Title: Behind Closed Doors

Author: ghostreader24

Summary: Washington Post reporter, Isabella Swan, juggles the secrets and lies of her private life while pursuing her dream of winning a Pulitzer Prize for investigative journalism. *BPOV expansion of This Week with Edward Masen for the Twilight Secrets & Lies Contest

Pairing: Bella, Edward

Rating: M

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DISCLAIMER: Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm here having fun.
Chapter 1: The Lawyer

Dear Reader,

I hope you've read my story, This Week with Edward Masen, before deciding to start this one. It provides an excellent overview of where Behind Closed Doors is headed and should answer many of your questions. After reading my one shot, you know I am a talk show host and political analyst, but what you may not know is that I'm also a lawyer. Therefore, I advised ghostreader24 to add a warning before we begin. She loves reading political fanfic and isn't easily offended, but she understands not everyone can agree on all issues. The word “politics” can invite many passionate responses, but Bella's story has always been one about human rights. My advice is to read this one with an open mind and a heart full of tolerance and compassion as Bella shares this story with you.

Sincerely,
Edward Masen
Chapter 2: The Game

“Watch where you’re—”

“Holy shit.” Immediately, I pull my borrowed Capitals’ jersey from my chest, as I’m drenched in cold beer. It’s seeping into every nook and cranny, leaving my bra just as soaked.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t see you.”

Looking up, I’m dazed momentarily by an incredibly handsome man tossing his empty plastic cup in the trash. He’s grabbing fistfuls of napkins from a nearby dispenser and dabbing at my chest.

This has been a shitshow of an evening. My best friend and roommate, Angela, begged me to go on this blind date.

“He will be perfect for you,” she’d claimed.

I had just finished texting her that Tyler bailed on our date, because his ex-boyfriend decided they should give their relationship another chance. Boy, was Angela wrong about that one.

Thank goodness, I had put my phone away before I ran into this hockey fan accidentally during the break or I would be shopping for a new phone tomorrow.

“I don’t think I’m doing much good.” He looks over my chest, tossing the wet napkins in the trash.

“Maybe I’ll just leave.”

“And miss one of the best games of the year? Look, this is my fault.” He points toward a shop full of clothes. “Let me buy you a new hockey jersey, then you can get back to watching the game with your boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” I chuckle. “You must be mistaken. I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“I thought I noticed you with a guy.”

I shrug. “He left to meet up with his ex-boyfriend. Or maybe it’s current boyfriend by now. I can’t keep up.”
“Good to know.” He holds out his hand. “I'm Edward Masen.”

Letting go of my jersey with one hand while still trying to keep it from coming in contact with my chest, I shake his hand. “Uh, Bella Swan.”

“Oh, right. Sorry. What size do you wear?” He leads us toward the store.

“That’s kind of a personal question to ask someone you just met.”

He brushes off my teasing. “Small?”

“Sure.”

I wait outside the store while Edward selects and purchases a new jersey for me in less than five minutes. He’s a power shopper.

“Here you go. They only had ‘Holtby’ in your size. I hope that’s okay. You probably would rather have an ‘Ovechkin.’” He hands me the plastic bag and points. “I think the women’s restroom is in that direction if you want to change.”

“You didn’t have to do this, but thanks.” I have no idea what a ‘Holtby’ or an ‘Ovechkin’ are, but I locate the restroom and make the switch, putting my wet bra and Angela’s beer-soaked jersey back in the bag. The fabric of the new one is thick enough I can get away without needing a bra, but it does make me a little self-conscious that everyone can see too much since the material clings to my body.

When I exit the restroom, I’m surprised to see Edward leaning against the wall, holding two beers.

His smile brightens when he sees I’ve spotted him, and he starts walking toward me, holding out one of the beers in his hand.

“It looks like a perfect fit. How about a beer?”

“You didn’t have to stick around, but thanks.” I reach out, grab the offered beer, and take a sip. “Am I keeping you from the game?”

“No, I was watching one of the television monitors while waiting for you. You know, you look familiar. Have we met somewhere before?”

“I don't think so. What do you do?”
“I work on a television show here in D.C.”

“Oh, well, I’m a reporter for the Post.”

“Were you by any chance at the White House Correspondents’ dinner last week?”

I smile. “I was there with my boss.”

“Then, that must be it. I was there too.”

“What type of television show?”

“One of those boring, stuffy Sunday morning political types.”

“Oh, are you a producer?”

“Uh, no. The host.”

“The host? Which one? I know a bit about politics.”

“I’ve just taken over This Week.”

“That’s one of my favorites. Are you here with some co-workers?”

“I wish. I was trying to woo one of my father’s former colleagues into coming on my show, Senator Aro Volturi.”

“Wow, he’s a big fish. Did you hook him?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve known him most of my life, but he disappeared not long into the first period.” He leans close. “I think he picked up a woman from one of the bars. I’m sure they’re headed for the nearest hotel room by now.”

“Oh, I didn’t know he was single.”

“He’s not.”

“So, why aren’t you wearing a Capitals’ jersey?”

“I’m originally from Chicago and will always be a Blackhawks fan.”

“I don’t know much about hockey. My best friend begged me to come to this game in order to meet the ‘perfect guy’ for me. A blind date that went south when his ex texted him that he
wanted to give their relationship another try. Now, I’m old news. Not that I was front page, by any means.”

“I would think you would be quite the feature story in my opinion. Since I don’t believe the Senator will return, would you like to take his seat and join me for the rest of the game?”

“Uh—”

“You would be doing me a huge favor. There’s a puck bunny sitting next to us who was trying to put the moves on me. I think she’s hoping for a ‘Kiss Cam’ moment.”

“A puck bunny? What in the world is that?”

“They’re women who focus on bagging the next great hockey star using whatever means necessary.”

“Sounds cut-throat. Aren’t you worried about me being a bunny?”

“I think I would rather take my chances with you than her.”

“Let me text Angela and let her know I ran into a co-worker, and I’m going to visit for a while.”

“A while? Tell her the rest of the game.” He holds my beer while I take out my phone.

Edward doesn’t lack confidence.

“Oh, wait. She sent me a text not long ago saying she’s not feeling well. Her boyfriend Ben is going to take her home.”

“Perfect, now you’re free for the rest of the game, and I can give you a ride home too.” He looks over my surprised expression. “If you need one.”

I’m not sure about the ride, but decide to see how this goes with Edward. “I’ll think about it.”

“Great. Follow me.”

I put away my phone and go to grab my beer, but he pulls it back to his chest.

“I’ve got this.” He smirks, and I don’t miss the wink either. “Let’s just get you to my seats without another mishap.”

When he points me in the right direction, I realize we are a lot closer than where I was sitting with Angela and Ben. “Wow, these seats are really close to the ice.”
We aren’t next to the glass, but we’re close and almost in the middle of the rink.

Edward nods. “This is my favorite spot. Although, sitting near the bench for either team is fun too. I forgot to ask, did you want something to eat?”

I pull out a yellow package of peanut M&Ms. “I’m good. Do you want to share?”

“Sure.”

I rip into the package and pour some into his waiting hand.

“You aren’t going to feed them to me?” He feigns disappointment.

“Maybe I can ask one of your puck bunnies to do that for you.”

I turn to get the attention of the heavily made-up, blonde woman with ample boobs next to me, but Edward grabs my arm.

“Don’t,” he says in my ear over the shouts and murmurs of the fans surrounding us. “Right now, your presence is enough to discourage her. Maybe I should offer to feed the M&Ms to you instead?”

Edward holds up one to my lips, and I’m surprised by the forwardness of his offer, but my mouth opens automatically as he eases it inside. His fingertips barely graze my lips as I watch a slow smile spread across his face. While I’m enjoying his attention, I’ve never had anyone offer to feed me, and I wonder if this is something he does on dates or to impress women. I watch him pop several into his own mouth, and I’m about to ask for another when our spell is broken by a huge crashing sound against the glass in front of our section.

“Dear Lord! Are they okay?” I watch horrified as the men get up off the ice, throwing off their gloves.

“Yeah, they’re fine. Oh, a fight!” Edward looks excited.

“I thought they were playing a game. Why do they just stop all of a sudden and start beating the crap out of each other?” I cringe when I see the bloody knuckles of one player land squarely into the jaw of the other. I look around our section, and there are plenty of fans recording the fight while others cheer them on. “This is ridiculous.”

“It’s part of the game. Those two have been after each other all night.”

“Like gladiators or some kind of deathmatch on ice?”
“Uh, not exactly. Not all hockey games have fights, but sometimes tensions boil over and conversations become heated.”

“Aren’t those essentially sharp knives on their feet? Why don’t they just use those?”

“Because as long as they are upright, the referees will let the fight continue. Once they fall down, then they generally stop it. Sometimes they step in before they throw any punches.”

“These are very odd rules. Did you play hockey?”

“Yes, until my junior year of high school. I broke my femur.”

“Holy crap, your femur? Isn’t that the strongest bone in the body?”

“Yes, my recovery was long and difficult. I still play in the occasional pick-up game, but now I stick to non-contact sports, like running or golf.”

“I see. I’m not really into sports. My dad likes to watch baseball and football.”

“Which teams?”

“We’re from the State of Washington, so I think it’s the Mariners and the Seahawks?”

Edward nods. “What does your dad do?”

“Uh, he’s in law enforcement.”

“That sounds foreboding. Is he a cop?”

“He used to be. Now he’s more of a manager.”

“Like a Chief of Police?”

“He was Chief in our town for a while, but now he works here in D.C. for the FBI.”

“Wow, that’s quite a promotion.”

“You can call it something like that.”

“What about your mother? Does she like living in D.C.?”
“Uh, no. My parents never married. I was an ‘oops’ baby. She lives in Florida with my stepfather. What about your parents?”

“They both still live in Chicago. My dad is senior partner of a law firm he started with Senator Volturi, and my mother stays home.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Unfortunately, no. I’m an only child. What about you?”

“I wish I could say the same, but I do have a couple of stepsisters,” I share, hoping he doesn’t notice me cringe at the thought of them. They are two of the most spoiled people I know, and that’s being kind. I have lots of other adjectives for them, but I’ll keep them to myself for now.

“Did you grow up together?”

“No. I’m almost ten years older than the youngest, and I lived with my dad. They are my stepfather’s daughters with his first wife. If you know Aro Volturi, then you probably know her, Dori Volturi. She’s married to Senator Caius Volturi, Aro’s brother.”

“So, your stepfather is Phil Dwyer? The owner of the Florida Marlins?”

Oh, dear. He’s starting to piece together my dysfunctional family tree.

“Yes, the Volturis are my mother and Phil’s neighbors. Small world, right?”

“After living in D.C. for years, I’ve found it to be a very small world, Bella.”

I look up at the scoreboard and try to figure out how much time is left for this boxing on ice event. “Is it almost over?”

“Yes, about three minutes left in the third period.”

“Oh, well, that should go quickly, right?”

“Yes. The Capitals are up by one, and the Hawks should pull their goalie soon.”

“Why would they do that?”

“To give them an extra player on offense—which would allow them a better chance of scoring a goal to tie the game and send it into overtime.”
I watch Edward as his eyes follow the players on the ice, then suddenly, he throws his arms in the air as a horn goes off.

“Yes!”

“What happened?” I look around us, and most people don’t appear happy—only Edward.

“The Hawks scored, and it looks like time will run out in regulation, so it ends in a tie.”

“So, there’s more?”

“Yes. Did you need to get home?”

“No, I can stay. I just have more work waiting for me when I get there. Angela will be happy I stayed for the entire game plus the extra—she says I’m a workaholic. It’s why she set me up with Tyler. He works with her boyfriend, Ben, over at the National Archives.”

“I bet that’s a fun job.”

“Yeah, a history buff’s dream. So, how do you like hosting your show?”

“It’s good. I’m still learning the ropes. I write a column for the Wall Street Journal every week, which keeps me up on all the latest. However, I’m a bit of a news junkie and CNN addict.”

“It’s always on?”

“Guilty. Or some type of sports game.”

“What are your subjects for this week’s show?”

“Taxes and government spending.”

“Oh, that reminds me, I still need to finish my taxes and submit them.”

“Are you a procrastinator, Bella?”

“No, but when you have to pay, you wait as long as possible to hand over the money.”

“True. So, tell me, what is Bella Swan, Washington Post reporter, working on right now?”

“That’s another very personal question. Will you be asking me to divulge my sources next?” I tease.
“I get it. You write the news. I just discuss current issues revealed by investigative reporters like yourself who do the hard work.”

“I’m only teasing. Right now, I’m working on an article about the sale of Native American lands to foreign mining conglomerates. You know, the whole ‘exploitation of natural resources’ thing. Probably boring for a politically savvy person like yourself.”

“Not at all. Sounds interesting. Let me know when you finish the article. I would love to read it.”

“Is this your way of asking for my number?”

“If it worked, then yes.” He holds out his phone for me to use.

I’m busy punching in my number when everyone around us goes wild with excitement.

I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket, knowing I have his number now too.

“What just happened?”

Edward looks sad. “The Caps just scored, and the game is over. Can I give you a ride home?” He holds out his hand for me to take, and I hand him back his phone, which he pockets. “Let’s not get separated.”

I nod, lacing our fingers together, following him and all of the other hockey fans up the steps and out of the building into the night.

“I’m parked in this direction.” Edward points toward a building nearby, holding my hand firmly in his.

He finally stops in front of a silver, Lexus LC. I’ve seen the commercials for this sexy beast and can’t wait to slide into the red and black leather seats.

“How long have you had this car?”

Edward opens the passenger side door and helps me inside. “It was a gift to myself for getting This Week.”

“It’s quite the splurge.”

He grins, closes the door, and walks smoothly around the car.

I watch as he gets into the driver’s side, pushes the button, and brings the engine roaring to life.
“Where am I headed, Ms. Swan?” He smiles.

“301M. Down by the Nationals Park.”

“I know where it is.”

“Where do you live?”

“Capitol View on 14th.”

“Ah, those are nice apartments.”

“What made you choose 301M?”

“It’s centrally located for work. Angela, the roommate I mentioned earlier, works at the Supreme Court building, which is about fifteen minutes away. Same with the Post for me.”

“What does Angela do there?”

“She works for one of the newly appointed justices, Kate Denali.”

“Wow, it is a small world. One of Justice Denali’s younger sisters, Tanya, is sometimes on my show.”

A flicker of jealousy licks my insides at the realization of Edward wooing female guests to be on his show, but I tamp down that line of thought right away before it gets me in trouble.

Traffic thins once we are away from the arena and Edward passes the National Mall. Our conversation is easy and the ride goes by too fast when I realize he’s already pulling into the main entrance of my building, letting the car idle, and waiting for my departure.

“Thanks for the ride, Edward, and the hockey jersey. It was an unfortunate way to meet, but I’m glad we got a chance to get to know each other this evening.”

“You’re welcome. Maybe we could see each other again?”

“I would like that. Give me a call or text. Maybe we can have coffee or something.” I lean over and give him a quick peck on the cheek, then grab my bags and open the passenger door.

“I look forward to it. Good night, Bella.”

“Good night, Edward.”
Chapter 3: The White House Women’s Luncheon

A women’s luncheon? I’m good with women. They are one of my strongest demographics. Why didn’t I get an invite?

Yes, a women’s lunch. Do you know the First Lady?

Ah, there’s my mistake. Am I missing the men’s lunch?

I don’t think there is one.

There should be. Full of cigars, whiskey, and golf.

I’m positive those types of meetings occur daily. You must not know the right people. ;)

Then I have more work to do. Have fun.

Edward and I have been texting and talking over the phone for the past few weeks as we continue to get to know one another. We have a lot in common and find ourselves discussing current events for hours. He’s curious and charming as he quizzes me nightly about many of my favorite things from foods to places. We’ve even shared childhood stories, laughing about some of our most embarrassing moments.

I have to admit I like hearing from him and my comfort level grows with every interaction. But we haven’t had a chance to get together in person since the hockey game, and I’m hoping our schedules will allow for a date in the near future.

“Bella, my dear. How are you?” Dori Volturi leans in to kiss each side of my face in a move they must teach in trophy wife school.

I tuck away my phone, needing to end my conversation with Edward, and focus on those around me. “I’m busy, but great.”

“Wonderful. I was shopping with your mother earlier this week before I went to New York with the girls. She was upset to miss today’s luncheon because she was feeling under the weather.”

I’m positive a more accurate statement would be my mother was feeling the effects of one too many cocktails. I’m always amazed how Dori, the ex-wife, and my mother, the current wife, get along so well. It’s even weirder that they are neighbors, but in Phil and Dori’s divorce, neither
wanted to give up their prized mansion. However, in the end, Phil purchased the larger estate across the street and moved in with my mother, while Dori gutted their home with Phil picking up the tab. Not long after their divorce, she married Caius, who moved into her remodeled mansion, but kept his extravagant home here in D.C.

“I’ll need to call her and check in soon.” My mother doesn’t miss me or she would call; however, it’s always a nice sentiment. Eventually, enough time will pass, and she will reach out due to guilt.

“I’m sure she would love to hear from you.”

Right.

I’m ready to change this dead-end subject. “How was New York?”

Dori lights up. “Oh, Bella. It was fantastic. Bree and Vic are both under contract with IMG Models.”

“Wow, that’s exciting. They’re so young.”

“Nineteen and twenty are hardly considered young in modeling. I told them they both need to get to New York immediately, or their best years will pass them by while they sit around Phil’s pool or mine all year. Thankfully, they are no longer wasting away their lives, but it took my high-heeled Manolos in their asses to do the trick. I’m thrilled they both chose to go down a path that was so rewarding for me. I need to find them an apartment, and hopefully, they can keep an eye on one another.”

“Are Victoria and Bree here today?” I look around hoping to avoid the dynamic duo.

“Yes, I think they are talking with Didi’s girls, Chelsea and Corin. You’ve met them, right? Make sure you say hello if you get a chance.”

Didi Volturi is the wife of Marcus Volturi, the senator from New York. In the senate, the Volturi brothers are a force to be reckoned with, as they have considerable power. There isn’t a committee or an issue with which one of the three isn’t involved. However, their wives aren’t far behind. They maneuver the political scene with ease. I’ve always liked Dori, but her daughters, Victoria and Bree, are nightmares I avoid when given the opportunity.

