas, thoughts, and unique people—the great and the terrible.”

Seeing that familiar fervor in her eyes, hearing it in her voice, Edward smiled. He loved her passion, and her beautiful mind. “It’s my job as a good partner to support you in your ambitions. I would support you if you were a doctor whose job it was to treat a dangerous murderer. I would support you if you were lawyer whose job it was to defend a serial killer. I would support you if you were a police officer whose job it was to catch these pricks in the first place. The important part is that I support you, that I’m proud of you.” He cupped her cheek. “And that you let me be here for that.” His smile then was rueful. “That’s not as easy for some people as it might sound.”

“Are you kidding?” She wrapped her arms around his neck, curling close to him. “Do you have any idea how glad I was that you were there with me? It would have been so miserable coming back to that hotel room by myself—being alone in my head.”

She kissed his chin. “I thought that too, you know? When I thought about falling in love.” She wrinkled her nose. “Before I fell in love with you. Even after. I thought about love being a complication. People are that—complications. Being part of your life means I have a lot more to do, a lot more distractions. A boyfriend with his own wants, and family obligations, all of that. Don’t get me wrong.” She pulled back and brushed the tip of her nose against his. “You’ve always been worth the complication you brought to my life.”

He chuckled. “Thanks,” he said, but he knew what she meant. A relationship was never without complication.

“But last week, I saw so clearly how much easier you made my life. I already knew how much better you make my life. How much happiness you bring me.” She ran her fingers along his back, sending delicious chills down his spine. “I love you, and I’m so, so lucky.”
Bella took a deep breath.

When this whole thing began, Eric had taken Edward’s advice and tracked down the forensic psychologist who’d worked on James’s case. The man had prepped Bella as best he could.

After she’d faced Marcus and James—especially James—she called the man again and spoke with him at length about her experiences. He’d assured her that even people who worked extensively with killers were thrown frequently by their warped minds and the horror of what they’d done.

“It’s hard to wrap your head around the idea that, for the most part, they have no remorse. They don’t apologize.”

Bella shuddered, remembering James’s cold eyes as he looked at her. She could only imagine what that man would have done with her if given half a chance.

Now, Aro Scarpinato.

Due to a timing miscommunication, Aro was already seated in the interview room when Bella arrived at the prison. She didn’t like that. Irrational as the thought was, it felt as though it gave him the upper hand; like she was late for an appointment, and he had the right to judge her for it.

Aro Scarpinato was an average looking man. Mild, she would have said. Obscenely normal, save for the bruise that darkened one eye. His hair was black and his eyes were sparked with an odd sense of curiosity as she walked in. His gaze swept over her, and then his features lit with what could only be delight.

“You’re going to have a baby,” he said as she sat down. “How wonderful.”

His words had an instant effect on her. It was like an ice-cold stone grew in her gut. Her step faltered, and she sat quickly.

Aro’s smile was deceptively innocent, but the glint in his eyes was...not. “Is it a boy?” he asked.

It took everything in Bella not to react, not to wrap a protective arm around her bump. Even tucked safely beneath her flesh and bone, her son seemed suddenly all too vulnerable.

She swallowed hard. “I don’t think that’s any of your business,” she said in a forced-polite tone.

She regretted her wardrobe choice. She wasn’t so big. She could have hidden her pregnancy, but she hadn’t thought about it.

If anything, his grin widened. “They’re a delight—little boys. Rambunctious, and fearless, and just so sweet.” He sighed, a fond and far off look in his eyes.

“I didn’t come here to talk about little boys,” Bella said, her tone harsh with an anger that had risen in her along with bile in her throat.

His eyes flitted back to hers, the smile—almost teasing—playing at the corners of his mouth. “Didn’t you?” He leaned forward on the table. His voice was like a feather with a sing-song lilt. “They told me you came to ask about these.” He turned his arm so she could see his tattoos. Five of them in a nice, neat row. So small.

Like the little boys they represented.
Bella breathed in through her nose and out again, willing the tightness in her throat to ease. “I did want to talk with you about your tattoos.”

“So, you wish to talk about my boys, but not yours.”

Bella didn’t answer right away, and that was all Aro needed as confirmation of the sex of her baby. He nodded. “Congratulations, all the same. No one loves quite as fiercely as a little boy does.”

“So you think those boys loved you?” Bella asked, grasping at a chance to steer the conversation into more professional, less personal waters.

Aro’s expression turned wistful, almost sad. “Not in that sense, no. Of course not.” He sighed. “They do love their mothers though. More than anything else in the world.”

“And you loved them.”

Aro’s eyes returned to her, and he held her gaze. Bella pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth, willing herself not to look away. Her skin crawled. “You find it difficult to think past the sex, don’t you? Not that I blame you. I know what I am, and I know what you think of me.”

“I doubt that very much,” Bella said, unable to keep the coldness out of her tone.

He huffed and nodded again, his face still more open than troubled or even angry. “And yet, the tattoos are there. You know the science as well as I do. Neither of us can dispute that I loved those boys.

“Consider, for a moment the science of it. What almost always comes before love for anyone? Attraction. Attraction is a highlighter. It’s the thing that makes you stop and pay attention to a particular person—really pay attention to who they are, and that’s what you fall in love with.” He shrugged. “It was no different for me.”

“I’d never kill the man I loved.”

At that, Aro’s expression did turn sad. He sighed. “As I said, I know what I am. I didn’t have a choice, you know. I was born this way. I was born with this curse—that no one I’m attracted to could ever want to be with me. Any attraction I acted on would always make a victim of someone.

“So you see, I killed them because I loved them. Because I knew I was going to do what I was going to do, and that they’d never recover from that. When my control snapped, it was the only gift I could give them; the one mercy.”

~0~

Edward waited in the prison lobby, trying not to tap his foot. His stomach was in knots, wondering what this interview would bring. He didn’t like this part—the waiting. He had to wait to see how Bella would react before he could know how to help her.

As a surgeon, his father had heart-wrenching days, Edward recalled. He remembered a time—he’d been twelve or thirteen, he guessed—when his father had performed emergency surgery on an eight-year-old girl whose father had beaten her that badly. He’d fought for her life for nearly twenty-four hours, and so had become invested.

Every night for two weeks, Edward’s mother was on tenterhooks, waiting for Carlisle to come home. When he asked why, she said that she couldn’t know what his day had been like, and so she couldn’t do anything about his pain until he got there.
In that two weeks, Carlisle would often come home dead tired. He spent as much time as he could with the girl, watching and waiting for her to wake up. Sometimes, he came home furious. The little girl’s mother was not there as often as he thought she should have been, and when she was, she was more of a pain in the ass to the nurses than a strong presence for her daughter. Then came his fury. Police had discovered the mother’s role in her daughter’s abuse and arrested her.

Then came one of the most horrendous things Edward had ever witnessed. Carlisle was always in control, always soft-spoken and even-tempered. Even when he was angry, it was a quiet anger.

There was nothing quiet or soft about Carlisle’s reaction that night. He’d stormed in the door, and Esme told her boys to go upstairs. They’d gone as far as the top of the stairs, but when their father turned into a tempest, they’d hidden outside the kitchen, both of them wide-eyed with horror.

Carlisle must have broken half a dozen glasses and plates as he raged. It was a rant that turned into a scream of frustration, fury, and a bone-deep agony Edward had no name for. He’d been terrified both of his father and for him.

The little girl, his patient, had died, it seemed.

After a long time, Carlisle’s rants and hollers of anger had turned into gut-wrenching sobs. Emmett and Edward had peered around the corner to see their mother kneeling on the floor, their father all but draped over her. She was such a small woman, and yet it was clear that she was holding almost all his weight as he clung to her and sobbed. Edward and Emmett looked at each other, each of them scared their father was going right out of his mind, that he’d shattered into too many pieces to be put back together again.

It was like magic, what happened then. Esme pulled back. She took Carlisle’s face in between her hands and began to murmur against his hair. Edward had no idea what she said, but his father began to calm, his sobs turning into a quiet keen before they stopped altogether. It was like watching her put him back together again.

He’d wanted to be as good a partner to the woman he loved as his parents had been to each other. He wanted to be that strong—to be there to hold her up and put her back together again if need be.

Ever since his conversation with Tanya, he’d hated idea she’d suffered without his knowledge. It made him wonder what else he’d missed. They truly had been leading separate lives for who knew how many years of their marriage.

The idea chafed, but it also made him appreciate Bella all the more. She shared her life—her triumphs and happiness as well as her low points. It was a level of intimacy he’d never had with Tanya—to know Bella so well, at her best and worst.

He was lucky. This—sitting here when he knew she could be hurting—was difficult. It was maybe the most difficult thing he’d ever done—to let her walk away from him into a room with men who would hurt her in any way. But it was a privilege too that she chose to share her life with him.

It seemed like eons before she emerged. He stood up quickly and went to her. This was different than it had been with James. She’d walked out of that interview shaking with leftover nerves. Today, she was merely ashen.

She fell into his embrace and clung to him. He waited, giving her a moment to tell him what she needed. “Home?” he asked after a long stretch of silence. She nodded against his chest, and he didn’t miss that she wasn’t speaking at all.

On the drive to their hotel, he kept glancing at her. She was motionless, staring out the window,
deep in thought. He held her hand as much as he could, letting her know he was there.

They were around the corner when she started sniffling. She was crying, but not in a horrible way. No, it was just a stray tear streaking down her cheek, her lower lip trembling as she stared straight forward.

He pulled into the parking lot, threw the car into park, and went around to the passenger side. He didn’t give a damn who was looking, he pulled her up into his arms and kicked the door shut. Luckily, their room was on the first floor, and it only took a little bit of careful gymnastics to get inside.

They lay together for a long time in silence. He kissed her hair and waited. Her breath was slow and even. With shaking fingers, she undid the buttons of his shirt and traced her tattoo on his chest with the tip of her finger.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” he whispered when he thought he would go out of his mind with worry.

She shuddered and sniffled. “I just…” She took his hand and pressed it against the bulge of her belly, keeping her hand over his. “I was just remembering how scared I was when I found out about him. He wasn’t… He was just a complication. He wasn’t him yet.”

Edward blinked. That hadn’t been at all what he expected. Then the hairs on the back of his neck raised. “He didn’t…” He swallowed. “That monster didn’t threaten our son, did he?”

“No.” Bella shuddered and ducked her head against his neck. “It’s real. It’s been real. I love our baby, and I want him. I do. I always did, I swear.”

“Bella, I know that. Of course you did.” He rubbed her back, bewildered at her thought process.

She took a deep breath, and her voice cracked. “I love him. I didn’t realize how much until I was talking to that monster, about what he did to those other boys. I love our boy. I love him so much I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to protect him. I didn’t want him in the same room as that bastard. Why did I do that, Edward?”

“Shhh, honey.” He kissed her forehead and her hair. “Shh, you didn’t do anything wrong. He’s safe.” He pressed his palm against her belly in emphasis. “Safe here with us.”

“But he can hear us, you know. He can hear us, and that means he could hear him. I hate that even that much of him touched our son. It feels so awful.”

He knew that feeling very well. It had felt awful to stand by and watch while Bella let monsters in her head. He sighed and wrapped himself around her. “Everything is okay. The baby’s okay, I promise.”

“I love him,” she whispered. Her fingers clutched at his shirt. “And I love you.”

If he could have, he would have folded both of them—the woman he loved and his unborn child—into his skin. He would have kept them both safe and happy and warm forever. “I love you.”

He kissed her temple and her hair and the bridge of her nose again and again. He held her, because that was what he could do.

And after a long, heavy time, some of the tension seemed to ease. She relaxed in his arms and tilted her head to press a kiss to the skin of his neck. Her fingers began to trace her tattoo over his heart.
“Edward?” she asked, her voice scratchy with tears.

“Hmm?”