“I will say hello when I get the chance. It was lovely seeing you again, Dori.”

“It’s always a pleasure.” She smiles and begins a new conversation with a nearby guest.
Someone comes up behind me and locks our arms together. I look over, and instantly, I am relieved to find Angela who whispers in my ear. “That wasn’t too bad, was it?”

“No, Dori is always great, but her girls and Didi’s girls get on my last nerve.”

“Well, come on. Let me introduce you to my boss.”

Angela and I make our way over to one of the more intimidating groups of women here. I recognize Sully Volturi, Aro’s wife; the Secretary of Education, Esme Platt; and Carmen Rodriguez, the Vice President’s wife. They are all smiling and laughing at something Justice Kate Denali shares, and I’m hoping we aren’t interrupting at the wrong time.

“Excuse me, Justice Denali, I would like to introduce you to my best friend and roommate, Isabella Swan.”

“Hello, Isabella. Angela tells me the two of you graduated from Harvard, and you are now a reporter for the Post? I’m a Harvard alum myself.”

“Yes. I did an internship with the Boston Globe then took my job with the Post. I’ve been there for two years.”

“Then you must know a dear friend of ours, Carlisle Cullen. He and Garrett, my husband, played rugby together during college, which was quite a sight to see.”

I smile at the thought of Professor Cullen playing rugby.

“Professor Cullen was my advisor during my undergrad, but he continued to mentor me throughout my internship with the Boston Globe and while I’ve been working at the Washington Post.”

“Carlisle must think you’re very special for such a close-working relationship. I’m pleased he took you under his wing. His network of connections is endless.”

“He truly is an invaluable resource. We are sorry to interrupt; please don’t let us keep you. It was lovely finally getting the chance to meet. Angela holds you in the utmost regard.”

“Angela speaks highly of you as well, and I was adamant she would introduce us when the next opportunity presented itself.”

“Enjoy your lunch, Justice Denali.”

“Thank you. Please do the same, and don’t be a stranger. If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to ask. I’m always willing to help a rising talent.”
“Thank you.”

With Angela busy talking to a very pregnant Emily Young-Uley, Sam’s wife, I decide to grab something to drink. Sam is another transplant from back home, who was appointed by the President. He stepped into the role of Deputy Secretary of State and spends a lot of time traveling the world.

As I step up near the bar, I notice one of my not-so favorite people, Leah Clearwater, waiting as well. She isn’t my biggest fan, since I’m good friends with her husband, Jacob. Their marriage was arranged by their fathers, and not a day goes by when Leah doesn’t remind everyone of her unhappiness.

“What do you mean you aren’t serving liquor? Not even a mimosa?”

“I’m sorry. We are only serving non-alcoholic beverages today, Mrs. Black.”

“Don’t call me that. It’s Clearwater, and fine, I’ll take a Diet Coke.” She looks around to see who is nearby, witnessing her tantrum, then acknowledges my presence. “Oh, hello, Bella. I didn’t see you standing there.”

“Hi, Leah. How are you?”

“I’ve been better.” She rolls her eyes as the server hands her the Diet Coke she’s requested.

“Are you adjusting to life in the White House?”

“No. I hate it. There’s someone constantly following me around. We had much more freedom when my father was governor in Washington.”

“I can’t imagine what that’s like, but your father has new enemies. You should be protected at all times. Jacob doesn’t seem to mind, does he?”

“No. Jacob is the picture-perfect son-in-law who can do no wrong, according to Mom and Dad.”

I look around hoping to find Sue before our meal starts and spot her across the room.

“It was good to see you again, Leah. I’m going to say hello to your mother real quick.”

“Sure. See you later, Bella.”

As I’m walking around the room, I see another familiar face and stop to hug Rachel, Jacob’s sister, who is now married to Paul Lahote. President Clearwater appointed Paul as Deputy
Secretary of Interior, which keeps him extremely busy, as he handles Native American affairs. The President is determined to right many wrongs for Native Americans, and has brought a new focus to their most prominent issues.

Sue has her arms stretched out, ready for a hug, before I take the final steps in her direction.

“Bella, I'm so glad you could make it. Let me introduce you to our Special Events Coordinator here at the White House, Alice Brandon. Oh wait, is it Whitlock now, Alice, or are you keeping your maiden name?”

“Alice Whitlock is fine, but most people know me by Brandon. Regardless, it's wonderful to meet you finally, Bella. Sue speaks highly of you.”

“I hope all good.”

“Oh, trust me. It is. We are almost ready to start serving lunch. So, I'm going to sneak back into the kitchen and let the chef know we are about ready.”

“Nice to meet you, Alice.”

“You too. Maybe we can grab a coffee or have lunch together one day.”

“Sounds good. I would like that.”

We watch as Alice disappears into the crowd, then Sue easily picks back up our conversation.

“You'll love Alice. She reminds me so much of you, and she has been a wonderful asset for us as we transition to life here. Bella, it's so different from Washington. I miss those times when we were having a fish fry in the backyard or walking along First Beach.”

“I agree. Life on the East Coast is very different from back home. I find myself missing the bonfires on the beach most.”

“I've got an idea. We should have you and your dad over for dinner one night upstairs in the private residence. I can ask Billy and Jacob. Who knows where Seth is? I think he's giving security a constant migraine. It may be their new code word for him.”

I laugh. “Seth is a handful.”

“Bella, he's my son, but dear Lord, the trouble he can find himself in so fast boggles my mind.”

“Just let us know. I'm sure Dad won't want to miss an opportunity for all of us to hang out like old times.”
“I can cook. I doubt the chef here would understand our concept of a fish fry, and I know Harry will want to plan a night when there’s a game to watch as well. I wonder if I can have some of that beer Charlie loves shipped from back home.”

“Rainier beer. He does love his ‘Vitamin R’.” I chuckle. “Sue, I’m going to run to the restroom before we get started.”

“All right, Bella. Thank you for coming today, and I’ll let you know when we have time for a La Push-Forks-style dinner.”

“I’ll talk with you later, Sue.” After one last hug, Sue is the perfect hostess who moves to welcome another guest, making everyone feel at ease and comfortable in one of the Nation’s most prestigious homes.

When I push open the heavy bathroom door, I find a few women gathered in front of the mirrors, touching up their makeup. I recognize two of them as Justice Denali’s sisters, Tanya and Irina. If there’s a party invitation they want, the two of them can seek it out better than any bloodhound. I don’t know anyone whose faces are plastered across the society pages more than the Denali sisters; though, the extremely private Justice Denali seems to be the exception. An older woman I don’t recognize is in a deep discussion with Tanya, but the other woman, whose reflected smile matches my own, I would know a mile away.

“Bella! Long time, no see. How are you?”

“Jessica, I’m surprised you’re here.”

“Well, don’t tell anyone, but I wasn’t technically invited. I ran into Alice the other day, and she was sweet enough to extend me an invitation. Do you know her? She’s a doll. Anyway, she didn’t know I was in D.C. this week, but Michael is here visiting with some colleagues on the Hill and left me to my own devices. The damage I did to his credit cards yesterday will teach him to leave me alone again.”

Picturing the Former Governor of Florida, Reverend Michael Newton, upset about the spending habits of his third wife, Jessica, isn’t new. During their time in the Florida Governor’s Mansion, the press was constantly after her for her extravagant tastes. However, with people like my stepfather, Phil, or the Volturis in attendance, expectations are high with contributions reaching unthinkable levels.

With the twenty-year age difference between Jessica and her husband, she’s been labeled a gold digger and called every name in the book. However, that’s never dampened my fondness for her or her sense of adventure.
“Who are you kidding? You have the Reverend wrapped around your finger, and he doesn’t stand a chance at being upset.”

“Oh, Bella, I always enjoy your company. Do you know where you are sitting? Maybe we can get a couple of seats together.”

“I’m not sure. I didn’t check the seating chart yet, but I need to do so before lunch begins. Give me a minute, and I’ll be right out.”

Jessica is thrilled to have found a friend, and agrees to go check the assignments ahead of me and see if Alice can shift her into a seat at my table.

When I finish, I move to the mirror and reapply my lipstick. I find the older woman from earlier still there while the others left, leaving us alone.

“Hello.” I give her a polite smile and watch her pack up her bag.

“You’re Bella Swan.”

It isn’t a question, but I don’t want to be rude. “Yes, and you are—”

“Shelly Cope. I’m an agent based here in D.C.”

“Oh, nice to meet you.” Her interest in continuing this conversation seems odd, but I try to play along. “I’m a reporter with no interest in representation.”

She ignores my statement and continues with her own agenda. “I understand we have a mutual acquaintance.”

I’m not following her, so I can’t imagine to whom she’s referring, but she waits for any recognition by me. When I don’t come up with the answer, she fills in the blank.

“Edward Masen. He’s one of my clients with a very promising career.”

“Oh, yes. I’ve met Edward.” I try to downplay my knowledge of him, but she seems to be a bulldog with her own information.

“I know. Actually, I understand it’s more than that.”

How would she know that? I wonder if Edward’s said something to her about me, or she’s overheard him talking to me on the phone.

“I’m not sure I’m following you.”
“Let me be clear, Ms. Swan. I know who you are—not everyone has had the opportunities that have been laid at your feet. It must be nice having your daddy pulling strings for you to land a cushy job at the Post and access to the President whenever your heart desires. Even I could be a successful reporter with those perks.

“Did the State of Washington pay for your Harvard education, or did the President’s contributors help you out? After all, a cop’s salary only goes so far. Although, you do have access to money from both sides of the aisle with your rich stepfather in Florida. Isn’t that right?”

She clearly has the wrong idea about me, as I’ve worked my butt off to get here without any extra favors from anyone. I came to the East Coast on my own to attend Harvard, based on my scholarships, which all happened long before Harry Clearwater ran for President or even Governor.

“You don’t know what you’re—”

She cuts me off before I have a chance to defend myself. “Save it. I’m invested in Edward, not you. He’s going to be big. I’m grooming him for greatness. He doesn’t need a clinger when he has the potential to be so much more beyond a Sunday morning talk show. I’ve done my research, and you aren’t exactly ‘power couple’ material.

“Don’t be the reason he doesn’t make it, Ms. Swan. People love him, and his numbers are climbing each week. He doesn’t need your baggage casting him in a negative light. I understand he’s easily distracted, and you’re the flavor of the month. He is a man, but it’s my job to keep everything on track. He has aspirations, and I’m going to be the one to help him achieve them.

“Let’s hope we don’t need to have this conversation again,” Shelly warns, then heads toward the door. She turns back and a devious smile crosses her face. “Enjoy your lunch, Ms. Swan. I know I will because being in the White House is a privilege not many get to experience.”

I’m not sure how long I stand there, stunned speechless, but the vibrating of my phone pulls me back to the present. When I check it, I see I have a text from Edward.

I can’t wait to hear about your day. Call me tonight.

I don’t respond and put my phone back in my bag. In light of my conversation with Shelly, I’m already second-guessing our intent with this fledgling relationship and wonder if it’s doomed before we get started.
Chapter 4: The Secrets & Lies

The stunning arrangement of glass and steel in the lobby of Edward’s apartment building leaves me astonished by the high-end elegance. However, the most fascinating part is the Dale Chihuly glass sculpture overhead. I would recognize one of his installations anywhere, but this is inside Edward’s building. It’s a piece of Seattle right here in the middle of D.C.; kind of like me, even though I’m from Forks. I hope this is a good sign.

My confidence about pursuing whatever this is between Edward and me took a hit after my conversation with his agent. I think conversation is generous for what went down. Shelly’s threat is probably the most accurate description for her monologue on the million reasons why Edward and I shouldn’t date.

In light of her words, I’ve been thinking about the best way for us to proceed, and I’m hoping that today Edward and I can figure out what’s best for our careers and us. I know I also need to come clean about my father and our connections to the White House—because I would rather Edward hear it from me first.

“I have a Miss Isabella Swan here to see you.”

While I wait for the front desk attendant to confirm my arrival with Edward, I notice a Zen water garden tucked away in a peaceful spot. I need more Zen in my life, especially right now; perhaps I should take Angela up on those yoga classes too.

“Very good. I’ll add her to your list. Miss Swan, if you go down this hall, you will locate the elevators. Mr. Masen is on the eighth floor, apartment 818.”

“Thank you.”

After a quick trip in the elevator, I locate Edward’s apartment easily and get ready to knock when the door suddenly swings wide open.

“Bella.” Edward’s face lights up. “Come in.”

“Hey.” My stomach flutters at the sight of finally seeing him face-to-face again. He’s every bit as handsome as I recall.

As I walk through the doorway, Edward leans in, leaving a quick peck on my lips. I’m a little startled, realizing we’ve just had our first kiss, and I wasn’t ready.
Edward closes the door behind me, but I’m frozen in place with how to fix this.

His happiness at my arrival evaporates instantly when he sees the concern on my face. “What is it?”

I touch my fingertips to my lips. “Did we just have our first kiss?”

“Uh, I guess we did. Not what you were expecting?”

“No. I mean, yes—it was fine, but I wasn’t ready. Usually, those happen at the end of the date.”

“I see your point. However, I like doing things a little unexpectedly. I don’t see any reason to wait. Do you think we can do better?”

“I know I can.”

“Then, I won’t hold back this time. Let’s try again.”

Edward slides his hands around my waist, pulling our bodies flush, while my fingers are laced together behind his neck. He leans down and softly presses his lips to mine, and I respond instantly. What starts as a tentative, delicate kiss, rapidly morphs into one filled with eagerness and enthusiasm. When we pull apart, I focus on controlling my ragged breathing, while my heart feels like it may beat out of my chest. Edward seems equally affected, and his bright smile matches mine.

“Better?”

“Much.”

“I am partial to a quick kiss every now and then.” He leans down to leave two pecks on my lips then pulls away, taking my hand and leading me into the kitchen. “Are you sure you’re okay with having dinner here? We can always go out to a neighborhood restaurant.”

“No. Dinner here is fine. I think it will be easier for us to talk without who knows who eavesdropping on our conversation.”

“Wow, sounds like we’re going to get down to the nitty-gritty. The journalist in me is extremely excited.”

I shrug. “Let’s hope I don’t disappoint you then.”
“Not a chance.” Edward smiles, claps his hands together, and pulls containers from a bag on the countertop. “I’m not much of a cook, so I took the liberty of ordering our dinner from a little Italian place down the street.”

“I love Italian. Do you want some help setting everything up?” I scan his kitchen and wonder what I can do.

“I thought we would eat out on the balcony.” He points toward the beautiful glass walls of his living room, and I see a table for two, set with candles, flowers, and silverware just outside the glass balcony door.

“First course: an antipasto plate.” Edward removes the plastic covering and holds out the most picture-perfect plate filled with thinly sliced meats, small wedges of cheese, giardiniera, artichoke salad, and slices of ciabatta bread.

“It looks delicious.”

“Would you like some wine?”

“Yes, please.”

Edward pours two glasses of red. “How about I carry these, and you bring the antipasto plate?”

“You don’t trust me with the wine?”

“Did you bring extra clothes?” He smirks.

“Very funny.”

“Don’t worry. If an unfortunate accident would occur, I’m positive I can find you a change of clothes.” He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

I open the door to the balcony and walk out into the cool evening breeze while Edward follows behind with our wine.

The sun is starting to set, giving us the most picturesque setting. “This is a beautiful view. How long have you lived here?”

Edward pulls out my chair and helps me to get settled then sits directly across from me.

“About a year—wait until you see the rooftop pool. It’s a real treat.”
“Oh? Are you someone who takes a midnight skinny dip?” I tease with my cheeky comment, but regret my words immediately as my mind pictures a naked Edward. I have no doubt my face flushes at the image.

“I’ve never thought about it, but I suppose I could be with the right person.” He winks, not missing a beat.

I give him a sly smile at the possibility I could be that person and ask between bites, “Have you ever been up there?”

“Yes... on the tour when I was considering this place, but to be fair, work overtakes most of my time. There’s also a workout area, but I have yet to use it either.”

“Sounds like you keep very busy, which makes me wonder how much time the two of us really have to devote to a relationship.”

“I understand your concern. It’s taken us over a month to have our first date.”

“I’m also worried about what kind of effect dating will have on either of our careers.”

Edward pauses, but I continue, knowing I’ll feel better once I get it all out.

“I probably should explain more than I did when we first met, but it’s not the easiest conversation to have, especially in a crowded hockey arena. My father is Charlie Swan.”

“Charlie Swan?”

“Yes.”

“As in Deputy Director of the FBI, Charlie Swan?”

“Yes, the very one. I understand that he can be a little intimidating, but knowing him and his position is only one piece to this puzzle. Charlie has a couple of best friends.”

I wait and let that soak in.

“Best friends? Okay, I don’t get it.” Confusion mars Edward’s handsome features.

“Yes, I told you we were from Washington originally, but my dad’s best friends are also from there. You know them as well.”

“Your dad’s best friends would be...”
I clear my throat. “Harry Clearwater and Billy Black.”

“The President?”

“Yes and his Chief of Staff.”

“Wow, Bella.”

“I know. It overwhelms me at times. When Harry decided to run for Governor of Washington, I don’t think anyone thought he would win, including Harry. However, he did win, ousting an incumbent. I had already moved across the country and was working on my undergrad degree at Harvard. By the time re-election came around for Harry, he won easily, while I was busy graduating and getting ready to start my internship at the Boston Globe.”

“So, you weren’t living there or involved in his campaign?”

“No, I wasn’t, and actually, I was grateful for the distance. I received scholarships in order to attend Harvard, and when I graduated, my internship paid enough for me to stand on my own two feet. Angela and I had an apartment while she was busy attending law school.”

“If my estimate is correct, she would have probably graduated close to the time your internship finished?”

“Yes. I was offered a position with the Globe but also one with the Post, which I took. Angela was lucky enough to land a federal appeals court clerkship.”

“Those are difficult to get.”

“Which is why we knew D.C. was our next step. So, we found our current apartment and have been living there ever since.”

“Then your dad…”

“Right. Harry decided to give the presidency a shot, not thinking he had a chance. You know how that went. He won by a landslide, and they all moved to D.C. Harry appointed the people who had been with him during his time as Governor into similar positions here for his presidency. While most aren’t in cabinet positions, they are only a step away. He chose those best for the cabinet jobs from all over the country, then added in the people he could trust to support them.”

“Holy smokes. You probably have some amazing connections now.” He smiles. “Are you ready for more wine and salad?”
Edward grabs our empty antipasto plate, and I follow him back inside.

“More wine and salad would be great. And yes, I do have some incredible connections, but I was already building my own network before they got here. My mentor, Carlisle Cullen, has been instrumental in my success and continues to be a huge influence as I build my career.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever met him, but I’ve heard of him. It’s hard not to when he’s a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner who rewrote ‘opinion journalism’. Doesn’t he contribute to the New York Times?”

“Yes, and he’s a political commentator for CNN while still teaching at Harvard.”

Edward opens the salad and divides it between two plates. “Second course: harvest salad, which is lettuce, apples, radishes, and candied walnuts. They put in a container of some type of vinaigrette. Is that okay?”

“Sure, but don’t go wild.”

Edward drizzles just enough on each salad, and I grab the wine for refilling our glasses once we move back outside to continue our meal.

“So, you’re here working, and they have all recently moved into the White House, which I’m positive is a shock to everyone, you included.”

“Yes, but I think they are all settling into life here, which is good. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a fantastic achievement for Harry, but at the same time, it’s now being thrown in my face.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been working hard to establish myself as a serious journalist, Edward. My nose to the grindstone and all that. However, now there’s like this... I don’t know... peanut gallery who rears their ugly heads every time I do something or I’m successful at something, claiming I wouldn’t have this success without my or my father’s connections to the presidency.”

“Ouch.”

“Exactly. I’m damned if I do, damned if I don’t. I can’t win.”

“So, it’s affecting your career and not in a good way.”

“Not just my career, but my life. Edward, you have no idea how many people now try to use me or my friendship to get to Harry. It’s ridiculous. And don’t even get me started with dating.”
“I can see where dating may become more challenging, but I would think the right guy could handle it.”

“But how do you ever know if someone is really dating you for you or for what you can do for them. I’m sick of being everyone’s stepping stone, which is why I was on a blind date at Angela’s prompting.”

“I may be biased, but I’m glad it worked out the way it did.”

“Edward, are you really sure you want to pursue something with me? I could inadvertently sabotage your career. It would kill me if that happened.” I shake my head.

“Bella, I like you. I like talking with you and hearing about your day. I like listening to your opinions on the stories you’re researching or the people you’re interviewing. You always have an interesting take on my questions for this week’s show. You’re this bright spot in the middle of my own brand of chaos. While I have goals, I’m not looking to use you for my own gain. I didn’t even know your connections until you told me. I want to give us a shot, and we can do this however you think is the best way to proceed.”

“That’s just it. I don’t want to be your dirty little secret or you mine. If word gets out we’re dating, we’ll both be hounded. You will be seen as someone who has his own political aspirations, trying to cozy up to the President by having a relationship with me. You won’t be viewed as an objective journalist, which could impact your ability to land guests for your show, causing your ratings to plunge.

“If our critics aren’t busy waving the flag of nepotism in my direction and discrediting my work at every turn, they will start singing a new tune. I’ll be branded as a fame-hungry journalist who’s only dating you for television airtime.”

“You don’t think we can make it?”

“I don’t know, Edward. It’s not going to be easy if we go the traditional route. We could be over before we even get started.”

“My father always told me worthwhile things are never easy.”

“Maybe it’s best to keep our relationship just between the two of us for the sake of both our careers.”

“Well, I’m not sure how easy it will be to keep it contained, but if it means you’re willing to give us a shot, then I’m willing to try. I put you on my list of allowed guests, which means you have access to my apartment without waiting. And before you ask, no one at the desk will tell anyone about my guest list or who frequents. Privacy is all part of the deal here.”
“Are you sure, Edward? I don't want you to have any regrets.”

“My only regret will be not giving this a try.”

“Do you have an agent?”

“Sure, doesn’t everyone?”

“Well, no. I don’t. Do you think this is something to discuss with your agent? If word gets out about our relationship, it could have a huge impact on your career.”

“I thought we were keeping this just between us? Look, Bella. My private life is just that, private. When asked, I make no comments. It’s that simple. My agent is busy crafting this successful career for me with an image that appeals to the most people. I try my best to do what she asks, but I have my limits too. I understand your concerns and the burdens you carry.”

“I just don’t want them to become too much for you, and you end up resenting me.”

I consider sharing my conversation with Shelly, but if Edward is adamant about keeping his public and private lives separate, then there’s no reason for me to worry he won’t keep her in line.

“Our relationship won’t be conventional, Bella, but I’ll do whatever it takes to keep it ours.”

“I can live with that.”

“Good.” Edward grabs our empty salad plates. “Ready for the next course?”

I follow him back inside. “Sure, what’s next?”

“Squid ink spaghetti with crab and shellfish cream, sea beans, and bread crumbs.”

I’m sure I make a face, but I try not to be the three-year-old who refuses to eat her peas when I see the next container he opens. “It’s black.”

“Come on, Bella. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“I like to leave it in the ocean with the squid and its ink.”

“You’ll like this, I promise.”

Edward divides the pasta between two plates.
“Not too much on mine.” I hope Edward believes in the old adage, less is more.

“I also have cannoli for dessert.”

“You’re not playing fair. Don’t you need to watch your weight with the pasta and sweets? What about the saying, ‘television adds ten pounds’?”

Edward grins. “Only if you lift it.”

“Ha, ha. You’re a comedian too.”

“No, the ten pounds are a myth, which can be attributed to bad lighting and poorly chosen camera angles. Why, you don’t think my fans would still love me a little doughy?”

“I’m sure they’ll love you no matter how you look.”

I open the balcony door, as he carries our plates back to our table for two. With the sun now set, the candlelight creates a beautiful, romantic glow about the space as we settle back into our seats.

“See, you’re good for my ego. I’m going to keep you around for a long time. Now, try the pasta and stop pushing it around your plate. It’s good. Trust me.”

I take a deep breath and twist a few noodles onto my fork. I pause when the fork is near my mouth. “Are any of the cannoli chocolate?”

Edward chuckles. “Yes.”

“Shoot. Here goes nothing.”

I ease the forkful of pasta in my mouth and start to chew, noticing a saltier flavor, but close enough to regular pasta that will keep me from freaking out.

“Well?”

“I’ll concede this one. It’s not bad, but I think the cream sauce is the true champ on the plate.”

“Oh, it’s not that bad, Bella.”

A thought occurs to me. “Oh, dear. Is it going to stain my teeth?” I take a drink of wine to clear my mouth and smile for Edward showing him my teeth.
“Uh—”

“Oh, God! It is staining my teeth, isn’t it?”

He finishes another mouthful, indifferent as I notice his own lightly stained lips and blackish teeth. “Bella, stop freaking out. It’s only temporary. I’ve had this dish before with no lasting effects.”

“Edward, you need to be more careful. Something like this could ruin your career more than any of my baggage,” I warn.

“You just don’t like the idea of eating black food.” He takes another huge bite.

“Not true. I think it’s the squid part that freaks me out. I’ve had blackout cake, which is divine and didn’t stain my teeth. Why didn’t you force me to eat that? Now, I’m some goth chick with my stained lips. Oh goodness, Edward. You have a show to do in the morning. It won’t fade by then, will it? You need to stop eating. Put the squid ink down before it’s too late. Let’s go inside. You should brush your teeth.”

“You’re overreacting.” Edward reaches for my hand, pulling me from my chair and urging me to sit across his lap.

“Am I?” I wrap my arms around his shoulders, and he tilts his head up, puckering his lips while waiting for me to kiss him.

“Yes. Now kiss me.”

I give him a quick peck. “Now I understand why we need to eat here. This wouldn’t be appropriate behavior in a restaurant.”

“Hmmm, you may need to give me lessons on appropriate behavior, Ms. Swan.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes.” Edward pinches my ass, causing me to jump and squirm on his lap. “Let’s go inside. I’ll make you a fire.”

“Do you mean flip a switch?”

“Technically yes, but a fire is still a fire.”

“I probably should be going soon. It’s getting late, and rising stars need their sleep when they have to host an early morning talk show.”
“Okay, but first, let me woo you with cannoli and a rousing discussion on free-trade agreements and tariff increases. I need to go over my notes before tomorrow’s show.”

“How could anyone turn down an offer like that?” I laugh and head inside.

A/N: A side note for those who aren’t familiar with the name mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Dale Chihuly is an American glass sculptor with colorful, large-scale installations found around the world. For those who read my story, M. Parfait, they will remember that Edward is a glass artist who learned to create similar pieces of art using many of Dale’s pioneering techniques.
Chapter 5: The Professor

My phone starts vibrating, and when I show my boss, Emmett McCarty, who it is, he nods, knowing I need to take the call.

“Hello, Professor Cullen,” I tease with a singsong greeting, but know he will correct me without fail.

“Good morning, Isabella. How’s my favorite, former student? And didn’t I tell you to call me Carlisle?”

“I heard that,” Emmett grumbles, standing to leave my office after our morning meeting.

“I should probably have told you that you’re on speaker.” I blush at my faux pas, even though he can’t see me.

“It doesn’t matter. Tell Emmett to get back to work and stop eavesdropping.”

“I think you just did.” A giggle escapes at the adversarial relationship between my mentor and boss.

“Tell Carlisle I’m planning his retirement party. I only need the date. An old relic like him will draw out all of academia, and I’ll make sure we have plenty of rocking chairs. We can squeeze him in next month before he becomes too senile to remember us.”

“At fifty-five, I’m nowhere near ready to retire. I have at least another twenty years left, and who would keep the two of you in line if it weren’t for me? I doubt either of you can keep up. I’m headed to Vienna next week for the World Conference on Human Rights. Did you want to join me?”

“I’ll talk to you later, Bella. Keep taking your vitamins, Carlisle.” Emmett raises his voice loud enough for Carlisle to hear him, waving as he leaves my office.

“I take it that’s a no. When is that kid going to learn the meaning of respect?”

“Oh, you know, he does. We both do. He just likes ribbing you and knows the easiest way to push your buttons.”
“Regardless, how are you, Isabella? We haven’t had a chance to catch up in a while, and I wanted to hear from you before I take off next week.”

“I’m good. Busy, but good.” I push some papers out of the way, and grab a notebook and pen, because I always take plenty of notes during our calls.

“I’ve got some thoughts and ideas for you, if you have a minute. I think you could really do some good and maybe point your career in a new direction.”

“I always have plenty of time for you. What’s on your mind?”

“I think, first and foremost, it is the refugee crisis. This is a human crisis of mass proportions that everyone keeps ignoring. Our political leaders barely give it a second glance, and we can’t continue sitting by and doing nothing. These people are leaving everything they have behind in hopes for something better. What does that tell you about what they are leaving? Our inaction has gone on for long enough. We need to push this one closer to the spotlight.”

“I don’t know how I would attempt to tackle this issue. It seems bigger than my abilities. I just can’t get my head around it or even know where I should start.”

“You’re going to need to break it down. Put it on a level most people will understand. You have to make them care. Human stories are everyone’s stories. Your reader needs to experience the pain and suffering through your words. These women and children don’t speak the language or understand the local customs of the new countries where they are finding themselves. Refugee camps split up families, leaving young children without a parent nearby. Husbands and wives are forced apart when they separate the men from the women. It’s tragic. Many of the women don’t understand their basic human rights. The number of refugees alone is astronomical. Sixty-five million people have been displaced, largely due to the Syrian Civil War.”

“Do you think I should travel to Europe?”

“I believe it will be in your future at some point since many of the refugees are migrating to areas all over Europe. I want you to start your research because it’s going to take time to get you up to speed. You should start digging into the root of the problems, learning the players, and understanding the politics. There’s massive corruption and greed in these ravaged countries. Those with the most resources are in a tug of war over land, forcing people from their homes while destroying schools and other important resources for their communities. If they ever get the opportunity to return, at this rate, there will be nothing left.”

“All right, I’ll start looking into it. Maybe we can talk again, and I can share my ideas after some research. What did you think about my story on hydraulic fracturing?”
“I thought it was fantastic. Great information that an uninformed reader can understand and well thought out, but Isabella, be careful. This is one where you’ll be seen as someone taking up the President’s causes. You and I know you’re objective, but others may not see it that way. You’re already walking a tightrope whenever you get involved with Native American issues.”

“I understand, but everyone should be worried about protecting water, wildlife, and public health from the oil and gas industry. There are over 700 million acres of public and tribal lands at risk.”

“Are you doing a follow-up article? Because a colleague of mine, Bob Banner, who chairs the Environmental Law Department here, can be helpful if you need him.”

“Yes, with everything tied up in the courts right now, he sounds like a great contact. Can you forward me his information? I’ll give him a call.”

“Sure. Did you end up going to your Women’s Luncheon?”

“I did, and I had a chance to meet a friend of yours.”

“Oh? This should be interesting.”

“Yes, Justice Denali.”

“Ah, Kate. Of course she would be there with her recent appointment to the Court.”

“She spoke fondly of you and mentioned your adept skills at rugby with her husband, Garrett.”

Carlisle laughs heartily. “She did, did she?”

“I didn’t know you played rugby. You continue to surprise me.”

“Oh, Isabella. There’s a lot about me you don’t know. If I was twenty years younger, no man besides me would have a chance with you.”

“You’re such a flirt. Well, next time I visit, I expect to see some photos of you in your rugby uniform.”

“I’ll see what I can do. How are you balancing work with your personal life? Anyone new I should know about?”

I did not see that one coming. The problem is I do have someone, now that Edward and I have hashed out an agreement to date privately. However, this is something I would have confided in Carlisle with in the past, and now it feels wrong to keep it from him, but I do.
“Pshhh, you know how it is to be focused on your career. There’s little time left for anything else.”

“You’re right. I do know, but that doesn’t mean I don’t wish I had found someone to share my life with every day. I hope you don’t see my bachelorhood as any type of role model. Companionship is always desirable at any age. What works for one person may not work for another.”

“Do you ever wish you had kids of your own? Some days I feel like at twenty-eight, my biological clock is ticking like a time bomb. Other days, I think maybe I’m not meant to be a mother, not every woman is required to have kids. Is there something wrong with me that I don’t want kids at this point in my life or even see them on the horizon in the future?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you. Sometimes I think it would have been nice, but it just isn’t in the cards for me. I travel, teach, and work year-round. I have you, Emmett, and my students anyway, and Emmett is like a child, always reminding me of my pending expiration.”

“He can be a handful. How’s everything else at my alma mater? Are you behaving yourself?”

“When have I ever behaved myself? I ruffle feathers at every turn.”

“So, you’re still scaring incoming freshmen with your stories from around the world.”

“How else will I stoke the fires of their curiosity? They need to understand issues at their core. The rest of the world isn’t as it is here in America. So, yes, I’m still sharing my trip to China, which uncovered the deaths of roughly 39,000 girls a year because they are not given the same access to food and medicine as boys. I always cover my time in Sudan where the most vicious form of ethnic cleansing exists in a campaign of murder, rape, and pillage. I bring tidbits of the world to them through my travels. We need to shed light on the issues that plague us and the ones that go unheard. Young hungry journalists all need a push in the right direction.”

“Just like me.”

“Yes, but I have yet to encounter another student who was able to make such an impact right out of the gate. You have a real instinct for getting to the truth while helping others and uncovering injustices. You’re exceptional with facts and figures, and your debating skills can make a grown man cry.”

“Thank you, Carlisle. That means a lot coming from you. I pride myself on bringing men to their knees.” I can barely finish the last statement without bursting out laughing.

“Speaking of bringing men to their knees, is Emmett still treating you well at the Post? Because there’s always a spot at the Times if he becomes intolerable. I can make a few calls.”
“We both know intolerable is the last word to use for my boss. Emmett is great, and don’t act like you don’t know this to be true since you’ve had a hand in his successful career, too.”

“Of course you would bring that small detail up. Don’t get me wrong, Isabella. Emmett is good, but you have the potential to be great. One of Emmett’s strengths is his ability to listen. He doesn’t miss a single detail, verbal or visual. I think it’s his great memory, but he’s a whiz at reading body language. Emmett charms through laughter and a natural, subtle ease, which disarms even his most unyielding critics. He can land the toughest interviews and have them spilling their secrets in no time.”

“I heard a rumor around the office last week that he was talking with a producer from either Dateline or 60 Minutes.”

“Oh, really? I’m not surprised. He would be fantastic on either one, but I don’t think that’s Emmett’s goal. It’s nice to be wanted though. The Post is lucky to have him. I know it’s tough to remember at times, but he shouldn’t forget.”

“I agree. He hasn’t mentioned a word to me. So, I doubt anything will come of it.”

“All right. I’m going to let you get back to work. Maybe once I return from Vienna, I can slip down to D.C. one day and take you and Emmett out to lunch.”

“That sounds like a winner to me; just let me know when you’re headed this way.”

“I will. Take care, Isabella. We will talk soon.”

“Okay, good bye, Carlisle.”

As I gaze over a page full of notes from Carlisle and my earlier ones from Emmett, I start to form a plan of attack for everything I hope to accomplish when my phone buzzes with a text.

How about lunch? I'm nearby.

Are you willing to brave a food truck in Franklin Square?

I have an iron stomach. Years of training. Bring it on.

I'll be down in ten minutes. x

See you soon.
I gather my notes together, tucking them in a file, knowing I have plenty to keep me busy for the next few weeks. While I close out my email and the open documents on my computer, I’m reminded of my pending deadline for Emmett. I grab my purse and head to the elevators, looking forward to my last-minute lunch date.

We both smile when I see him, but I think he spots me first with his eagle eyes.

“Bella.”

“Hi, Dad.” I give him a quick hug, then we walk toward the variety of food trucks parked along Franklin Square. “I still can’t believe you’re texting. It always catches me off guard.”

“Yep, I’m high tech. There’s no stopping me now.”

“What brings you to my neck of the woods?”

“Can’t a father just want to have lunch with his daughter?”

“While that’s a nice idea, it has yet to happen. So, what’s up?”

“I had a meeting this morning at Harry’s place.”

“Of course you did.” He’s always so casual about his visits to the White House. “Anything you care to share?”

“Not with a Post reporter.”

“How about your daughter?”

“Her either.”

“Well, then, I guess the only thing left is for you to pick your poison. Our choices for today are Spanish, Japanese, Indonesian, Mexican, or American, and I say that hesitantly, as all they serve are meatballs. So, who knows what you could end up with from Ball or Nothing. Anyway, the world awaits your decision.”