“Would you… I know you were disappointed that I’d overwritten my tattoo. I was wondering what you thought… Well, I was wondering if you maybe wanted to put the same changes.” She splayed her palm over the tattoo on his chest.

Edward froze, taking in what she was asking. He knew how important it had been to her to make her tattoo her own. She hadn’t liked the idea that it would become someone else’s. The tattoos were not their choice, so she had made it her choice.

And now, she wanted to give that last piece of herself, the part that was only hers, to him.

“I want it to be ours,” she said. “Or, I guess, maybe we could design a new one together. Would that be better?”

“No,” Edward said, his voice gruff. He put his fingers beneath her chin and lifted her beautiful, teary face up to him. “No, I don’t want a new one. Well.” He laughed and pecked at her lips. “That’s not a bad idea, but no. I would love to wear your tattoo, Bella. You have no idea how happy that would make me.”

He kissed her again, more seriously this time, gathering her closer to him. He loved the feel of her in his arms—especially the hardness of her belly holding their son between them. “Are you sure?” he asked between kisses. “Really sure?”

“Yes. It would make me happy.” Her fingers skimmed his chest again. “Like being a part of you forever.”

“Bella, you are a part of me,” he whispered, breathing the words against her lips as he kissed her reverently. “You and my boy are my heart and soul. My everything.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And deep breath. No more serial killers.

Many thanks to Betsy, Eleanor, Packy, MoH, and Mina. My docs are so lovely, and so are they.

And so are YOU! Yes, you! How are you doing, kiddos?
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

A/N: Okay, so. A couple of quick things.

Contests: I will be writing for the Anything Goes contest. :) I will be judging the PS I Love You contest. You should check out both!

Now...this fic. Uh. I don’t know how to say this, but...I accidentally finished it. I try to give some warning, but this is the last chapter. I know. I know.

Yes, there will be an epilogue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Embry looked bemused. He crossed his arms over his chest and quirked an eyebrow at Edward. “Let me get this straight. You want to start your inked life with a chest tattoo? Maybe you should start smaller. A little heart on your shoulder? Oh, or a delicate flower.”

Bella reached over and smacked Embry playfully upside the head. “Don’t make him more nervous than he is.”

“I’m not nervous,” Edward said, but Bella saw the way he swallowed hard.

She took his hand and squeezed it. “Embry’s right, though. You don’t have to do this. We could design our own tattoo and put it somewhere less, ah, vulnerable.”

Edward’s green look faded somewhat as he pulled her to him and tucked her under his arm. He splayed a hand wide on the bulge of her belly. “If you can handle giving birth to our son, I can handle a damn needle.”

“But can you do it without crying?” Jake asked, there just to observe the festivities.

“Ah, I’m planning to cry when I give birth.” Bella pulled a face. “I’ve seen birth videos. That doesn’t look like fun.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, Bells,” Jake said.

“No shame in crying.” Edward took a deep breath and pulled his shirt off over his head. “Let’s get this over with.”

Embry whistled and clapped his hands. “All right. Free show.” He patted his table. “Get up here, cowboy.”

“Embry, if you molest my boyfriend–” Bella started.

“Hey, I’m a professional. Molestation costs extra.”

Bella shook her head and went to sit in the chair on the opposite side of where Embry had set up his tools. She smiled at Edward and took his hand. “Ready?”
“Oh, sure.”

“I’m going to need you to breathe as shallowly as possible,” Embry said. “We’re going for less chest movement here. Tell me if you need me to back off because you need to wiggle, okay?”

“Yes.”

Bella rubbed a thumb over Edward’s knuckles. “See, you don’t even get to do that lamaze breathing stuff to mitigate the pain.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ll be-- Ah!”

Embry immediately took the gun away. “Are you okay?” He seemed amused.

“Yeah. Sorry. Go ahead.” Edward’s cheeks were tinted pink. “Sorry. I was distracted.”

“Just remember. It’s your sexy body. If I get a stray line on it, it’s not my fault.”

Edward just groaned and turned his head to look at Bella again. She smiled at him. “You know what I remember most about getting a tattoo?”

“What’s that?” he asked, wincing as Embry set to work.

Bella squeezed his hand again. “I was really glad I didn’t have a dick.”

He furrowed his eyebrows. “What? Why?”

“Less talking is better,” Embry muttered.

“Yeah. Shhhhh,” Bella admonished. “See. The sting of the needle...after a few minutes, you kind of reach this perfect point of pain.” She leaned in close to his ear. “And I got so wet.”

Edward groaned and breathed in through his nose, but he didn’t move.

“And I was glad I didn’t have a dick, because then it might have been an awkward situation for poor Embry.”

Embry snorted. “Honey, I’m not exactly a stranger to erections.”

“Ah, I hope not in your work,” Jake said, crossing his arms.

Embry looked up enough to give his husband the eye. “Babe, were you under some impression that the hard-on you get when I do your ink is unique to you?” He looked back to his work. “But don’t worry. The only one I touch afterward is yours. You know, unless that’s the part I’m tattooing.”

Jake looked taken aback, and Edward wrinkled his nose in distaste. “You tattoo cocks?” Jake asked.

“Only for the extremely masochistic. Although, I did meet a guy once who had someone else’s tattoo on his cock. Imagine that? That’s another sucky one, because he obviously wasn’t with that person when I met him. Bet that makes for an awkward blow job, huh?”

Bella ducked down to whisper in Edward’s ear. “I don’t know about you, but this is hot for me.”

It was, too. Watching her mark—the one she’d chosen—appear on his flesh. His skin was flushed hot; his cheeks pink as he breathed through the pain of it.
Edward groaned again at her words. “You’re trying to kill me,” he said out of the corner of his mouth.

“You are being a little devilish, Bella,” Embry said. “I think now is a good time to tell you that there’s no sex in my parlour.”

“You’re such a liar,” Jake said.