“Have you tried any of these?” He waves his arm in the direction of the colorful line of trucks.

“Dad, Emmett is a food truck fanatic, and there’s always a variety parked just footsteps from our office. I’ve tried all of these.”

“Let’s have tacos then, my treat.”
“You sure know how to have a good time. Mexican it is. Hopefully, I can avoid the siesta later.” I chuckle as we take a spot in line and wait our turn.

“You seem to be in a good mood. New man in your life?”

I know better than to make eye contact with him after a question like that. So I pretend to study the menu board, even though I already know what I’m ordering.

He can’t possibly know about Edward, can he?

I have only one choice: deflect.

“Oh, I just got off the phone with my old professor, Carlisle Cullen. Do you remember him?”

He nods.

“I guess I’m a little excited about starting something new. Carlisle wants me to work on some specific issues and turn them into stories. So, he threw out several ideas and gave me plenty to research.”

“Sounds like you’ll be busy.”

“I always am.” I smirk at his familiar saying.

Dad’s mustache twitches, and I’m positive we’re both thinking the same thing: like father, like daughter.

We step up to the *D.C. Taco* truck, and I order shrimp and grilled fish tacos, while Dad chooses chicken and steak tacos. It doesn’t take long to get our food, and we find a nearby bench to share our lunch.

“These are some of my favorites.” I’m quick to unwrap one and bite into the grilled fish taco. “Mmmm.”

After finishing the first bite of his steak taco, Dad seems happy with his choice. “You’re right. They are good.”

We eat in comfortable silence as both of us people-watch, noticing an unusual amount of homeless people shuffling around the park.

I lower my voice. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to seeing so many homeless people. It wasn’t something that happened in Forks, but there were plenty I would see daily while I was at Harvard, and they seem to be everywhere in D.C.”
Dad nods. “It’s the veterans that really bother me. We should be taking care of them.”

“There are so many problems in the world, Dad. How do we ever fix all of them?”

“One at a time, Bella. One at a time.”

After finishing our lunch together, I give Dad a parting hug, and we head back to our respective offices. In no time, I am lost in my tasks at hand: doing research, making appointments, and lining up interviews. When I finally check the time on my phone, it’s after seven in the evening, so I decide to pack up for the night.

I’m exhausted when I enter our apartment, but Angela hasn’t made it home. I can’t decide whether I really need dinner or just to shower and crawl into bed when my phone vibrates with a text.

**Are you home yet? I need to hear your voice.**

I decide not to text back, but I locate his number on my phone. Pressing the button and waiting for it to connect, I decide to pour a glass of wine from the bottle on the kitchen countertop.

“Hello, darling. How was your day?”

Forget food or a shower, Edward and a glass of wine is exactly what I need to unwind.
Chapter 6: The Birthday Boy

“I’m surprised to hear from you so early on a Sunday morning.” There’s nothing casual about Jacob in his suit and tie on our early coffee date. He looks as polished as ever, ready for wherever the day may take him.

I shrug. “I was up and planning to run some errands, so I thought you would be interested in catching up over coffee. Have you been up for hours, or do you never sleep?”

“Sleep? What’s that? If I’m lucky, I nap for a few hours, as I move from one crisis to the next.”

“So, how’s life in the big house?”

“You make it sound like a prison.”

“Isn’t it? I was speaking with your wife at the Women’s Luncheon, and she seems to hold that opinion. I take it you don’t feel the same way?”

“Oh, Leah. No, from my point of view, living there is a privilege.”

“What’s wrong with Leah? Trouble in paradise?”

“It’s not good. I guess it hasn’t ever been good. We aren’t even sharing a bedroom at this point. Everyone is constantly asking when we are having kids. However, you would need to have sex for that to be a possibility or at least share a bed.”

“Jacob, I’m sorry.”

“I know she’s having sex, just not with me. She’s seeing someone.”

“Like who?”

“Sam.”

“I thought that was old news, and they were over each other when he married. What about Emily? She’s pregnant, for goodness sake.”

“I don’t know. It’s a mess.”
Jacob’s phone starts vibrating. “Unknown number… Is it okay if I take this? I never know who may be in crisis at any given moment.”

“Sure.”

“Hello? Hey, Seth. What’s up?” He looks across the table at me. “I’m having coffee with Bella.” There’s a pause. “Seth says, ‘Hi.’”

“Hi, Seth.” I speak a little louder, so he can hear me.

Jacob’s face fills with concern, but I have no clue what Seth is telling him on the other end.

“Seth, I have no idea. Sit tight and I’ll see what I can do.” He looks over at me, shaking his head. “Okay. Later.”

Jacob ends his call, scrubbing his hands over his face. “I can’t believe him.”

“What happened?”

“Seth has lost his phone.”

“Well, that’s not so bad. What was he doing when he lost it? I’m sure he can get a new one fairly easily.”

“True, but that’s not the problem. It’s what’s on Seth’s phone that’s the problem. Apparently, there is a sex video and nude photos that could be trouble.”

“What?” My eyes widen with shock and disbelief. “Seth made some kind of sex video? And it’s out there somewhere?”

“Yes, there’re dick pics too, and they aren’t only his.”

“Oh, sweet Jesus. His parents are going to lose it.”

“They aren’t the biggest problem, Bella. The media will have a field day with this, and I have no idea how to contain it.”

“Has he tried tracking his phone’s location from another phone? Sometimes that works.”

“True, but the tracking feature needs to be on, and he tells me it isn’t. So, who knows who has his phone and when they plan to sell it or use it to their advantage. This is bad.”

“Happy Sunday morning to you.” I hold up my coffee. “Cheers.”
“Oh, Bella. This is just par for the course with Seth. I need to figure out what to do about Leah. If she’s so unhappy with me, maybe we can come to some type of agreement. Have an open marriage, if we can’t divorce. Our fathers are going to be livid when they find out how badly everything has deteriorated between us.”

“Don’t her parents already suspect something’s wrong if you aren’t even sharing the same bedroom?”

“They don’t know. They still think she stays with me when she is out all night. I found out from security she frequents a hotel nearby.”

“What if she gets pregnant with Sam’s baby?”

“Oh, God. I’m sure he would like that. Something else to taunt me with in how he’s always so much better than I am: ‘the man I couldn’t be.’ Security told me it isn’t just Sam. She was with an intern from Sam’s office, Collin somebody.”

“If she does get pregnant, then it sounds like a paternity test will be in order.”

“It doesn’t matter. It won’t be my kid.”

“Jacob, I’m sorry. Is your marriage really over? Maybe counseling would help.”

“I can’t trust her if she’s out with other men, Bella. I think we’re done. I just need to figure out how to divorce her as quietly as possible and find my own place.”

“What about you, Jacob? Have you considered dating anyone else?”

“No. I thought Leah was just going through a bratty phase, and she would come around, but I would say breaking your marriage vows sends a pretty complete message.”

“She’s always had an attitude for as long as I’ve known her. I was surprised when the two of you decided to marry.”

“It wasn’t our idea, but clearly, we should have objected. Everything was fine in the beginning when we were actually having sex, but there’s more to a marriage than sex. Let’s hope I don’t lose my job if we divorce.”

“I don’t see that happening. Harry and Sue probably know more than you think. They are used to dealing with Leah, and you’re doing a great job. It isn’t easy finding a Press Secretary who can handle the job with the ease that you do. I think you’re safe there. I’m sure Sue will be pissed, but at Leah.”
“Well, enough about me and my latest problems. How are you? All good at the Post?”

“Yes, I’m working on some articles, but I feel pulled in so many different directions. I just hope I don’t spread myself too thin.”

“Why would you do that? I thought Emmett was an easy-going guy.”

“He is, but it’s my former professor who is pushing me. Ever since I confided in him. One of my goals is to win a Pulitzer Prize, and he keeps pushing me toward more human rights stories. Carlisle, that’s his name, thinks I’ll stand a better chance of getting my work noticed if I head down that path.”

“It sounds reasonable.”

“I agree, but the personal experiences are heart-wrenching. It’s taking a toll on my emotions while I’m here far removed from the turmoil. The suffering—”

“Hey, this is what makes you so good at what you do. You’re connecting emotionally, and it will come through with your words. Keep going. Don’t give up because it gets difficult. The experience whether you win any type of recognition or not will be worth the journey.”

“Thanks, Jacob.”

“I hate to cut our time short, but I’ve got a new situation to address.”

I chuckle. “That’s right. Seth and his phone.”

“I have no idea how to prepare for this one.”

“Good luck with whatever happens with you and Leah. If you need to talk, give me a call.”

“Thanks, Bella.”

After wrapping up my coffee with Jacob, I stop by a grocery store in Edward’s neighborhood before making my way to his place. During one of our conversations, we shared birth dates, which is how I found out his was coming up this week. With little time during the week to celebrate, we made plans to meet at his place after today’s show and spend the day together.

Since Angela and Ben were at our place when I left this morning with no plans to leave, I decided to make a birthday cake at Edward’s to avoid any raised eyebrows or questions. After locating and purchasing everything I need, I finish walking to Edward’s, hoping he’s made it back to his apartment before me.
I’m readjusting my bags when I hear someone calling my name.

“Bella?”

I see Alice Whitlock smiling brightly and heading in my direction.

“Alice. Hi, how are you?”

“Oh, I’m good. Do you live around here?”

“No, I was just in the neighborhood having coffee with Jacob Black.”

“Right. You two know each other from Washington, correct?”

“Yes, longtime family friends. Unfortunately, we don’t get a lot of opportunities to see each other, but it was great he could get away this morning.”

“Well, don’t think I have forgotten about us getting together. Sue gave me your number. I hope that’s okay.”

“Sure.”

“But I’ve barely had a chance to breathe lately. We had one intern quit, and another decided she didn’t want to continue at the White House and is now backpacking through Europe.”

“Yikes. I’m sure you’ve been busy then. Do you live around here?”

“No, I made a quick visit to see my cousin, but he wasn’t home. So, I thought I would stop at a local bakery the Clearwaters love since I’m in the neighborhood.”

“Always on the job.”

“I just want them to feel like it’s their home, and they are welcome here in D.C. If they enjoy the great things our area has to offer, then they will always remember their time here with fond memories. Plus, it’s easier for me to run any sort of errand than for them to leave the White House.”

“Wow, Alice, that’s really sweet.”

“What can I say? I’m a memory maker, among other things.”

“Well, don’t let me keep you. Let’s plan on having lunch soon.”
“I’ll call you later this week to set something up.”

“Sounds like a great plan. Talk with you then.”

“Enjoy the rest of your day, Bella.”

“Thanks. You, too.”

Edward’s apartment isn’t far, but when I enter the lobby, the attendant at the front desk recognizes me and stops me from proceeding to the elevators.

“Miss Swan, Mr. Masen left an envelope for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Have a good day.”

Shifting my bags to one hand, I head to the elevators and tear open the envelope. Inside, I find a key and a handwritten card that says, “818, if you forgot—E.” I figure Edward must have left this for me just in case he isn’t back from the studio yet.

It feels a little weird being in Edward’s apartment without him, and I’m hoping with time, I’ll feel more comfortable in his space. I set my grocery bags on the counter and start making the cake first. Most of Edward’s kitchen items still have sales stickers on them, and cake pans are nowhere to be found, so I’m glad I thought to bring some of my own.

I’m pouring cake batter into three pans when I hear the front door open.

“Honey, I’m home!” Edward yells, coming around the corner with a huge smile on his face. “Now, this is a sight I could get used to seeing.”

He leans in to steal a few kisses. “Mmmmm. Delicious.”

“What do I taste like?”

“Vanilla cake.”

“Let me just put these in your oven.”

“That sounds so sexy.”

“You’re ridiculous. Have you ever used this oven? It looks brand new.”
“Uh, did I mention I’m not one to cook?”

“Yes, but Edward, surely you don’t eat carryout every night.”

“No, some nights I eat at one of the restaurants around here or at the studio. Other times, I eat at work events or meetings. Do I not look well-fed?”

“You look mighty fine to me.”

“That’s more like it. Now come here so you can properly welcome me home after a long morning at work.”

I slide into his embrace, and immediately, relax as his intoxicating scent surrounds me.

“I like this. Maybe it should be a tradition—you here waiting for me after the show.”

“Baking you a cake?”

“It’s making me feel like 1950. Do you have an apron and pearls you could wear?”

“Neither.”

“Well, that kills my fantasy.”

“I think you’ll get over it.”

“I’ll try. Okay, I’m going to shower and get rid of this morning’s thick coating of hairspray and makeup.”

“Is there anything in particular you would like to eat? I can order food from somewhere.”

“Mmmm, how about pizza and beer? My favorite pizza is from Little Coco’s, where we had your favorite squid ink pasta.”

“Oooh, don’t remind me.” My “ick” face is in full force with the idea of eating that dish again.

“Their pizza is fantastic. You can’t go wrong with any of the selections, and if you can find hockey anything on television, that would be great.”

After Edward leaves for his shower, I keep myself busy, tidying up the kitchen and placing an order with Little Coco’s. I’m unable to find a hockey game, but settle on a Washington Nationals baseball game, which plays softly in the background.
Edward finally emerges from his room freshly showered, in jeans and a T-shirt, when the timer goes off on the oven. “Something smells delicious! It reminds me of living at home with my folks. My mom used to bake all of the time. What kind of cake am I getting?”

“You told me your favorite was strawberry shortcake, right? Well, that’s what I’m making, but not a traditional version.” I set the cake pans on the top of the oven to cool just as Edward’s hands slide around my waist, pulling my back flush against his chest.

“I can’t wait. Did you order pizza? I’m starving.” Edward nibbles on my ear, then moves lower along my neck.

“Yes. It should be here in about fifteen minutes.”

“Mmmmm.”

“That doesn’t sound like hockey.”

“It’s sports.”

“Close enough.”

A knock on the door slows Edward down, reluctantly leaving to answer the door and retrieve our pizza delivery. I grab two beers from his refrigerator and a couple of plates, then follow him as he sets us up in his living room in front of the game.

“Is this okay?”

“Sure, Angela and I are television eaters too.”

I manage a couple of slices of pizza while Edward demolishes the rest. Apparently, he works up quite an appetite post-show, and after a second round of beers, we are both feeling sleepy.

“How about a nap?” Edward shifts on the couch and opens his arms, helping me settle on his chest. “I’m always up so early on show days this feels like evening. The early alarm always catches up with me later in the day.”

“I could nap.”

“Did you see today’s show?” he asks through half-lidded eyes.

“I did.”
Edward’s hand starts stroking my back. “What did you think?”

“I think you’re the most handsome host.”

“While that’s great, what about the rest?”

“Uh, are you asking me as a reporter or as a woman?”

“Both?”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Senator Volturi’s plan isn’t great. It has the potential to be a disaster for many women who stand to lose basic health benefits. When you allow the states to determine what are essential health benefits, most will choose to cut coverage of maternity and prescription drug benefits. With this plan, Medicaid will also suffer deep cuts, which covers more women than men. Half of all births in the United States are covered by Medicaid, which puts many young mothers at risk. The plan also looks to defund Planned Parenthood, which means it will no longer reimburse Planned Parenthood for Medicaid patients. Therefore, a woman on Medicaid can no longer use Planned Parenthood’s services which provide well-visits, cervical cancer screenings, access to low-cost contraception, and testing for sexually transmitted infections. The cuts will force many Planned Parenthood locations to close, leaving women and communities without access to the care they need. The United States already has the highest maternal mortality rates among developed countries; reducing coverage will likely make the problem worse.”

I tilt my head up to gauge Edward’s reaction to my position on Senator Volturi’s plan, only to find his eyes closed and his breathing slow and deep. He’s asleep.

While I enjoy being here cuddled together, my brain won’t turn off, and I’m a little worked up thinking back to this morning's show. Carefully, I extract myself from Edward’s arms and go check to see if his cake is cool.

Since it isn’t, I take out my phone and go through my emails, catching up on those. Then, I do a little research for work while the sounds of the baseball game and Edward’s soft snores fill the background noise.

Two hours later, Edward starts to rouse from his afternoon nap just as I’m adding the final strawberries to the top of his cake.

“Bella?”
I wipe my hands and walk over next to him, sitting on the edge of the couch.

“Hey.” My fingers run through his soft wavy hair.

“Where did you go?”

“I just finished your birthday cake.”

With his eyes still closed, a smile spreads across his face. “Cake.”

“I also got you a present.”

“You’re just full of surprises. Sorry, I fell asleep.”

“It’s fine. I know you’re exhausted.”

“I like you being here when I wake up. How late can you stay?”

“I would say midnight. I still have to get up early for work in the morning.”

“Okay. You said something about a present?”

I hand him the brightly wrapped rectangular box I left sitting on his coffee table earlier. “Happy birthday.”

He puckers his lips, tilting up for me to give him a kiss, which I do.

“Thank you.”

“You haven’t even opened it yet.”

Edward unwraps and opens the box. “A blue tie?”

I shrug. “Since you need to dress up all of the time, I figured another couldn’t hurt. I think it would look great with that gray suit you wore today. I know everyone is all about the ‘power red’ tie, but blue can be patriotic too. You’re just lucky I chose this one over the bald eagle one I was considering.”

Edward laughs. “You’re not going to believe it, but I have one with an eagle. It just doesn’t get a lot of airtime. Thank you, Bella.”

“Sure. Are you ready for cake now?”
“Absolutely.”

I bring the cake over to the coffee table and light the two “3” candles in the center of the cake.

“Are you going to sing for me?”

“I’m not much of a singer, but I’ll do my best.”

“Marilyn Monroe style?”

I use my best deep breathy voice to deliver the sexiest version possible.

“Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday, Mr. Masen,
Happy birthday to you.”

He pulls me across his lap and smashes our lips together in a kiss filled with passion and promise.

I’m the one who finally breaks away needing to catch my breath. “You need to make a wish and blow out the candles.”

Edward gets a sneaky grin on his face then leans over and blows out the candles.

I turn around, cut a slice, and place it on a plate, then get ready to cut another, but Edward stops me. “Let’s share a piece.”

“Sure.”

He readjusts me across his lap, and I hold the plate and fork while Edward’s hands start wandering over my curves.

I hold up a bite for him then take one for myself.

“This cake is delicious. I’m glad you could come over.”

“Me, too.”

“You feel good and smell amazing.”

“It’s the cake.”
He’s very distracting, but I manage to feed us half of the slice before we abandon the plate all together.

Kissing Edward is becoming one of my favorite ways we spend our time together. However, we did round a couple of bases this evening, making me appreciate our national pastime in ways I never considered.

Before I leave for the night, we make plans to spend the Fourth of July together, watching the fireworks from his balcony. I’m excited for more fireworks of our own.
Chapter 7: The Boss

“Bella, don’t forget. I need both of your articles by 3:00 p.m.” He plops down in one of the chairs across from my desk with a look of pure defeat on his features.

“I know, Emmett. I know. You’ll have them by then,” I reassure.

We are all aware we need to meet his early deadline with the Fourth of July holiday quickly approaching. I think he’s reminding us every hour or half-hour it seems, while I try to reread the same sentence for the sixth time.

Emmett is always a little on edge this time of year and not his normal jovial self. There’s no one I know who loves his country more than Emmett does. However, I think it’s the random popping and booming of the nightly, stray fireworks prior to the actual day, which leaves him unsettled. We will all be breathing a little easier for him once the holiday passes.

He lets out a huge sigh as I watch his unraveling slowly continue.

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t know. Some days, I feel just… lost. Like, why am I even here? Who really cares?”

“Hey, I know it’s tough, but you’re a fighter, a survivor, and one of the most handsome veterans I know.”

My compliment gets me a small smile, so I continue.

“Emmett, you should be extremely proud of yourself. You’ve accomplished so much. Most soldiers have a difficult time coming back and readjusting to civilian life. You make it look effortless, when I know it isn’t.”

He lets out another heavy sigh as he contemplates my words.

Originally, I met Emmett in Carlisle’s office at Harvard during my undergrad. At the time, he had received an honorable discharge from the Marine Corps, but it only took one glance to see he was still in full-blown, soldier mode.

Being a marine is a tradition in the McCarty home, and his father expected Emmett to enlist after graduating from high school. However, Emmett received a full ride scholarship to Harvard.
Not only was Emmett an All-State football player who would join Harvard’s team, but he was also an academic All-Star in the classroom. In a true Emmett compromise, he agreed to enlist upon graduating from college, and when that day came, his father was right there to make sure he upheld the family tradition.

After getting his college degree in journalism, he entered Officer Candidate School and trained three years to become a Cobra helicopter pilot. As a combat pilot, he provided support for Marines on the ground by protecting transport helicopters, medevac aircraft, or destroying nearby threats using rockets, missiles, or guns.

He served his country for five years, before a lucky ground-to-air missile grounded his helicopter and his career, taking his left leg below the knee. After being fitted for a prosthesis and enduring plenty of physical therapy, Emmett returned home, where he faced new challenges of adapting back into civilian life.

It’s Carlisle who has nurtured Emmett’s civilian career to what it is today, and in the process, the two of us have found an easy friendship during his visits to see Carlisle. Emmett took a job as a reporter for the Post, like me, but it was his articles detailing soldiers’ struggles in combat and behind enemy lines that got him noticed and promoted to his current position, as my boss.

He’s everything you could hope for in a boss. He reassures when it’s needed, encourages the small wins, and creates an easygoing atmosphere. Emmett’s time in the military sharpened all of his skills, as he’s an active listener who communicates effectively. Under his guidance, our department runs like a well-oiled machine.

I won’t lie. Emmett is extremely easy on the eyes, standing at six foot, three inches with a muscular build while sporting short, curly brown hair and blue eyes. It’s true that most women are suckers for his smile and those heart-stopping dimples, but it’s his charm and personality that wins everyone over, including me.

So, it saddens me to see him looking so dejected and defeated.

“Hey, are you still seeing that one girl… what was her name?” I prompt, hoping he will focus on something other than this current funk looming around his edges.

He shrugs me off, so I know I’m going to need to dig a little deeper.

“Was it Jill or Jennifer? I think you said she’s a masseuse?”

“Yeah, Jen the masseuse.”

“Are you still seeing her?”
“Not really. It turns out, dating a masseuse seems like a good idea, but she isn’t interested in giving you a massage every time you see her.”

“What about Tiffany, the hairstylist?”

“She was too critical and wanted to wax my brows and other shit.”

“Well, it takes a very special woman who can appreciate the unibrow.”

“My brows aren’t that bad.”

I grin because he’s starting to come alive when I get him talking. “Have you ever thought about getting a dog or a cat?”

“No, but I had several large retrievers growing up. We used them for hunting.”

“What did you hunt?”

“ Mostly birds, like pheasant or quail.”

“What if you got a dog now?” I ask, knowing Emmett would probably do better with some constant companionship in his life. I’m surprised he doesn’t already have one. “Maybe like a small dog that could stay at your apartment. You could have a dog walker come by while you’re at work or you could do a doggie daycare nearby.”

“Like a Yorkie or Chihuahua?”

“Yeah, a sweet little lap dog, maybe a Maltese. Then I could come over to your place and love on your dog when I need a fix.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“You should think about it. Angela is allergic to cats and most dogs, so we decided to table the issue for us.”

“Is Angela still dating Ben?” He perks up a little more with the mention of her name, as I know he has a small crush on her.

“Yes, it seems pretty serious.”

“Oh.”
“Hey, how about after we’re done for the day, we grab dinner. My treat. We can even go to Old Ebbitt’s Grill, one of your favorites. What do you say, feeling up for some oysters?”

“All right. Miss Swan. I see what you’re trying to do. I’ll leave so you can get your work done. I’ll call and make reservations, then we can go to dinner later.”

“Deal.” I give him a thumbs up and go back to my open document, trying to reestablish my last train of thought.

-BCD-

Emmett and I have made it through a dozen oysters, crab cakes, and a pile of calamari, plus a Black and Tan for each of us, when a familiar face walks toward our table.

“Bella?”

“Hi, Alice.” I’m surprised to see her, but not as much as I am to see her dinner companion.

“I’m not stalking you really, Bella. The universe must be trying to tell us something. Miss, would it be okay if we took the table next to my friend?”

“Sure. No problem.” The hostess leaves menus at their spots and Alice moves to the booth side to sit next to me.

Alice doesn’t miss a beat and makes a quick introduction. “Bella, I’d like for you to meet my cousin, Edward Masen. Edward, this is Bella Swan. She’s a reporter for the Post, and we met at the White House Women’s Luncheon a little while back.”

“Nice to meet you, Bella.” He appears unmoved by my presence as he gently shakes my hand.

Oh, dear. This should be interesting.

“You, too. This is my boss, Emmett McCarty. Emmett this is Alice Whitlock and Edward Masen.”

“I hope we aren’t bothering you.” Alice slips off her jacket.

“No, not at all. We are just finishing up another long day in the office and enjoying dinner at one of Emmett’s favorite spots.”

“I love this place too, but it’s funny, you never know who you will see here.”
My eyes lock with Edward’s while his face gives away nothing. “I agree. Funny.”

“Edward is in the same field as you Bella, and I guess, you too, Emmett. He writes for the Wall Street Journal, but he also hosts a talk show. They talk about all of the ins and outs of Washington and politics. Right, Edward?”

“Yes, that’s what we do.” He confirms the information without a glance in my direction.

During a rare pause in the conversation, Alice and Edward study their menus while Emmett shoots me a look.

I just shrug and give him my best I-have-no-idea face.

“Edward, do you know what you’re getting? I’m starving, but I’d better stick with fish so I don’t overdo it. Maybe the grilled swordfish.”

“I think I’ll get the hanger steak.”

The server comes by and takes their orders, then Alice jumps right back in to keep the conversation going.

“So, Bella, what are your plans for the Fourth?” she prompts.

I certainly can’t tell her I plan to spend the day with her dinner companion in hopes of rounding a few more of those bases we passed a few weeks ago.

“Nothing too exciting, probably watching the fireworks. My boss barely gives me any down time for fun.” I wink at Emmett.

“Oh, the fireworks are spectacular. Best display in the country, in my opinion, and for once, an event I have nothing to do with organizing. What about you Emmett?”

“I’m going to the Nationals’ game with some buddies.” He shrugs and finishes the last of his beer.

“Emmett was just telling me he’s thinking of getting a dog and he may have a line on one sweet little pup in particular.” I grin over his afternoon search at my prompting.

“Oh, Emmett, pets are the best. I keep telling Sue she should consider some pets, as most of the First Families have them. However, she has yet to give me the green light that she’s interested. Did the Clearwaters have any pets when you were younger, Bella?”
“Yes, but usually they were strays. Sue would take them in and nurse them back to health, as they showed up on her doorstep in need of plenty of tender loving care. Most were malnourished, but some were three-legged or missing an eye. It didn’t matter. She loved them all.”

“Oh, maybe I can have her go to a local shelter to adopt a pet or two. It doesn’t sound like a purebred is a requirement like her…” Alice lowers her voice. “Uppity predecessors.”

I smile. “No, there’s nothing pretentious about Sue or the Clearwaters. They’re regular people.”

“There’s a rumor floating around that Seth lost his phone—again.”

I chuckle. “I may have heard that rumor too. Seth is the life of the party, so I’m not surprised. He was very quiet growing up, but he’s certainly become more outgoing with the move.”

Since we are finished with our meal, Emmett decides to forego another drink and call it an evening.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Bella. Do you want me to walk you to your car?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m just going to finish the last of my beer, then I’ll head out too.”

“Okay, nice meeting you, Alice. Edward.”

“I’m going to find the ladies room, if you both will excuse me.” Alice makes her way toward the back of the restaurant.

I swirl the contents of my glass and take another sip. I can feel Edward’s eyes on me, and when I glance in his direction, I can tell he’s surprised we find ourselves somewhat alone in a restaurant full of people.

“How—” he starts.

“Edward! I thought that was you. I didn’t know you would be here tonight or you could have joined our table.”

Lucky me. Tanya Denali. Of course, they know each other more closely than his mention of her only being a guest on his show.

“Tanya, good to see you.” Edward gives her the easy smile and attention he can’t seem to garner for me.
“Isn’t it? I just finished dinner with friends, but if you want, we can go have a drink together in the bar? I’m always up for another round, especially with you.”

“I’ll have to pass. I’m having dinner with my cousin.” Edward points to the spot across from him.

She glances in my direction, but dismisses me as anyone significant. I try not to pay any attention to their interaction, but it is next to impossible. She’s louder than necessary, bringing unwanted attention to our table.

“Alice is here? Oh, she’s such a sweetheart. I have to go, but tell her I said hi and give her a kiss for me.” She leans in and plants a kiss on Edward’s cheek before he can move away.

“I’ll do that.” He uses his napkin to wipe off the lipstick she’s left on his cheek.

“See ya later, handsome.” She runs her hand across his shoulders and gives him a flirty smile as she heads for the main door.

“Bella—” he starts.

“Sorry, that took so long. There was a bit of a line.” Alice returns to her seat.

I take a deep breath to calm my nerves and plan my escape, as I’ve seen all I need to see. “I think I’m going to head out. I have an early morning, like Emmett. It was great seeing you again, Alice, and meeting you, Edward. Enjoy your dinner.”

I can’t get out of the restaurant fast enough and make a hasty retreat to my car then drive home. I’m filled with so many emotions during the drive that I’m not sure which is the most dominant one. I think it may be jealousy at Tanya’s flirty display, but mostly anger at myself and our arrangement. After all, no one knows we’re together, and for the first time, it hurts being unable to stake my claim on Edward for everyone to see.

Maybe he isn’t as serious about this relationship as I thought he was. What if he has secret arrangements with other women? Am I one of many? Nobody special? I don’t even know how to label us. We aren’t boyfriend and girlfriend or even friends with benefits. If anything, we’re friends without benefits, and that status seems quite precarious at this point, as I wonder if we are merely acquaintances. My excitement and trepidation over seeing him this evening has turned my head upside down with the possibilities we are only privately dating and not even exclusively. I feel like his dirty secret, which makes me think ending whatever this is could be best for both of us before either gets hurt.

When I reach our apartment, Angela is home, but in her room as I can hear her talking on the phone through the door.
I head into my room with a plan to shower and collapse, but check my phone to see no new texts or messages from anyone, especially Edward. I’m surprised he has nothing to say, which only confirms my suspicions of how invested he is in this relationship—or whatever we are.

Oh, God.

What if Shelly Cope, his agent, was right and I am the flavor of the month.

After my shower, I don’t feel any better, and replaying the entire evening over in my head, leaves an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach I can’t shake. I’m feeling disappointed and needy, hoping Edward will reach out and dash my doubts. He’s turning me into a hot mess of insecurities, which is part of the reason why I don’t date.

Against my better judgment, I check my phone one more time before calling it a night, only to find that I do have a new message, but not from Edward. It’s a message with an adorable photo, showing off the newest addition to the McCarty family, a Chihuahua aptly named Hercules. With Emmett proudly holding Hercules in the palm of his hand, I’m envious of the beginning of the sweetest, lifelong friendship, while whatever relationship I had with Edward is probably ending.
Chapter 8: The Fireworks

Are you still coming over today?

I’m probably being juvenile, but I’m still a little pissed off about our run-in at Old Ebbitt’s. Of course, Emmett and I see people we know when we’re out; however, I never anticipated not only seeing Edward, but also for him to sit next to us with such an air of indifference toward me or the conversation. His attitude was off-putting, and I haven’t been able to shake off mine ever since.

Is that a good idea?

Why wouldn’t it be?

I thought you might have made other plans.

I’m giving him an out, wondering if he will take it and move on to the next willing female.

I made plans with you, Bella. Do you have other plans?

No.

Then come over.

I need to stop being childish. I know we need to talk, which means more than a few texts here and there that we have been volleying between us ever since the restaurant run-in.

Do you still want me to cook?

Of course, but I can order something if you would rather not.

I will. I need to stop by the store on my way.

Okay, see you soon.

I should be more excited about seeing him, but I’m dreading how this day will go. With a heavy sigh, I throw a few things in my bag and plan a simple grocery list for preparing a Fourth of July meal for the two of us. I like to figure out the details of what I will prepare in the store, but plan to use some combination of the manly mainstays of beef, potatoes, and corn.
It’s difficult not to get carried away when I’m shopping at my favorite local market, but I try to stay focused and put together a cohesive meal. My mouth waters as I spy all of the freshly made choices, which can go with the beef filets the butcher just packaged for me. I decide to keep it simple and choose some red potatoes and fresh rosemary for roasting. I also plan to make a corn salad, with grilled corn, hazelnuts, pecorino, and fresh mint.

I can’t remember if Edward has a grill on his balcony, but if he doesn’t, I can always sear the steaks in a pan on his cooktop and finish them in the oven. With my plan firmly in place, I also grab some patriotic cupcakes and craft beer, as I know Edward enjoys many of the local brews, from when I peeked in his refrigerator last time I was there.

Selecting a cashier, I look over the latest food and gossip magazines trying to lure me into another impulse purchase, which I have to admit works on me most of the time. While I wait for my turn, one magazine in particular stops me dead in my tracks and I start fumbling for my phone. I locate his name, pressing the button and wait for the connection.

“Hey, Bella. What’s up?”

“Jacob, I found Seth’s phone.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” I lower my voice and look around to any possible eavesdroppers. “I’m standing in the checkout line, staring at one of those gossip magazines. Their latest issue is titled, ‘My wild orgy with Seth Clearwater.’”

“Oh, shit. How did that get out without us knowing?”

I start flipping through the pages for the article, which is complete with plenty of pixelated photos. “Jacob, I’m looking at the pictures and this is bad. It’s Seth and he’s naked with both men and women.”

“Bella, I’ve got to go.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to you later.”

I put the gossip rag back on the wire stand, not needing to read the story to know its impact. I refuse to financially support whoever chose to sell those photos or the people who bought them. I’m surprised they didn’t give the Clearwaters a chance to squash this before they made it to press, but maybe they did and Harry refused to give into threats of blackmail or extortion. Either way, Jacob’s Fourth of July just got busier.
After paying for our groceries, I head to Edward’s apartment. I left the key from my last visit with him, as I thought it was a little too soon to be having keys to each other’s places. I never believed it was Edward’s intention to give me one, just to allow access when he wasn’t back from work yet. So, while I’m free to take the elevator, I wait after knocking on the door of his apartment.

When Edward opens the door, I see he’s on the phone but waves me inside with a brief smile. I notice the Nationals’ game is on, which makes me hope Emmett is having fun with some of his Marine Corps buddies. I head to the kitchen with the groceries and start organizing my prep plan for our meal, while he finishes his call.

“Hey, sorry about that. It was my mother. She was talkative today.”

“Hi, I didn’t mean to interrupt your conversation.”

“You didn’t. I’m glad you’re here.” He leans to kiss my lips, but I turn my head and his lips land on my cheek.

I wish I could say the same thing, but I’m feeling off and maybe coming here was a mistake.

“Bella, what’s wrong? I can tell something isn’t right here, but I have no clue what. There’s something different in your texts too. If you can’t talk to me, this isn’t going to work.”

“Really? You have no idea?”

“Is this about seeing you and your boss at Ebbitt’s? It’s unrealistic to think we wouldn’t see each other out eventually. I thought you would be happy. I didn’t give anything away, despite Alice’s nagging that she could set us up after you left.”

“Alice is your cousin?”

“I didn’t know you knew her, but yes, our mothers are sisters.”

“And Tanya Denali.”

“She’s been a guest on my show. I thought I told you that. We see each other around town and know a lot of the same people and attend the same functions.”

When I don’t reply he continues.

“Bella, she’s married.” Edward throws his hands up in frustration.

“Not very happily, I would guess with the way she behaves.”
“Are you having second thoughts about keeping this just between us?”

I think back to my conversation with Shelly and know I have no choice but to keep this relationship a secret. So, I avoid his question and ask my own.

“How many other women are you dating?”

“Other women? I didn’t take you for being the jealous type.”

“Yes, other women. We aren’t exclusive, and I think I have a right to know before I get anymore invested in whatever this is.”

“You’re ready to bail?”

“I don’t want to get hurt.”

“Bella, you knew this wasn’t going to be easy, and you don’t see me complaining with how cozy you were with your boss when we arrived.”

“With Emmett? Please, that’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? How would I know you weren’t out on a dinner date with another man?”