“I have special privileges. Hush. Anyway, I’m almost done, believe it or not. Bella’s embellishments weren’t all that complicated.” He tilted his head, concentrating on the picture Bella had provided of her tattoo. “Just a few more minutes, and then Bella can ride you into the sunset.”

“Jesus Christ,” Edward muttered. “You’re all terrible.”

Bella bit her lip to cover a smirk. His hard-on was straining through his jeans. She didn’t feel too bad about it, though. That likely would have happened anyway. At least this way, he’d been fairly distracted.

For his part, Edward was stoic. He stayed still, despite the obvious pain and state of arousal he was in. True to his word, Embry was done within twenty more minutes.

“Oh, wow,” Bella said. She hadn’t expected to feel such a rush of pure pleasure seeing her mark, all of it, on the love of her life. So much better than a name. This was all of her. She reached out to touch the work.

“Hey.” Embry smacked her hand. “You know better than that. Don’t touch it.” He looked to Edward. “Try to be shirtless as much as possible.”

“Poor Bella,” Jake said.

“Woe is me,” Bella said, trailing her fingers along Edward’s abs.

He sucked in a breath and caught her fingers. “I’m worked up enough as it is.”

“Hmm. Not enough.” Bella leaned in and pressed her mouth to his neck, breathing hot air against him. “Not ever enough.”


Bella kissed his cheek, tightening her fingers around Edward’s. “Thanks, you.” And with that, she pulled her boyfriend out of the shop toward the car.

Apparently, Edward was on the same page. He didn’t want to wait. Before Bella could get the car open, he’d pushed her up against the door. He took her face in his hands and kissed her. Hard.

Moaning into his mouth, Bella went to put her arms around his neck. Just as quickly, she jumped backward. “I’m not supposed to touch your chest.”

“I don’t care,” Edward said, his voice a low growl that seemed to rumble right between Bella’s legs. “I need you now.”

“Christ.” She put a hand on his shoulder to keep him at bay and looked in his eyes. “Tattoos take care, newbie. You’re going to have that thing forever.” She kissed him, deep but soft. “And I’m going to be with you forever too.”
“Bella,” he whispered. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer; carefully, of course. Lifting the other hand to her chin, he tilted her head up. His kiss then was slow. Not sweet, but smoldering—a burn that was only barely contained.

She always felt as though he could incinerate her—raze her to ash and nothingness. It was terrifying to admit someone had that kind of power over her. This love of theirs—it owned her.

She pulled back and ran her fingers through his hair. No. She wasn’t scared of love anymore. The last few months had proved to her that Edward was a true partner. She didn’t have to fear that love would consume her, distract her, when Edward was there to keep her on track. He could love her and help her accomplish everything she wanted in life.

“Come on.” She kissed him once more. “Let’s get home behind closed doors. I know a few positions we can still manage between my condition and yours.”

~Edward~

Edward whistled to himself as he gathered the bags of groceries he’d purchased. He found himself chuckling as he recalled the conversation he’d had just before he finished work.

One of his coworkers had invited him out with the guys for a drink. Edward had declined. Though he genuinely wanted to go home, he’d offered up the age old excuse. He’d promised his girl he’d go to the grocery store.

It was the truth in a way. He had told Bella he’d go to the store, but she wouldn’t have cared if he didn’t come home right away.

These days, Edward liked coming home. Even now, it was still something of a novelty to know he even could buy groceries. For a long time, Edward thought he didn’t like to cook. When he was with Bella, he discovered he liked cooking a lot. What he hadn’t liked was how many times his dinners went to waste because Tanya would arrive home so late that the only thing she had time to do was stumble into bed. Even the days she did make it home in time for dinner, she was almost always distracted. She could have been eating dirt for all it mattered to her.

Bella was, as with almost everything, a whole other world. She came home at a reasonable time almost every night. On the days she was a little late, she was appreciative to come home to a hot meal. When she got home on time, they cooked dinner together, chatting about their day and finding excuses to bump into one another.

And, with his new mindset, Edward found domesticity suited him. It wasn’t that he was tired of his job. He liked his job and liked the respect he had in his field. The simple fact was, these days, it was his home life that brought him the most satisfaction. Like researching strollers and cribs gave him a greater sense of accomplishment than anything else he completed during the week.

He had the crazy idea that maybe he wanted to stay home for a little while after the baby was born. He wasn’t the kind of guy who thought it wasemasculating for a man to stay home with his kids. He didn’t think either parent had to stay home, but maybe he wanted to. At least while their baby was a baby.

It made sense. Bella wanted to take as little time off as possible. She was looking forward to their son’s birth, but the article she’d written—serial killers and the people they loved—seemed to have tipped some kind of scale. The big corporations were sniffing around, and she needed to be visible now more than ever. They’d already had the hard discussions—would he move to New York or Los Angeles if it came down to it.
He would. Of course, he would.

There was time to figure it all out. He’d bring up the idea of staying home; see how Bella felt about being the primary breadwinner. He had plenty of savings and vacation time stored up, but it was a harrowing thing to ask someone as young as Bella to be the sole earner for a family of three. They’d discuss it, and if she was okay, they’d figure out if they could actually afford it.

That was another remarkable change. With Tanya, whenever Edward wanted something in their life together to change, he always went in knowing there was going to be a huge fight. Tanya had treated everything he wanted as an unreasonable nuisance. Even taking the time to talk about it would annoy her. Bella always listened, and she would help him find a way to get what he wanted or a compromise if need be. Either way, she always treated their discussions, and his concerns, with respect.

His life, stagnant for so long, was good and progressively getting better.

Edward made it upstairs to the apartment with aching arms. Okay, so it hadn’t been such a great idea to take all the groceries up at once.

To his surprise, when he got the apartment door open, a wonderful smell greeted him. Garlic and butter and spices. “Bella?” he called.

“Nope. Not me.”

Smiling, Edward picked up all his bags and hurried into the kitchen. There, he found his very pregnant girlfriend poking at something on the stove. “What are you doing home? And what are you doing on your feet? Let me do that.”