“Because I introduced him to you.”

“A lot of people get involved with co-workers or their bosses all the time. Why would you be any different?”

“Touché.”

“Wow, you don’t trust me.”

“Edward, this thing between us is so new; I don’t know what to think. You know I’m already skeptical of everyone in this town. Maybe we need to clarify a few things, if we plan to continue.”

“Like what?”

“Am I the only one you’re seeing? Ugh! Or dating. Or whatever we’re calling this. I don’t want you to answer this based on some technicality in my question and I find out later there are other women, when I’m thinking I’m the only one.”

“Yes. You are. I’m not seeing or dating anyone else. Just you.”
My shoulders sag in relief at getting a straight answer out of him.

“And what about you?” he presses.

“What about me?”

“Am I the only one?”

“Yes. Of course you are.”

“Then from this point forward, we are in an exclusive relationship. Agreed? No more second-guessing each other. We both have work commitments, which will require socializing with others. If something upsets either of us, we need to talk about it.”

I let out a sigh, happy we have some transparency. “Fine. Agreed.”

“Now, how about a better greeting than that sad cheek kiss I was allowed?”

He lifts me to the kitchen countertop and stands between my legs, sliding his hands over my thighs and around to my ass, pulling me closer to the edge. Edward presses our bodies together as his lips find mine. A kiss, which starts out gently, heats up quickly when Edward’s tongue probes my lips seeking entry. I part my lips and his tongue tangles with mine until I’m breathless and needing to break away.

“Much better.” He looks past my shoulder at the bags and ingredients all over the counter. “You got cupcakes?”

I chuckle. “I did.”

“And beer? I love D.C. Brau. My day is getting better and better.”

“Do you have a grill?”

“Yes, out on the balcony.” He gives me a sneaky grin. “Apparently, you were so distracted during our last meal out there that you missed it.”

“I was overwhelmed by squid ink.”

“Did you buy steaks? I can probably do those without turning them to char.”

“And I need the corn grilled for a salad.”
“Sounds fancy. Let’s do that first. I’ll go start up the grill.”

I clean the two ears of corn and leave them on a plate for Edward to grill, then start cutting up potatoes. When I’m finished, I toss them with olive oil, salt, pepper, and fresh rosemary. After spreading them out on a pan, I slide the tray in the oven for roasting.

“What do you want me to do with the corn? You didn’t leave it in the husks.”

“Nope. It’s naked.”

Edward gets a big grin on his face. “I like the sound of that.”

“Just put it straight on the grill. The corn will end up charred and browned with nutty bits that taste delicious.”

“Did you just say ‘nutty bits’?”

“Stop. It should take about ten minutes.”

“Okay. I’ll go put them on and set a timer.”

I find a couple of glasses and pour each of us a beer when he returns.

“So, what were you doing this morning besides stewing over my love life?”

I stop mid-pour and notice his cheeky expression.

“Sorry, our love life.”

We clink glasses, and I take a sip. “Not much. I did talk with Jacob while I was at the store waiting to check out.”

“Jacob? The Press Secretary Jacob?”

“Yeah, you probably remember Alice and me talking about Seth losing his phone.”

“I suppose.”

“Well, I found its contents on the front page of some gossip rag. Harry and Sue are going to be livid.”

“I know you think Seth lost his phone, but maybe it was a set up and someone stole it with the intent to make the Clearwaters look bad.”
“I doubt it. No conspiracy theories needed here. Seth is gaining quite a reputation. I’m pretty sure he can screw up all on his own now. Hopefully, Jacob will get a handle on it.”

“So, this Jacob. Are the two of you close?”

“We were growing up, then I left for college. I would see him during the holidays when I went back home, but there was never anything between us. He’s like a little brother. His wife isn’t my biggest fan, but I doubt she’s really happy with anyone these days.”

“Leah Clearwater?”

“Yes, I don’t think she wants to live in the White House or deal with the security detail, which is now required.”

“Losing your privacy is tough.”

“That’s funny, because they’re just trying to protect her and her privacy.”

Edward backpedals at taking Leah’s side. “I’m just saying that I’m sure moving here is a big change for her.”

“I suppose it is.”

I don’t add that it’s no excuse for cheating on your husband, but it doesn’t stop me from thinking it.

“I’m going to go turn your naked corn.” He wiggles his eyebrows, as I chop up some hazelnuts for toasting.

I check on the potatoes, then salt and pepper the steaks for Edward to cook next, when he returns with perfectly charred corn on the cob.

“Looks great.”

He winks. “Naked corn is now one of my specialties. Give me those steaks.”

I’m much happier with our talk out of the way and our lighter, playful mood front and center.

Edward tries to sneak a cupcake while I’m putting together the salad, but I catch him red-handed.

“Just one, Bella. They’re so tempting.” He takes a bite out of the one in his hand. “Like you.”
I shake my head. “You’re silly.”

“Oh, am I?” He holds the cupcake to my mouth. “Here take a bite then you can be guilty like me.”

“Partners in crime?” I lean forward and take a bite of the delicious red velvet cupcake with cream cheese icing.

“Cupcake swipers. My mom used to get after me for swiping cookies from the cookie jar, but I don’t think she was really mad.”

“Mmmm, that is good. Why not?”

“Because she always made sure it was full of her home-baked cookies. You want another beer?” He pops the rest of the cupcake in his mouth and opens the fridge.

“Sure. You seem really close with your mom.”

“Yeah. Unfortunately, she’s showing early signs of dementia and has more good days than bad.”

“Oh, Edward. I’m sorry to hear that she’s not well.”

“She has a housekeeper and a nurse who checks on her daily.”

“What about your dad? Are they divorced?”

“No, but they should be. He’s too busy living the life of senior partner in his law firm. He’s always been married to his job, and Mom knew she came in second. However, it’s the disrespect for her that upsets me. He hasn’t ever been faithful, and they live separate lives and have for years. He still takes care of her financially, but he’s checked out on their marriage in every other way. There’s always someone new on his arm, who is usually younger than me these days.”

“Oh, Edward. I’m sorry that must be really tough to witness.”

He shrugs. “My whole life he was grooming me to be like him, and after I graduated from law school he expected me to join his firm in Chicago. Let’s just say, he wasn’t happy I decided to move to Washington, D.C. taking a job on Capitol Hill. I don’t care what he thinks; I like living here where I’m Edward Masen, not ‘Junior.’ And for the record, I want you to know in no way, shape, or form do I ever want to be like him.”
I can tell this conversation about his parents is starting to upset him, since he chugs down half of his beer. “I better go check on the steaks.”

He doesn’t return right away, but stands and looks out over D.C. deep in thought.

I’m adding a few finishing touches to our meal, when Edward returns with our perfectly cooked steaks.

“You like yours rare?” He teases, and I know he’s managed to shake off whatever dark cloud was threatening to take over his mood.

“I would prefer medium, but I’m flexible.”

“Me too, but that’s good to know. Flexibility is important.” He leaves a pinch on my ass, which causes me to let out a squeak, and a kiss on my neck before going back to his beer. “They need to rest for about ten minutes. You want me to set the table outside?”

“That would be great.”

I fill our plates and we sit out on his balcony to enjoy our meal, as the sun starts to set. Everything is delicious with Edward praising my cooking skills while we enjoy each other’s company with tremendously more ease than when I arrived.

Edward is flirty, playful, and charming. All the reasons I was so smitten with him when we first met.

“I’m going to go get the rest of the cupcakes,” he eagerly volunteers.

I watch as he shuts off all of the lights in his apartment, leaving only the candle on our table for light.

Edward returns with the cupcakes on a plate and sets it between us, grabbing a blue one this time. “I guess this is blue velvet? The package just said ‘velvet’ cupcakes.”

“Yes, just like the more popular red velvet ones, but only blue. They taste the same. Very patriotic with the stars on top of the blue one.”

“They’re good, but I’m more partial to strawberry shortcake myself.” He winks and rapidly finishes the one in his hand.

“Oh, you are, are you?” I take a bite of my own, savoring the sweetness of the icing, but loving my favorite part, the cake.
“I ate the whole thing. Did you see I wore your tie on Sunday?” He reaches for a red one this time.

“I did. You looked very handsome, like always.”

The sounds of booming get our attention. During our meal, evening turned to night and the fireworks display over the National Mall is underway. We watch what we can see from Edward’s balcony, but mostly I enjoy his warmth as he holds me close, wrapping his arms around me, while we finish the last of our cupcakes.

My eyes close when he starts leaving kisses along my neck. “Mmm.”

“You taste so good.”

“It’s probably the cupcakes.”

“Maybe the combination of you with them. You know, you can’t see the fireworks with your eyes closed.” He chuckles, while his hands roam the curves of my hips, moving to my waist where his fingers slip over the fabric of my shirt, moving to the front buttons.

“I can hear them,” I promise, as my head falls back to rest against his shoulder.

His fingers start working the buttons of my shirt, revealing my spaghetti-strapped, white tank underneath. A fingertip circles my nipple, hardening both in the process. He spins me slowly around to face him and his fingers lower the material, exposing my breasts to the cool night.

“Do you want to stay over? You don’t have to go to work in the morning, right?”

His hands squeeze my breasts as he lowers his mouth to one while his thumb continues to play with the other.

I gasp and reach behind me to hold onto the railing. “I don’t have work tomorrow, but I didn’t bring anything with me.”

Edward moans and moves his mouth to my other breast while one arm supports my arching back and the other moves to the button of my shorts, teasing the exposed skin he finds there along the waistband.

His mouth pulls off my breast. “I’m sure I can find you something to sleep in and a toothbrush to use, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

*Is that what I’m worried about?* For the life of me, I can’t think of one single worry at the moment.
While still sucking and nibbling on my nipple, he pops the button open of my shorts, lowering the zipper. He slides his fingers inside, caressing me over the slightly damp fabric of my underwear.

My head falls backward over the railing when he pushes my underwear to the side, running his fingers through my arousal.

“You’re so wet, Bella. Spread your legs for me.”

I readjust my position and gasp when he slides a finger inside then a second.

“Oh, God.” I pant at his insistent touch.

His fingers move in and out of my body with ease, then he circles my clit, which forces my hips forward, seeking more of everything.

“Do you want to go inside?”

Being outside on his balcony is the least of my concerns. “I don’t want you to stop. More. I need more, Edward.”

He removes his hand from my shorts, and I groan at the loss of contact. He chuckles and kneels in front of me while roughly tugging my shorts and underwear down my legs until I can step out of them.

Before I can brace myself against the railing again, Edward’s mouth is on my clit as he guides one of my legs over his shoulder, opening me up wider for him.

“Oh, Edward.” I moan as I feel his tongue working its magic.

One of my hands grabs his hair, holding him to me, while his mouth stays on my clit and two fingers push inside of me again, moving slowly at first.

“Come on, Bella. Let go,” he says between licks while he fucks me with his fingers.

The sensations are overwhelming, and I grip the rail tightly, knowing my release isn’t far away.

Edward’s fingers pick up the pace while his other hand reaches up to squeeze my breasts and tweak my nipples.

His mouth never leaves my clit, and I know the combination of everything is more than I can take. “Edward. Oh, I can’t. I’m—” When my orgasm bursts through me like the fireworks exploding in the background, I’m lost in waves and waves of pure bliss.
I tilt my head up; watching through half-lidded eyes as Edward stands and removes a condom from his pocket. After he unbuttons and lowers his shorts, I watch him roll the condom on his impressive length.

“Turn around and hold on.”

I follow his directions and bend over, pushing my ass in his direction.

I look out over the city and notice the light display still going when I feel him guide the head of his cock up and down my slit then push completely inside of me in one thrust.

I gasp at the full feeling. It’s been a while for me, and I need a moment to adjust to his size.

“Oh, Bella.” He grips my hips, keeping us nestled together, then starts pushing and pulling my body to his in a slow, easy pace.

I hold on securely to the railing as he nudges me forward with every thrust, causing my exposed breasts to bounce with each impact.

Edward speeds up his pace. “Can you come again? Because I don’t think I can wait any longer.”

I shake my head. “Not usually.”

One hand moves from my hip and around to my breast, squeezing it before he reaches up and fists a handful of my hair.

The twisting tug of my hair causes my back to arch, pushing my hips backward on his cock.

“Come on, Bella. Fuck me.”

I try to move my hips without much success, but bend my arms, which does the trick.

“That’s it,” he encourages, tugging on my hair, which delivers a bit of pain and surprisingly increases my own arousal.

“Oh, God. Edward.” I gasp at the new feelings, but wonder if a second orgasm isn’t out of the realm of possibility for me this time.

Not happy with my pace, Edward releases my hair, grabbing my hips, and takes over again where all I can do is grasp onto the railing. It only takes a few more strong thrusts until he shoves his cock deep inside me and lets out a growl of pleasure at finding his own release.
“Fuck. Bella.” He pants, catching his breath. After several quiet moments, he pulls his cock from my body, removing the condom and tossing it in a trashcan next to the grill. “I think we missed the rest of the fireworks.”

I readjust my tank to cover my breasts and locate my shorts and underwear, sliding them back up my body, while Edward refastens his shorts.

“I don’t think we missed a thing. If anything, the fireworks here seem to be just getting started.” I grin.

Edward grabs my hand. “You’re staying over.”

“You’re kind of pushy.”

“I’ll show you pushy.”

He leans over and blows out the candle on the table then opens the door, leading me inside toward his bedroom. “And if you want fireworks, I’ll show you how many more shots are left in my Roman candle before this night is through.”

My giggle turns to a moan as I watch from behind as Edward pulls off his shirt and loses his shorts in record time.

He spins around, and it’s hard to miss his cock jutting out at attention, as he walks toward me.

My mouth waters at the sight, and I consider all the possibilities for the rest of this night, thinking that dropping to my knees may be my next best option.

“Now for my favorite, new specialty.” He pushes off my shirt and yanks my tank over my head. Leaving my upper body exposed, he unbuttons my shorts, pushing them with my underwear to the floor.

Edward lifts me up, holding our bodies tightly together, as my legs naturally wrap around his waist and I lace my fingers behind his neck.

My breath catches when his cock nestles between my legs, sliding through the wetness, which is starting to gather once again. A tilt of my hips causes the head of his cock to pause at my opening. “And what would that be?”

I can’t resist the temptation of having him inside me again. Tightening my legs while pushing him from behind with my feet, I shove my hips forward until they are flush against his.

Wiping the grin from his face, we moan at the new feeling of our connection. “Shit. Condom?”
I shake my head, as Edward pushes his door closed where he pins me against it. His hips automatically start thrusting as he drives into my body over and over. "My favorite new specialty would be naked Bella."

If it means I’ll get a naked Edward, then I like the sound of that.
Chapter 9: The President’s Son

I squeeze into a coveted spot off to the side of the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room and listen as Jacob wraps up another daily meeting.

“Yes, the President is thrilled at the renaming, as it was long overdue. President Clearwater is pleased the football commissioner and owners came to a unanimous agreement not to support a racist name any longer. As the leading member of the Native American community, he will happily support the aptly named Washington Generals, unless they happen to be playing the Seahawks.”

“Who will the President root for if both teams end up in the Super Bowl?” A reporter I can’t see from the back of the room questions.

Jacob grins. “The winner, of course. Thank you everyone and have a good evening.”

Everyone laughs, packing up until next time.

Jacob closes his black leather folder and smiles when he spots me waiting among the White House Press Pool of standing room only attendees.

I return the greetings of several colleagues from the Post and Globe, before Jacob grabs my hand and we escape through the West Wing of the White House.

Jacob hurries us along and dodges a few reporters. “Let’s head upstairs. If I stop in my office, they will keep me for another couple of hours, and Sue already warned me she gave the chef the night off.”

I chuckle. “It sounds like she’s taking over.”

“Doesn’t she always?” He laughs. “Trust me. We want her at the helm tonight or the chef would turn a simple fish fry into a five-star dining experience.”

We enter the Clearwaters’ private residence and notice we are the last to arrive. My father, Jacob’s dad, Billy, and the President are all gathered around the television surrounded by bowls of chips and beers, while the commentators for tonight’s football game hash and rehash every player’s current status.

“Hi, Sue.”
“Bella, how wonderful to see you again. Jacob, I’m surprised you could get away so quickly.”

“Me, too. I’ll need to go back down for a couple of hours later this evening and wrap up everything, but I sent everyone home at the conclusion of today’s briefing.”

“Do you need any help, Sue?” I ask. “Jacob said you were on your own this evening.”

“Not really. How hard is it for these guys to open some bags of chips and dump them in a bowl? They like the simplicity, but you are welcome to join me in the kitchen.”

“Let me say hello to everyone, then I’ll be right there.”

Jacob removes his suit jacket, leaving it over the back of a chair, and loosens his tie.

“Hello, Mr. President.”

“Bella, dear. It’s Harry, and don’t you forget it. I hear I have you to thank for this evening.”

“I’m not sure about that, but Sue and I thought it would be fun for all of us to get together.”

“It’s exactly what I needed.”

“I’m glad.” I lean down and give Billy a hug. “Hi, Billy.”

“Good to see you, Bella. How are you doing at the Post? Your dad says you’re busy changing the world one story at a time.”

I look over at my father who’s holding a beer to his lips, but I don’t miss the slight smirk his mustache reveals. “He does, does he?”

“Hey, Bella.”

“Hello, Dad. I think we’re all doing the best we can to make a difference in whatever capacity possible.”

“Very true, Bella.” Billy grabs a handful of pretzels from the bowl.

Jacob joins their group, and I head to the kitchen to find Sue pulling perfectly golden brown pieces of fish from a countertop fryer.

“It smells like home in here.” I nab a French fry from the pile of cooling potatoes.
“Finally, right? The chef looked at me as if I had two heads when I made the grocery list for this evening and told him he would have the night off.”

“I guess most people aren’t used to such a hands-on First Lady.”

“Harry has more patience than I do, but Bella, the excess seems ridiculous at times. I mean heaven forbid I want a simple grilled cheese and tomato soup for dinner. I made that request one evening, and I was shocked at the version that showed up. I’m picturing simple white bread with butter and American cheese, plus soup from a can. We ended up having artisan bread with four cheeses and a tomato basil soup that nearly brought tears to my eyes, it was so good.”

“Didn’t you have a personal chef while Harry was Governor?”

“We did, but she prepared so many of our favorites familiar to the region that I didn’t think twice about it. The food wasn’t stuffy or pretentious just prepared simply in its natural form from local farmers.”

“Is Seth or Leah joining us this evening?”

“I have no idea where Leah is, but I suspect she is with a friend.”

“A friend?”

“That’s all she tells me. I know she hates it here, but we’re here. Her husband is here.” Sue lowers her voice. “Don’t tell Jacob, but her security detail said she’s been frequenting a local hotel. I think their marriage is hanging by a thread and Leah’s doing nothing to try to fix it.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Sue.”

“Jacob is a saint. He’s here constantly for Harry, and I think Leah resents their relationship. She’s drifting and I don’t know what to do to help. Maybe a baby would bring them together. Can you imagine, Bella? A little Clearwater-Black baby combining our two bloodlines. It would be fantastic.”

“Sue, what if things don’t get better between Jacob and Leah?”

“I don’t know, Bella. I’m not sure how to help them fix their relationship at this point. A marriage counselor may be the simple answer, but I wonder if we’ve waited too long to intervene. Harry and Billy are adamant they try to work it out. Their relationship is very important to our tribe’s future, and the elders will visit, if necessary.”

“What about Seth?”
“He told me he would be here, but who knows what exactly that means. Let’s put everything on the table.”

We don’t have to say a word when we arrive at the dining room table with platters overflowing with the freshly fried goodness. The guys all gather around, loading their plates full of a taste of back home, including Seth who showed up while we were in the kitchen.

“Hey, Bella.” He takes the seat next to mine.

“Hi, Seth. How are you?”

“Good. What are you doing this evening after we eat?”

“Work.”

“You want to go out with me and my friends? We’re thinking about going to a new club nearby. I could show you a good time?”

Part of me wonders if I should take him up on his offer and keep tabs on him for tonight. Maybe I can help him to steer clear of the wrong people and realize he needs to be more careful.

“Yeah, Bella. You aren’t dating anyone right?” Jacob asks.

I shake my head. “Not at the moment.”

I don’t miss the look between my father and Harry.

“Then you should go out and have some fun for a change,” he encourages.

“Jacob—”

“Don’t look at me. I have more work to do this evening. So, I can’t babysit either one of you.”

Seth turns on those puppy dog eyes. “Come on, Bella. It will be fun. Let me show you the benefits of being the First Son.”

-BCD-

“Good morning, sunshine. I’m surprised to see you here so early at work after your night out. No hangover this morning?”

“Funny. How do you know I went out last night?” I ask, sipping from my coffee cup.
Emmett takes out his phone. “I think everyone knows by now. Listen to this from D.C.’s Daily Chatter—”

“Oh dear, a gossip site?”

“Yes, a gossip site. I get my news from all angles. There’s a little bit of truth in everything, and they always have the juicy stuff. Now listen up:

‘Has First Son, Seth Clearwater, finally found the one woman to tame him of his wild ways? It looks like this time he’s going with an older woman, six years his senior. Perhaps they are rekindling a second chance at romance from before he landed with his father in the White House. Tongues are wagging at the latest pictures of our beloved First Son with Isabella Swan, daughter of Charles Swan, Deputy Director of the FBI. Is this a relationship that would be pleasing to the President and First Lady? Our sources say they already have his parents’ blessing and wedding bells can be heard in the distance. We think they make a gorgeous couple, and what woman wouldn’t be jealous of the way Seth’s looking at her? He’s clearly in love. If you don’t believe us then check out the pictures snapped below of their latest night out on the town.’

And there are pictures, Bella, but most are blurry. The first one is Seth holding your hand, leading you into an elevator of the underground parking garage for the club.”

“I bet that was the limo driver.”

“There’s one of you sitting next to him in a cozy corner of the VIP area.”

“Let me see that one.”

Emmett hands over his phone, then I hand it back to explain.

“We weren’t ever alone, and they’ve cropped out all of his friends who were everywhere. We sat together for maybe ten minutes tops. It was so loud we had to constantly lean in and shout in each other’s ears to be heard.”

“Here you’re dancing with him.” Emmett turns his phone to show me the picture.

“I bargained my freedom with one dance then left. The rest is speculation, and I thought I would keep him out of trouble by tagging along after dinner last night. It sounds like I stirred the pot.”

“You had dinner together?”

“With our families… at the White House.”
Emmett whistles. “How do I get one of those invites? You had dinner with the First Family in the private residence?”

I shrug. “It’s not a regular thing, but something we always did when I was growing up in Washington. It was a nice, small get together. Are there any other pictures? Because Seth was dancing with a lot of people.”

“Nope.”

“Shit.” My mind starts racing, wondering if Edward has seen the pictures.

“It’s not so bad. Maybe your readership will increase.”

“Or I’ll be picked apart by the vultures who wish they were the ones in those pictures.”

“The fact that you’re a reporter wasn’t mentioned or the Post.”

“I’m not surprised. I’m always ‘Charlie’s daughter,’ ‘friend of the President,’ or now, ‘Seth’s girlfriend.’ I’m never Isabella Swan, reporter for the Washington Post.”

“Oh, give them time. I’m sure they will dig up every juicy tidbit about you imaginable, and when they find out how boring you are, they will make up a better story.”

“Great. That’s just what I need. Did you just call me boring?”

“Let’s face it, Bella. All you ever do is work.”

“Now, it appears with one abbreviated night out, I’m a permanent fixture on the club scene, which is so exciting when I was out for the first time in years for about an hour.”

“I’m picking up some sarcasm here. I don’t think you’re really excited.”

My phone starts vibrating, and I see Jacob’s calling. “I better take this.”

Emmett chuckles. “Hard to believe you would deny a call from the President’s Press Secretary.”

“Get out.”

“So harsh. I would think love would soften you up,” he taunts.

Emmett closes my office door just as I throw a wadded up piece of paper at him.
“Good morning, Jacob.”

“I had no clue. You and Seth, huh? You had us all fooled.”

“Not you too.”

“How long has this been going on? I mean I knew he had a crush on you for years, and you are a little older, but good for you, Bella. I’m sure your parents are delighted with the news.”

“Jacob! There’s nothing going on between Seth and me.”

“Is that your official comment or would you like me to work on something for the two of you?”

“You’re impossible. Did you talk with Seth?”

“No, I figured he was still there with you at your apartment.”

“Jacob, I’m at work. We didn’t leave the club together last night. I didn’t even stay longer than an hour, and outside of me being there with him for those pictures, not much about this morning’s story is true.”

“If you say so, but Bella, I’m not going to shut this door for you. When asked, I’m just going to say ‘no comment’ on behalf of everyone at the White House.”

“Jacob, that’s not going to help. It will fuel the speculation.”

“Bella, are you dating anyone?”

“No.” I cringe at repeating the sort of lie again, but Edward and I aren’t technically dating. If we were, I wouldn’t be trying to hide our relationship.

“Then maybe this would be a good thing for both of you—hometown sweethearts. You can be the stable, older woman who young, wild Seth needs. I can spin this any which way you want to go.”

“No spin, Jacob. Seth and I aren’t together. End of story.”

“Whatever you say, Bella.”

“I’ve got work to do. Bye.”

“Okay, we’ll talk later. Have a good day, Bella.”
I end the call only for my phone to vibrate again.

“Hello.”

“Hey.”

I smile at the sound of his voice. “How are you?”

“I’ve been better. You?”

“I’m good.” I can tell he’s pissed, and I’m not sure how to tackle this discussion, so I decide to rip off the Band-Aid. “None of it is true.”

“I figured. So, tell me.”

“I had dinner at the White House last night with the Clearwaters, the Blacks, and my dad was even there. Seth invited me out with him and his friends. I agreed to go along, thinking I could help keep him out of trouble. We were surrounded by people the entire time we were in the club. I danced, one dance with him, then left after an hour. I went home and worked on my article due today.”

He lets out a huge sigh over the phone. “I don’t like this.”

“I don’t either, but it will eventually die down.”

“I need to see you tonight, but I’m afraid you’re going to be followed for a while, which would lead them right to my doorstep. The last thing we need is for someone to think you’re cheating on the First Son and put together some torrid love triangle between the three of us that doesn’t exist.”

“What should we do?”

“I’ll make arrangements and text you with the details when I have them.”

“I’m sorry for this mess.”

“I know. We’ll talk later. Bye.”

“Bye.”

It’s late when I finish up my article, but I’m not worried about meeting Edward, as we agreed between eight and nine o’clock, and it’s almost nine now.
Before I can raise my hand to knock on the hotel room door, it opens, and Edward pulls me into the room, letting the door slam shut behind him. The room is dark with only the natural moonlight from outside illuminating my surroundings.

His jacket is off with his tie loosened at the neck. His hair is a mess and he’s panting as though he’s just run a marathon. He’s on my lips instantly, then he moves to my neck, sucking and biting the skin there before he pushes me back and onto the bed.

There’s no reserve. No hesitation. Just frantic want and need as he pushes up my skirt and over my hips, letting it rest at my waist. I hear the zipper of his pants lower and feel his cock tracing a path along between my legs, pausing at my opening.

He pushes inside of me and lets out a growl of relief. “Bella.”

“Hey. I’m here. We’re okay.” I reach around, holding him to me tightly, as his hips swivel and drive into me at a relentless pace.

“You’re mine.” He sucks on the exposed skin of my chest, ripping my blouse open and shoving the cups of my bra down for immediate access.

His mouth, moving over every inch of my chest, feels like he’s leaving marks. But at this point, I’m beyond caring.

“Only you,” I pant, tilting up my hips to meet his.

“God, Bella. I’m—”

He’s jealous, out of control, and needy.

But, I understand, and there’s no reason to apologize.

“It’s okay. Take what you need.”

He speeds up, and after two more thrusts, releases his building frustration, collapsing on top of me.

“I’m not—”

“It’s okay. Even if you are,” I whisper.

“I’m only jealous it isn’t me in the pictures with you.”

“I know.”
“You didn’t come. I’m going to make it up to you.”

“I have no doubt.”

“And I’m going to take you away for your birthday. Away from D.C.’s prying eyes. Can you get a few days off from work?”

“Probably. What are we talking?”

“We can leave on a Sunday afternoon and I’ll have you back by Tuesday night. Or maybe Wednesday morning you can just go from my place straight to work.”

“Two days off from work?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Emmett should be fine with it as long as I get my articles to him ahead of time.”

“Then it’s settled. You’re mine and now I’m going to remind you why.”
Chapter 10: The Birthday Girl

The airport is buzzing on a late September Sunday afternoon with travelers departing on flights from visiting the sights of D.C. and others who are arriving to a workweek full of business meetings. Edward and I are trying to escape for a few days in Arizona to celebrate my birthday.

We are dressed casually in jeans and T-shirts, as you would expect from tourists, in an effort not to be recognized by anyone we know. It’s a minefield of possibilities here at Reagan National Airport.

Edward is wearing a hat and sunglasses to disguise his easy to spot copper-colored hair, while I’m tucked inside a hoodie with sunglasses too.

I see Senator Caius Volturi stop at one of the airport bars, no doubt arriving from Florida after spending the weekend with Dori and the girls. While Edward spots Irina Denali with Tanya’s husband, Laurent Dubois, walking hand in hand toward a gate for a flight to Paris.

With my eyebrows raised at the pairing, I wait for Edward to confirm what we are both thinking.

“I don’t know what to say, Bella.”

“I told you Tanya wasn’t the happily married woman you think she is. Why else would her sister and husband be here—clearly together?” I look back at the pair and catch him placing a sweet kiss on Irina’s forehead. “Holy smokes, he just kissed her.”

As Laurent and Irina disappear from my view, I notice her slide her hand into Laurent’s back pocket without a care or concern to who may see them. A pang of jealousy courses through me at their public ease together, which leaves me wishing I had that with Edward.

He looks around, taking note of the people nearby. “Let’s focus on getting out of here without being noticed.”

I received an early birthday gift from Seth a couple of weeks ago, when he finally commented about our non-existing relationship to a friend, which was repeated to the right people, causing any interest in my private life to evaporate almost immediately. When word got out there wasn’t anything to our relationship, I forwarded the link to Edward. Seth had said I was too good for him and any man who caught my eye should consider himself the luckiest man in the world. Edward agreed completely.
Our flight is called, and we board the plane, taking our seats in the back and being careful not to make too much eye contact with anyone in particular. I let out a sigh of relief when the door closes and the plane backs away from the gate.

Edward reaches over and holds my hand. “Not much longer now.” He smiles and leans in for a quick peck on my lips.

Our flight is uneventful. I watch out the window when the terrain changes from lush farmland to a red-rocked desert full of canyons and cliffs. We land at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, and Edward leads us to the car rental area. After selecting a car and storing our bags in the trunk, we leave the airport and head to the Boulders Resort and Spa in Carefree, Arizona.

My jaw drops when we arrive at our destination, the resort’s Villa Retreat. It’s a three-bedroom villa full of old world furnishings and artifacts, offering every luxury imaginable with complete privacy.

“Edward, this is amazing!” I’m in awe of the fireplace in the living room while my eyes take in the kitchen full of professional amenities.

“I’m glad you approve. The kitchen is fully stocked, so we won’t need to leave. I plan to spend some quality time with you in front of that fireplace—naked. Let’s go take a look at the master bedroom.” Edward grabs our bags and carries them upstairs to our room.

The master overlooks an infinity pool against a backdrop of magnificent boulder formations. “Edward, this is—I’m speechless.”

“Good.” He turns me in his arms. “Happy birthday, Bella.”

He looks at his watch, gets a sneaky grin, and points to a single massage table set up in the room. “You’re scheduled for an in-room massage at 5:00 p.m. Do you want to shower?”

“Sounds good to me.”

I grab what I need from my bag and take a quick shower. When I finish, I slip on one of the provided robes and return to the bedroom to find Edward also freshly showered, sitting on a chaise lounge on our balcony, staring out at the beautiful setting.

“You showered.”

“In one of the other bathrooms.” He’s sipping on a beer. “Did you want a glass of wine?”

“Yes, please.” I tighten the belt on my robe, taking the filled glass he offers. “There’s a Japanese soaking tub in the bathroom that looks like it can hold two people.”
“Sounds like something we will need to take advantage of during our visit.” He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

After a quick sip, I move to the railing, tilting my head up toward the sun. “Mmmm, this is delicious and the view is incredible. I love the warmth. It’s hard to believe only hours ago we were back in D.C. and full of stress.”

Edward slips his arms around me and pulls me back to rest against his chest. “I agree.”

He pushes my hair to the side and starts trailing kisses down my neck, distracting me from anything but him.

“So, did my masseuse arrive yet? I have no idea what time it is.”

“He did.”

“He? I’m surprised you would request a male masseuse.”

“I’m okay with this one. I don’t want to rush you with your wine, but whenever you’re ready, go ahead and get under the sheets on the table face down.”

I take one long, appreciative drink and go back inside to get settled, then hear Edward join me from the balcony. He opens and closes several cabinets and drawers when my curiosity at what he’s doing gets the best of me. I turn my head to see Edward adjusting towels and opening a bottle of oil.

He grins when our eyes meet. “Would you like music?”

“You’re my masseuse?”

“Nothing but the best for you, my dear.” He starts a playlist from his phone and the easy listening tunes fill the room.

“Have you ever...?” The moan that escapes my body stops me from finishing my thought—Edward clearly knows what he’s doing. His soft, warm hands begin massaging my shoulders, moving up to my neck, rendering me speechless.

Edward’s hands drift into my hair, rubbing my scalp with the right amount of pressure, sending tingles through my entire body.

“So, you’ve done this before?”
“Once or twice.” That is all he gives me.

The words “once or twice” are more than I want or need to know. “Well, you could be a massage therapist, if the whole television host thing doesn’t work out for you.”

Edward chuckles and moves the sheet lower that’s covering my back, exposing me to his knowledgeable hands, which seem to know how to push all of my pleasure buttons.

He pauses to add more oil to his hands then uses his thumbs, tracing the curve up and down my spine.

I groan and squirm as he works on my lower back, wishing he would move just a little lower. I’m disappointed when Edward’s professionalism kicks in and he moves higher to work on my arms, first one side then the other.

When he finishes my upper body, he returns the sheet to cover my back and reveals my full leg. With newly oiled hands, he works through the muscles of my thigh, spending extra time on my hamstring, moving to my calf, then removing the sheet from my other leg and repeating his actions.

His hand touches my shoulder, pulling me from the floaty headspace where I’ve drifted. “Whenever you’re ready, you can turn over.”

With a simmering need between my legs, I don’t bother covering my chest when I make the transition, hoping to entice Edward into a little more than a massage. He doesn’t take the bait, unfortunately, and moves a chair down by my feet where he sits and starts working them over one at a time.

I struggle to keep my breathing even; Edward’s foot massage is bringing my arousal to new heights. He moves farther up each leg, pushing away the sheet and exposing my lower body to him completely.

His hands work my muscles until they relax at his loving attention, my legs open a little wider when his fingers get closer to where I need him most.

“Edward.” I pant and reach out, finding him hard and straining against his jeans. “Stop teasing me.”

“Bella.” He groans when I rub him over his pants. “I’m never going to finish your massage, if you keep touching me.”
I pull the sheet from my body and let it drop to the floor, grab one of his hands, bringing it between my legs. His fingers need little direction, sliding through the wetness he’s created there before pushing inside of me. I moan at his touch, encouraging him to keep moving.

Edward stops and moves to the end of the table, pulling my body until I’m nearly hanging off the end, and bends my legs, pushing them back to my body. He sits in the chair he used for my foot massage and lowers his head. When his tongue makes contact, my hips push up off the table, straining toward his willing mouth.

“Oh, Bella.” He groans and uses one arm to hold back my legs, while the fingers of his other hand return to sliding in and out of my body, as his tongue toys with me in the most sinful of ways.

With his cock out of reach, my hands move to my chest, squeezing my breasts, playing with the hardened nipples. My groan at my impending orgasm, which prompts Edward to remove his mouth and fingers, then he stands and unzips his jeans.

“I’m so close, Edward. Please, don’t stop.”

“Fuck, Bella. I’m definitely not stopping, but I need to be inside of you.” He watches as I continue squeezing my chest while my legs spread open wider for him.

He wraps his hands around my thighs, pulling me closer, and sheathes his cock inside of me in one smooth thrust.