“I’m fine.” Bella wrapped her arm around his waist and tilted her head up to meet his kiss. “I came home a little early and decided I’d start dinner for once.”

He gave a sigh of mock gravity. “Throwing off all my plans.” He kissed her once more before he let her go. “Can I help?”

“Naw. I got it.” She looked back to the pot she’d been stirring, and he could swear he saw her cheeks get pinker. Must have been the heat from the stove, he figured. “I got you something.”

“Oh, yeah?” he asked, opening the fridge so he could put away the perishables.

“Yeah. It’s in the living room.”

“What is it?”

She poked him in the side with the tip of a clean wooden spoon. “Go look.”

Obliging--and curious--he finished putting away the frozen food and headed into the living room. He saw the box right away and sat on the couch in front of it. He raised his eyebrows as he realized what it was. A kit. It was a woodworking kit to make a children’s toy box.

Edward smiled, a warm feeling spreading through his chest. She did understand him, this beautiful woman. He wondered if he could finish the project in the month they had left before the baby came.

He reached for the box to pull it closer and found that he’d used too much strength. The box came too easily, and he huffed in surprise. Then, he frowned.
Was it empty? It was way too light to hold anything that was on the cover.

But not empty. He could hear something rattling around, he realized. He set the box down again and opened it.

There were exactly two items in the box. One was a flash drive, but he didn’t think too much about that. No, his hands went to the box within the box. Specifically, the ring box.

What the hell.

There was a grunt of effort, and Edward looked over, realizing Bella had dropped awkwardly to one knee beside him.

“Bella, what are you doing?” His brain wasn’t sure what to concentrate on--his outrage over the fact she’d gotten down into a position he knew had to be uncomfortable for her or his confusion as to what the heck kind of gift she’d gotten him.

“That should be obvious, my dimbulb.” She puffed a little as she spoke, but she took the ring box from his hand. “I’m asking you to marry me.”

Sure enough, there was a fancy man’s ring in the box. Black metal with a silver vine twisted down the middle. He laughed. “Oh, Bella.”

He slid off the couch, onto his knees beside her, and wrapped her up in a tight hug, laughing again because he was incredulous. He kissed her, then made a strangled noise and stopped. “Christ. Get up off your knees.”

She was out of balance these days, so he braced his hands under her arms and rose with her.

“You’re so… I don’t…”

“This isn’t a difficult question,” she teased, smiling at him. “Yes or no?”

He took her face in his hands. “Yes.” He kissed her again. “Yes.” And again. “Yes, you crazy woman.”

They kissed, and Bella insisted on sliding the ring onto his finger. They both giggled like children and kissed again like fresh-faced teenagers. “You were supposed to let me do this, remember?”

She grinned against his mouth. “Yeah, well. I’m supposed to do a lot of things I don’t do.” She looped her arms around his neck. “Regretting saying yes yet?”

“No.” The word was a rumble, and he tightened his arms around her. “No. Never.”

“Bella?” Edward murmured the words directly onto her lips. Their fervent kisses had turned to those slow, perfect, potent kisses. The kind he could get drunk off of.

“Hmm?”

“What’s on the flashdrive?”

She pulled back. “Oh.” She ducked her head, her expression shy. “I… Well, it’s some preliminary research.”

Research and an engagement ring? Edward couldn’t quite figure how that went together. “Research on?”
Bella took a deep breath. “It’s very basic, very preliminary research on the housing market and realtors.”

Edward blinked. “What?” He felt like his primary mode for the evening was thrown for a loop.

“I just think you should have a garage. You know, for all your woodworking. Maybe even one of those power saw table things.” Bella took a deep breath. “And that means a house. If we can swing it. Anway. I’m just saying, I’m willing to talk about it. Figure it out.”

“Now?” Edward asked, still in shock. They were moving at light speed. Not that he minded. It was everything he’d wanted.

Her answering smile was gentle, and her eyes sparked. “There’s no need to wait, I don’t think.”

“No. None at all.” Grinning so hard his cheeks hurt, Edward wrapped his arms around her and pulled her up against him.

Getting a house and planning a wedding meant Edward would probably definitely have to keep working for a while. They’d have to talk about it. They’d have to figure out the logistics. But that was a compromise Edward was more than happy to make. Together. With his partner. His love. His everything.

It was going to be a very good rest of his life.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: As Mina and Packy have told me it’s unacceptable that I’ve faded to black three times this week...yes, you can rest assured there will be sexy times in the epilogue. And yes, of course, you’ll get to meet Baby Boy Cullen.

My second ever sequel from a woman who hates sequels. Wow. What do you guys do to me?
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

A/N: Be aware of the time jumps. Here we go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

An Epilogue in Three Scenes

~Edward~

Part I

For the first time all day, Edward’s smile fell.

His six-month-old son was missing.

He spun around in a circle, looking for Nathaniel’s familiar form. He concentrated, trying to hear his baby coos and giggles over the din. No luck. He glanced to his side, about to call Bella away from where she was talking to her parents, but then, finally, he spotted the boy.

Relieved, Edward strode over to the a table toward the back of the venue and sat down with one chair between him and Tanya. “Hey. Sorry. He must have gotten away from... whomever had him last.” He smiled sheepishly. Nate had been in a different set of arms every time he looked. He reached over and ran a hand over his son’s downy hair. “I can take him.”

The boy was fast asleep, his head on Tanya’s shoulder. She had her hand splayed over his back. “He’s okay, actually.”

Edward arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yeah.” She ducked her head, skimming her nose along Nate’s hair. “I always forget how good babies smell.”

He scoffed. “Spoken like a woman who’s never changed a diaper.”

“I’ve changed a diaper.” She scowled at him, but there was no venom there for either of them. They both laughed, and her scowl gentled into a smile. “He’s a beauty, Edward.”

“Thank you.”

She sighed, a wistful expression coming over her face. “Is it weird for me to be here?”

“You were invited.”

“Edward.” She gave him that look.
He smirked. “You were invited because we knew if Eric came, he’d bring you anyway. I wanted to make sure you knew you were welcome, if you wanted.” He paused a beat. “Though no, I didn’t expect you to actually come.”

She snorted. “I didn’t expect me to come either. Curiosity killed the cat. I figured if I was going to obsess over your wedding, I might as well know what it actually felt like to watch you marry someone else.”

“So, what’s the verdict?” Edward asked, keeping his tone light.

“It sucked.” Tanya rolled her eyes and smiled at him. “Surprisingly, though, it also felt really good.”

Edward arched a disbelieving eyebrow.

“I know, I know. I was supposed to sit there and think bitter thoughts about how you promised me all those things first. Love, honor, and cherish until death do us part.” She waved a hand. “But I watched you up there—and you looked like you were about ready to float through the ceiling, you big goofball—and I was surprisingly happy for you. Like really proud and happy. I only imagined Bella falling in the cake once.”

Edward’s lips twitched, but Tanya continued before he could say anything. “You know, I’m never going to regret being married to you. You were always my biggest champion. I wouldn’t be where I am today, who I am today without you. We were good for each other in the early days, weren’t we? In school, when we were deciding what we wanted to be when we grew up, and when we were both newbies in our fields.”

“Yeah, T. We made a good team for a while there.”

Tanya’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “And Bella couldn’t have done that for you, what with her being a child and all.”

“Tanya.”

She chortled, but then her smile gentled. “What I realized today was that you were there when I got everything I wanted; when all my hard work paid off. You smiled, you clapped, and you were proud of me. Today, I realized that I felt exactly the same. I was proud and happy for you, because you got what you’ve been working hard for all your life today.”

Edward couldn’t help his smile. After the officiant announced that he could kiss his bride, someone had brought their son to them, and they’d walked down the aisle together—the three of them.

Nathaniel stirred then, waking with a whimper. Edward reached for him automatically, and Tanya gave him up. “Shh, baby boy. Don’t wake up.”

“You really taking the year off work?” Tanya asked when Nathaniel was asleep again. “I couldn’t imagine that.”

“No kidding.” Edward flashed her a grin so she knew it was a joke. “I have the savings. Bella’s doing incredibly well. We decided not to move out of the apartment for at least a year so there was no reason for me not to stay home.”

“And you wanted to,” Tanya finished for him.
“I’m pretty happy with the arrangement, yeah.”

“See?” She grinned at him. “It’s getting harder to be bitter when we’re both pretty happy these days.”

“Hey.”

Edward turned in his seat, his smile broadening as he saw Bella coming toward him. He’d hardly taken his eyes off her all day, and yet she still stole his breath. His wife. The mother of his beautiful son. She was radiant today—elegant and stunning. The corners of her eyes tightened only the slightest amount as she saw Tanya. She put a possessive hand on Edward’s shoulder. “Hi, Tanya.”

Tanya looked amused. “Hello, Bella. Congratulations. This is all so beautiful.”

Bella’s cheeks turned pink, and her smile got more genuine. “Thank you.” As Edward stood, she wrapped an arm around his waist and kissed their sleeping son’s head.

Eric came back then, and Edward and Bella made their excuses. “This whole wedding thing has actually been a lot more fun than I thought it was going to be.”

“More fun than you thought, hmm?” Edward teased when they walked away a few minutes later. He shifted Nate to one arm so he could take Bella’s hand. “Well, I’m glad I’m not boring you, Mrs. Cullen.”

“You could never bore me.” She stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek, vaguely aware the photographer was close by. “I meant that I expected the wedding to be a pain in the ass to plan, but it was fun.” She smirked. “I think that has more to do with letting your mother, Jake, Alice, and Embry duke it out rather than do any of it myself.” She grinned.

Edward chuckled. That had been fun, actually. The four of them argued themselves hoarse, presented Edward and Bella with three ideas, and narrowed it down from there. It had been like their own private reality show.

“Speak of the devil.” Edward turned slightly to smile at his mother.

Esme quirked an eyebrow and looked at her new daughter-in-law. “Did he just refer to me as Satan?”

“He sure did.” Bella poked him in the side. “You’re in trouble.”

“Nope. I have a surefire cure to angry mother disease.” Edward put Nate, who was blinking awake again, in her arms. “Hold this.”

Sure enough, his mother’s pursed lips turned into a smile as she cradled her whimpering grandson. “Oh, Natey. None of that. Where’s my smiling boy who looked so precious at the ceremony. Look at you, so handsome.” She peppered him with kisses until the baby giggled.

“Come on, you,” Edward said, tugging Bella the opposite direction.

“Where are we going?”

“They’re playing our song.”

“This isn’t our song,” Bella said as he pulled her onto the dance floor. She furrowed her brow at
“We have a song?”

“We do have a song.” As he took her by the waist, the music started. Lady in Red. Bella’s confused look melted into a tender one.

“I’m not wearing red,” she said, her look soft and her eyes adoring on him.

He hummed to her, pulling her closer against him. Around them, the dance floor cleared out as if they knew. “There’s nobody here,” he crooned next to her ear. “It’s just you and me.”

It was the song they’d danced to when Tanya had sent Bella to a ball with him instead of going herself. On some level, it had always bothered Edward that Bella fell in love with him that day. That she’d been there in his arms, looking up at him, looking into his eyes and falling head over heels.

Looking at her now, he had no idea how he hadn’t fallen for her right then. How had he ever looked on her with anything but this consuming emotion? But that was fine, he supposed, because he was making up for it. Right there on the dance floor, he was falling in love with his wife all over again.

It was, he thought, a good thing that those tattoos didn’t reappear randomly every time he fell in love with the same woman. If they did, he’d be covered head to toe in vines.

Part II

~Bella~

“I still don’t understand how this happened,” Bella muttered.

“You wrote a story about serial killers,” Eric said, glancing at her as they drove to the airport. “It was well-received.”

“Yes, I know that. But I interviewed serial killers in jail. This is an active serial killer I will definitely not be talking to. That’s a whole other kind of journalism.”

“Congratulations, Bella. Your name is linked with serial killers.” Eric chuckled. “We don’t look a gift horse in the mouth when it’s a piece in Time magazine. This is big. You know that, right?”

Bella’s stomach gave a twinge of nerves. “I’m not complaining.”

Eric sighed. “I’m going to lose you soon. I can see that one coming a mile away.” He shook his head. “You ready for this one?”

“Oh, sure. It’s going to be fun. I’m going to have to look at those crime scenes.” Bella grimaced. This freak actually took the tattoos from his victims as trophies. “No, really. I’ll be fine. I don’t know how I stumbled into being some kind of expert on violent crimes, but I’ll be fine.”

“Well, at least your career will be interesting. No writing about visiting foreign dignitaries at boring state parties.”

He parked the car, and they headed into the airport. The line for security was long as always, and Bella busied herself scrolling through the pictures and video she’d taken right before she left the house.
In the video, Edward held their tearful son at his hip. Nate had one hand extended toward the camera and was babbling at her. “Mama. Mama no.”

Edward gave the camera—and Bella behind it—a rueful smile. “He doesn’t want you to go, Mama.”

She heard herself give a disgruntled sigh. “You’re both terrible.”

“How’s the kid?” Eric asked.

Bella smiled at her boss. “He loved your gift on this birthday last week. Especially the box. I swear he’s part cat. He loves boxes.” She tilted her head. “By the way, really? That play center makes twenty-seven different noises. Twenty-seven, Eric. It’s not that I don’t appreciate it, but that’s a major party foul.”

Eric looked like the cat who ate the canary. “Tanya was the one who bought it. I just signed the card.”

“Ah, well, that explains that.” She fixed him with an equally bratty expression. “So you going to marry her, or what?”

“Gosh, Mother, I didn’t realize I was bringing you along on my business trip. We’re happy as is.” Before he could quip back, Bella’s phone rang. She smiled when she saw it was Edward. “Hey, you. I’m—”

“Bella.” His tone made her stomach churn.

“What happened?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“We?”

“I’m at the hospital with Nate.”

“Jesus. What happened?”

“I don’t know. He woke up with a horrible fever, and he’s lethargic. He’s dehydrated, and they’re admitting him.”

“I’m coming.” She had already ducked under the line.

“Bella,” both Edward and Eric said.

“My kid is sick,” she said over her shoulder to her boss. “I’m coming,” she said to Edward.

~0~

He was too tiny for the crib. It was too large to look cozy. A child could have fit easily in it, but Nate wasn’t a child. He was just a baby.

Bella sighed and rested her cheek on the bars of bed. She stroked her fingers through Nate’s sweat-damp hair. Her heart ached in a way she had no idea it was capable of.
The infection had hit out of nowhere. It had taken most of thirty hours—hellish hours of uncertainty and fear—but Nate’s doctors said he was out of the woods. He’d be fine. He was just a little miserable at the moment. Well, he was miserable when he was awake which was—both mercifully and nerve-wracking—not often.

It was the early hours of the morning. The hospital was as quiet as hospitals ever got. Edward had finally passed out only half an hour before, and he was slumped in the seat on the opposite side of the bed. Bella was somewhere beyond exhausted. She’d passed exhausted twelve hours ago, but she still couldn’t sleep. She was afraid to close her eyes. Afraid of what would happen when she couldn’t see her son.

Watching Nate’s chest rise and fall, Bella’s heart squeezed. It was too much. Too tight. She squeezed her eyes shut, but she couldn’t stop the tears from falling. She clapped a hand over her mouth, not wanting to wake her husband or son.

“Fuck,” she muttered under her breath minutes later when she was semi-coherent again. She sniffed hard, her fingers trembling as she ran her fingers through Nate’s brown curls. “I have a confession to make, baby.” She wiped at her eyes again. “The last time I cried that hard was when I found out I was pregnant with you.”

She flipped her hand over and traced the tattoo of the dragonfly on her wrist. It matched the one on her son’s ankle. She and Edward had both gotten the tattoo shortly after Nate was born. She smiled. “These tattoos are such a funny thing. I’ve always wanted to talk to whomever was in charge of this system. Romantic love is too fickle for this kind of permanence. That’s what always made me so angry about these damn tattoos.

“But if I thought falling for your daddy was scary, it was nothing to how I felt when I had you.” She took her son’s tiny, pudgy hands in hers. “That love, Nathaniel. That’s permanent. And I guess, maybe that’s the reason. A tattoo would be redundant. My love for you was etched on my bones, sewn into my soul, the second they laid you in my arms. I love you so much.”

Her voice cracked and she pressed a knuckle against her lips, trying to calm down. She had no idea why she was still so scared. She just wanted her baby home. She wanted to be home in her bed with her baby in her arms and her husband holding them both.

She shouldn’t have been surprised when she felt Edward’s strong arm around her shoulders. She hadn’t heard him get up, but now he was in the chair beside her. She turned and buried her face at his neck, crying out her residual terror and helplessness. “I’d take it all for him. Everything,” she whispered raggedly.

“I know,” Edward said, his hand stroking up and down her back.

Bella raised her head, looking at him. “I just… I didn’t ask for either of you. There was a time when I didn’t want either of you. And now, sometimes I feel like someone’s going to take it all away.” She shook her head hard. “I’d give it all up. Everything else. Everything.”

“Shhh.” He took her face in his hands and wiped away her tears with his thumbs. “Nate is going to be fine, sweetheart. He’s here, and I’m here, and you’re not going to lose either of us because you want more than us.”
“You’re everything to me. You and Nate.”

“We’re the most important.” He kissed her forehead. “But not everything. And that’s okay. That’s perfect, because we’re going to teach him he can want as many things as he’s willing to work for, right?”

Bella nodded and let him pull her back into his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder. “He really scared me,” she whispered.

Edward shuddered. “I know. Believe me, I know. But give him a few days. Then we’ll be back to tearing our hair out, wondering how something so small has so much energy and brattiness in him.”

“Well, he is your son.”

Part III

~Edward~

“Nate. Why in God’s name are you naked? Again?”

Edward’s two-year-old son, sitting in the middle of his room surrounded by his toys, shrugged. “Don’t like pants.”

“Oh, okay,” Edward said slowly. “What do you have against shirts?”

Nate looked up at him with an expression Edward was familiar with. It was Bella’s ‘Edward is being dumb’ look. “Shirt goes with pants.”

“I see. And you’re not a fan.”

Nate shook his head and pushed to his feet. Edward had to cover his smile. He loved how Nate always pushed himself to his feet ass first. It was three times as funny because he was naked. Oblivious to his father’s mirth, Nate went to his toy box and bent over it—again with his ass in the air. Edward chortled to himself.

Then there was a crash from the other room that had Edward on his feet. He looked at Nate—who appeared not to have heard—and then headed down the hallway quickly. He gasped when he saw Bella was on the floor.

“Are you okay? What happened?”

She was laying on her back, her cell phone clutched to her chest, looking pale. “I’m fine,” she said in a small voice.

He took her hand and pulled her into a sitting position, squatting beside her. “Why are you on the floor? Did you fall?”

She looked stoned—her eyes unfocused and her mouth hanging slightly open. She made a vague motion behind her. “I fell out of the chair. I’m fine.”

“Okay. What happened?”

“Um.” Finally, her eyes focused on him. “How do you feel about California?”

His eyebrows arched. “We’re moving?” He’d been ready for this announcement for over a year.
She’d been invited to too many events with too many of the big names in journalism.

“I thought… Well, I thought they wouldn’t want me now. But they said it wasn’t a problem.”

“What wasn’t a problem?”

“That I’m pregnant.”

Edward blinked. He replayed the words in his head. They didn’t add up. “Excuse me, what?”

Bella winced and looked at him again. “And I told them before you. Crap. I’m sorry. It’s just, this is one of the big guys. The really, really big guys. And I know. I was published in Time magazine, so it shouldn’t be a surprise that they even know my name. And true, it’s one of their smaller magazines, but these are the big kids, Edward. This is intense.”

They stared at each other. “Wait a second.” He wiped a hand over his face. “Can you go back to the part…”

“Where I said I was pregnant?” A tiny smile tugged at the corner of her lips. “Yeah. That’s true.”

He stared at her. He laughed once. “And we’re moving.”

“Uh. I said I had to talk to you.”

“No, you didn’t. You knew what I would say.”

She grinned. “Yeah. I told them yes straight out.”

“After you told them you were pregnant.”

“After they said that wasn’t a problem.” Bella nodded.

They stared at each other. And then they both started laughing. “We wouldn’t even think of making it uncomplicated, would we?” Edward said between chortles, sitting beside her and taking her into his arms.

“It wouldn’t be us if it was uncomplicated.”

He pressed his hands over her belly, a thrill going through him. “Another baby.” He kissed her cheek. And then kissed it again. And again. Then they were giggling and kissing.

“What you doing? Me too!” Nate announced his presence by wiggling between them.

“Why are you naked?” Bella asked, laughing as they rearranged themselves with Nate between them.

Nate shrugged. Edward huffed and shook his head. He ruffled his son’s hair and kissed his wife one more time.

It was hours before they could really talk about it. Nate took their time and attention—especially talking him back into his clothes. Dinner had to be cooked, served, and the kitchen cleaned. Then there was bathtime and storytime. Nate got out of bed once, twice. They finally let him sleep in their bed and ended up stretched out there on either side of their sleeping son.

“Are you really okay with this?” Bella asked.
“Which part? The baby or the move?”

She smirked. “I know how you feel about the baby, goofball. You haven’t stopped smiling; do you know that?”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “How about a girl this time?”

“I’ll log your request in with management.” Her smile gentled into something more tender. “I meant the move. It’s a lot to think about. To be away from your family.”

“This is my family.” He reached out, resting a hand on her hip. “We’ve had this discussion a hundred times over, Bella. This isn’t a wagon train across the wilderness where we’ll never see our friends and family here. We’ve got planes and Skype. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but since when was life ever easy? It’s the right thing for us.”

“You’re good to me, you know that?”

Edward shook his head. “What you’ve given me, love, is far beyond anything I could have expected from life.” He looked down at their son. “Are you okay? About the baby, I mean. We didn’t plan this.”

“We didn't not plan, either,” she said wryly. “I knew what I was asking for when I stopped being careful about the pill. It's not ideal, but I never wanted Nate to be an only child, and a huge age gap wouldn't have been ideal either.”

He nodded. “So this is our life.”

She grinned. “This is our life.”

Life was good.

~The End~

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Many thanks to MoH, Songster, Eleanor, and especially Mina and Packy. I’m surprised they didn’t disown me today.

Thanks to all of you for your love and support.

If I may, I’m getting ready to release my fourth book, Spaces Between Notes (no relation at all to my fic of the same name). The summary is as follows:

Nikolai Amorosa is one of those men’s men. You know the type—allergic to feelings, couldn’t have a heartfelt discussion if he tried, which he never did. Then, he lost his voice, and any chance of communication went out the window.
Unable to speak or otherwise interact with anyone, Niko’s anger was off the charts. It could’ve been worse; he could’ve been in jail. Instead, he found himself doing construction on Carys Harper’s house. Carys talked—a lot—both with her voice and her hands. She was also at the beck and call of her deaf little brother, Benny, which drove Niko nine kinds of crazy. Not that he would’ve said anything, even if he could.

Something else that drove him crazy? Carys was stubborn. She wouldn’t let him wallow. More than that, she seemed to hear all the things he couldn’t say. She understood him like she understood music. She heard what existed in the spaces between notes. She knew that sometimes silence screams the loudest.

Follow me on my blog, KristinaMSanchez dot com, or on my Facebook page for more info. Spaces Between Notes should release on October 13th.

Thank you, friends. With that, Marked Complete is...marked complete. *smug grin*

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!