“Edward.” I moan when he starts driving his body into mine at a relentless pace, causing the table to sway with every thrust.

His hands take over for mine, grabbing my breasts and torturing my nipples, as I grab the table, hoping I don’t fall off. “I want to hear you, Bella. Don’t hold back.”

His cock hits that spot inside of me, bringing me right back to where his fingers and mouth left off.

“Oh God, Edward. Your cock—”

Soon my toes are curling as my back arches off the table and all of my muscles tighten, hurling me toward my impending release, which pushes me over the edge, leaving me spiraling into great depths of pleasure.

“Fuck.” I gasp.
While my orgasm slows and I pant, trying to catch my breath, Edward slams his cock inside as he pulses, finding his own release with a growl.

“Holy shit, Bella.”

I chuckle. “I know.”

“So much for relaxing you with a massage.”

“Oh, you’ve relaxed me.”

Edward pulls out, grabs a towel, and wipes us clean. “How about a nap before dinner?”

“Sounds wonderful, but I don’t think I can walk due to your magic hands and cock.”

He pushes off his jeans and underwear, scoops me up into his arms, carrying me over to the king-sized bed. “Did you say magical cock?”

“Is that all you ever hear?”

Edward grins. “Maybe.” He tucks me under the covers and moves to the other side of the bed, crawling in next to me, pulling me into his arms.

“This feels so good.” I sigh and close my eyes, as Edward leaves a kiss on my forehead.

“Naked sleeping is the best.”

“Mmmm.”

The smell of something delicious fills the villa, rousing me awake from my nap. I have no idea what time it is, but from the view outside our balcony, it’s dark with the stars starting to twinkle in the night sky. I throw on my robe and head for the kitchen, still feeling a little dazed from my Edward massage.

“Why hello, sleepyhead.” He’s standing in the middle of the room in only his boxers, fixing two plates of food.

“Hey. I guess I was more tired than I thought. Something smells good.” I stretch as my robe gapes open, giving Edward a brief glimpse of my naked chest.

“Hello, gorgeous.” He leans in to kiss my lips then lower, nibbling on my neck. “I’ve got dinner ready. Let’s eat out on the patio. It’s beautiful outside.”
“Okay. What are we having?”

“Mexican. There’s a little of everything. I had it delivered from one of the restaurants. Oh, can you grab the tequila and the two shot glasses on the counter.”

“Oh, dear. Tequila?”

“What’s wrong with tequila?”

“Nothing at all. It’s my one of my favorites, but in my past experience, things usually get a little wild when a bottle of tequila is involved. Clothes are typically optional.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to that and we’re both already almost there.” He points toward my robe. “Let’s have a shot.”

Edward pulls the cork stopper from the bottle and fills the two shot glasses, handing one to me, then holds the other in his hand.

“To birthday shots with the birthday girl who I’m hoping will wear her birthday suit in the pool with me later.”

I giggle. “Skinny-dipping, Mr. Masen?”

“A guy can dream, can’t he?”

“We’ll see.” I look out over the pool, as the water dances in the moonlight, knowing with a few more shots anything will be possible.

We settle into our seats and dig into our Mexican feast.

“This is delicious.”

“It’s good. I thought about heating up something, but it’s easier to pick up the phone.”

“I can cook for us tomorrow. Do we have any plans?”

“I was thinking about watching you sunbathe nude when we aren’t in bed.”

“Edward!”

“The only plan I have is for very little, if any, clothing to be involved on our entire trip. You didn’t even need to bring a bag.” He winks.
“Very funny.”

“I meant to ask. Did you get your shot before we left?”

“Yes. Last week.”

“Good.”

“Worried about the pitter-patter of little feet?”

“Not really. I just don’t want any surprises when I don’t think either of us is ready for something like that at this point in our lives. Since we aren’t using condoms, I feel a little responsibility to at least ask.”

“Well, don’t worry. We’re all good.”

“You are definitely good.” Edward pecks my lips and refills our shot glasses. “Let’s drink to that.”

This shot goes down much easier as the familiar warmth spreads throughout my body, sending another buzz of tingles between my legs.

Feeling full from our Mexican feast, I tilt my head back, looking up at the starry night while one of my hands starts rubbing Edward’s thigh.

He looks over and smiles at me when my hand drifts to his cock.

“You’re a horny drunk?”

I shrug, sliding my hand under the waistband. “I just want you. I can’t help it.”

Edward pushes his chair away from the table and grabs a pillow for my knees when he sees my intention.

I have his cock in my mouth seconds later, giving him a blowjob I hope he’ll never forget.

“Oh, sweet Jesus, Bella.” He gathers my hair as I bob up and down in his lap with a determination he isn’t used to experiencing from me.

I keep my lips tight around him, adding more suction than necessary, occasionally letting my teeth graze his length. I give the head extra attention before sucking him back into my mouth, taking him as deep as possible, holding him while willing my throat to relax around him.
“Oh, God, Bella. You can take all of me. I can’t. This is going to be—” His hips lift up, and he makes a few more passes, pushing and pulling my head off his cock, then holds my mouth in place when he groans through his release.

I swallow everything he gives and feel his grip loosen on my hair as he softens in my mouth. I pull away, leaving a few licks along his length, kissing the head before standing.

“Whose birthday is this again? Damn, Bella.”

“That was as much for me as it was you. I love making you lose control.”

“Mission accomplished.”

I’m already pouring another shot for each of us when I feel Edward untie my robe. His fingers wander up my legs and between, finding me slick with need.

“Mmmm, giving me a blowjob turns you on?” Edward holds his shot to his lips and throws back the contents.

“Yes.” I down my shot, knowing this is probably my limit since I’m feeling buzzed.

“Well, fuck. I can’t leave you hanging before we skinny-dip. I am the luckiest guy in the world, according to Seth. With magical hands—and cock, according to you.” He pushes off my robe, leaving me naked in front of him. “Turn around and let’s see if I can make you see stars.”

I straddle his body, settling on his lap, feeling my back against his naked chest, as his spent cock rests between my legs and his lips leave a trail of kisses from my shoulder to my ear.

“Edward, I can already see lots of stars.” I laugh, tilting my head toward the sky, but it dies as his roaming hands rub my body, making me see more stars than I ever thought possible with my eyes closed on this cool Arizona night.
Chapter 11: The No Thanks-giving

“Bella!”

I scan through the crowd at the baggage claim of Miami International Airport for a familiar voice.

“Dem!” I’m rushed by one of my best friends and wrap him up in a bear hug. “I’m so glad to see you!”

Demetri and I met during one of my summer vacations with Mom while I was in high school, and we’ve never lost touch. He’s one of the few bright spots about making this trip.

“Let me look at you.” Demetri pulls back and looks me over from head to toe. “Girl! Who is he? Because you look like you’re getting it on the regular. Or is there the very slim possibility… you’re in love? Here, give me your bag.”

Oh, shit. My stomach drops. It’s definitely not love. Lust maybe. I had better get my game face on because if I’m not more careful, Demetri will have me spilling the beans before I’m back on a plane to D.C.

“Why in the world would you think that?” I ask, as we lock arms and exit the airport terminal.

“You’ve got this glow I haven’t seen. Ever. And I know it’s not because you’re happy to see your mother for Thanksgiving. Only good dick can bring this kind of change. Trust me. I know.” He grins widely.

“Oh? Someone new in your life?” I try to deflect.

“Girl, there’s always someone new, but this time, maybe someone old?”

“Dem, an older man?”

“Who wouldn’t want a sugar daddy?”

“I think I’ll pass.”

“Mmmm. Don’t knock it until you try it.”

We pause in front of a black sports car taking two spots.
“Dem, is this you?” I circle around the car, meeting him at the back where he is loading my bag.

“A little present from Daddy.”

“Holy smokes. This is a Maserati...”

“GranTurismo. I know.” He grins as he waves me toward the passenger side. “Don’t hate me because you ain’t me.”

We take our seats and click our seatbelts into position as this fine piece of Italian craftsmanship roars to life. “How fast have you gone?”

“Fast enough to land on your father’s radar—finally. I mean what does a guy have to do to make that mustache twitch. Well, I have some ideas, but... if only I could get him to use his speed gun on me.” He winks.

“Demetri! Stop,” I beg while laughing.

“How is your dad doing? He hasn’t shaved off his mustache, has he? It will kill all of my fantasies.”

“No, he still has it.”

“Your father is so hot. A little uptight, but I can work with that. It’s always more fun to break them in slowly. He’ll warm up to me eventually.”

“Don’t hold your breath. Thanks for picking me up.”

“No problem, but who actually travels on Thanksgiving? You’re supposed to cut out the day before or at least bag the whole week and call it a vacation.”

I wave toward all of the traffic we’re experiencing while trying to exit the airport. “Clearly, I’m not the only one. I had some work to finish up before taking off.”

“Oh, did you? And does this work have a name?”

“Demetri, stop.”

“So, you’re telling me there isn’t anyone?”

I hesitate too long, and he pounces.
“I knew it! It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me. I’m just happy for you. Maybe I’ll meet him one day?” he prods.

“Oh, Demetri. I’ve been away from you and your persistent ways for too long.”

“Well, sweetheart, you don’t get me for much longer today. I’ve got to work tonight. My adoring public doesn’t give two shakes about a holiday. If anything, the club will be packed with everyone fed up with visiting their families and ready to let loose.”

“That could be me depending on how dinner goes.”

“Well, if it all goes south, just come by the club and you can catch my show. I’ll take you home and you can sleep on my couch. It will be like old times, but I can’t imagine you not sticking around with step-daddy Dwyer. He’s like a fine wine. Is he still working out regularly? I bet he is. Those retired baseball players take such good care of themselves. Not to mention he’s loaded.”

“Again. Gross. Why do you have to fantasize about all of the men in my life?”

“It’s not my fault you’re surrounded by hotties. I have good taste and can appreciate the male form at any age. How’s your boss? Do you have any recent photos? That Emmett is prime.” He fans himself.

I take out my phone and show him the latest photos of Emmett and Hercules when we’re paused at a traffic light. “He got a dog this past summer. Isn’t he adorable?”

“I’ve never been so jealous of a dog in my life. Look at those hands!”

“Give me back my phone.”

“Promise me you’ll send those to me.”

“Fine, fine.”

“So how is work?”

“It’s always a challenge, Dem. I did go—” I stop as I catch myself.

“Where did you go?” He eyes me sharply.

“Uh, Arizona.”

“Oh? When?”
“September.”

“You're birthday? He took you away for your birthday? Oh, Bella. It sounds like he has some moves. And the way your face is flushing, I know I'm right.”

“Demetri, don't.”

“It's okay, but I can read you like a book. Maybe I need to come up to D.C. for a visit and do a little sniffing around. You know me. I'll find him.”

“You're ridiculous.”

“You're right. I can never do those cold climates. My heat alone will endanger the polar ice levels. Speaking of heat, what was that little tidbit I read about you and Seth Clearwater? Is it him? He took you to Arizona?”

“Nope, Seth is old news that was never news. He's like a younger brother.”

“That's too bad. He's hot. Maybe you can set me up?”

“I can introduce you, but let me warn you, there's quite a line. Everyone wants a shot at the First Son.”

“Except you.”

“Except me.”

“Oh, Bella, darling. Your man must be something else for you to pass on the likes of Seth Clearwater. What about the Press Secretary?”

“Dem, when do you have time to keep up on politics or watch any television?”

“Since the White House got an infusion of d—lish, C-SPAN is now one of my go-to channels. Put it on mute and there are hours of possibilities. Is Jacob Black really happily married?”

“Uh—”

“I knew it. What a waste. Leah Clearwater is an idiot.” Demetri shakes his head as he pulls into Mom and Phil's Miami Beach neighborhood full of multi-million dollar mansions where private yachts, pools, and tennis courts are the standard not the exception.

I let out a snort accidentally when he pulls into the circle driveway. “I always forget how ostentatious everything is here.”
“Sweetheart, it’s lifestyles of the rich and richer. I don’t blame you if you would rather forget about my couch.”

“Dem, I would rather sleep on your couch than stay here any day.”

“Well, good luck at Hotel Dwyer.”

I sigh and look around at the excess. “It’s not the accommodations that make a home. It’s the people.”

“I know. I know. I’m just glad you’re my people.”

“Me, too.” I lean over a leave a quick peck on Demetri’s cheek. “Let’s see how long I last.”

“Be good, my love.”

“You, too.”

“I’m always good, but most people like me better when I’m bad.” He winks.

“I’ll talk with you soon. Maybe you’ll let me drive this before I catch my flight tomorrow?”

“I’ll pencil you into my schedule, sweets. Bye, Bella.” He releases the trunk latch, and I exit the car reluctantly, grabbing my bag.

I wave and watch as Demetri makes his way back down the driveway, then turn and walk up the steps to the front door. I ring the bell and wait.

After only a few minutes, a familiar face comes into view. “Isabella! Mi hija! Come inside.”

“Hello, Maria.” I hug her tightly. “As much as I love seeing you, why hasn’t Mom given you the day off to be with your family?”

“Oh, Isabella. I was home, but your mother decided to cook your Thanksgiving dinner.”

“Did I miss the fire trucks?” I check back outside.

“Close. The kitchen is a mess and I’m here to salvage what I can. Mr. Dwyer asked me to fix everything.”

My mom comes around the corner with a martini glass in hand. “Isabella! You’re finally here. Why don’t you help Maria in the kitchen? I’ll have someone put your bag in a room. James?”
“It’s okay. I can take it myself.” I hope she will leave me to my own devices, as the last thing I need is that sleazy creeper following me around.

“Nonsense. What good are men if they aren’t at your beck and call? James!”

Victoria’s boyfriend James comes around the corner and his eyes light up when he sees me.

“Oh, there you are. James, please be a dear and help carry Isabella’s bag to her room.”

He grabs my bag before I can protest further. “Sure, Renee. I would be happy to help. Follow me, Isabella.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I promise Maria.

I follow James upstairs and into a guest room.

“Do you need any help unpacking?”

“No, I won’t be staying long, just tonight.”

“Well, I’m next door with Victoria, but if you need my help turning down the bed later, I would be more than happy to stop by.” His finger traces down my arm as he lowers his voice. “Victoria won’t mind. She’s busy with Riley anyway.”

“Oh, no thanks. I’m good. I better get back downstairs and help Maria, if we’re going to eat any time soon.”

I move to the door, but James puts his arm out blocking my escape.

“You don’t have to fight this attraction between us, Isabella,” he whispers. “No one has to know.”

“James, there is no attraction. Now, please move.”

“Mmmm, feisty. I like that.”

He removes his arm from the doorway, and I make a hasty retreat back downstairs, finding Maria pulling a huge pan of lasagna from the oven.

“We’re having Italian?”

“Yes, your mother’s request after the turkey caught on fire.”
“How does that even happen?”

“She decided to make a vodka turkey, but I think she was more focused on infusing herself with the vodka for the past three days.”

I shake my head and look around the kitchen. “What can I do?”

“How about you take care of the mussels? I’m about to finish up the mushroom risotto.”


“How are you, Mom?” I ask politely, as I begin to scrub the mussels under cold water.

“I’m better now.” She holds up her fresh cocktail for me to see. “I don’t understand why it is always left to the women to prepare this meal, but no one needs those stupid traditional foods. Do they Maria?”

“No, Mrs. Dwyer.”

I catch Maria rolling her eyes and give her a smirk.

“Isabella, I have a surprise for you. Guess who I invited to dinner? You’re going to be thrilled.”

“Uh, I have no idea.”

“Oh, I’m not going to spoil it. You’ll see once he arrives.”

Oh, dear. It’s some man.

“Mom, I don’t need you setting me up with anyone.”

She begins, ticking off items with her carefully manicured fingers. “Isabella, are you married? No. Do you have any prospects? No. Clearly, you need me to be involved, as you will never be able to live the life you should without the right man. I mean, who will take care of you? You need your own Phil, then you can quit writing your little stories. You’re twenty-nine, for goodness sake. You aren’t getting any younger. At least your sisters, who are ten years younger, have jobs and boyfriends. Life is going to leave you behind if you don’t get with it. Maybe we should go shopping while you’re here and have your hair fixed.”

At the thought of being compared with my step-sisters, Victoria and Bree, I internally cringe. “Thanks for pointing all of that out, Mom. I’m only here for the night, then I’m flying back tomorrow.”
“Isabella! Wonderful you could join us.” Phil walks into the kitchen, wraps his arm around my shoulders, and squeezes.

“Thanks, Phil.” I start pulling the beards from the mussels with a knife.

“How’s life at the Post?”

“It’s good.”

“Let me know if you ever need anything, and I’ll be happy to help. I’m sure I could get you on at the Herald, when you’re ready to leave the cold winters and hot wind bags on Capitol Hill behind you and embrace the warmth and palm trees.”

“It’s tempting. Thanks.”

“When will dinner be ready?” He reaches over and grabs a toasted garlic breadstick from the large basket.

“About ten minutes, Mr. Dwyer.” Maria removes the risotto from the stove.

“Excellent, Maria. You’re a lifesaver.”

Mom huffs at Phil’s comment, then sips her cocktail. When the doorbell rings, she lights up in anticipation of whomever she’s invited. “I’ll get that.”

“We’ll steam the mussels whenever you’re finished, Isabella. It should only take about five minutes,” Maria lets me know.

“Okay, I’m almost finished.” I’m pulling at one of the beards when Mom returns to the kitchen.

“Look who’s arrived, Isabella?” Mom singsongs as if she’s won the lottery.

When I glance up, the knife I’m using goes flying out of my hands and across the floor of the kitchen.

“Isabella! Be careful,” she scolds.

I hold onto the countertop and take a few deep breaths at her surprise guest, while Maria retrieves the knife from the floor.

“I’ll just finish up the mussels.” She grabs the bowl and dumps them in a huge pot for steaming.

“Well, Isabella… don’t be rude.”
I stare at my mother in shock that she’s taken it upon herself to invite my ex for Thanksgiving dinner.

“Hello, Felix,” I grit out.

“Isn’t it wonderful that Felix could join us today?” She lovingly looks up at him.

“Hello, Isabella. You look great. Your mom explained the misunderstanding, and I’ve decided to give you another chance.”

My eyes immediately go to Mom. “Misunderstanding?”

“Yes, darling. I told Felix how you would love a second chance at making it work between the two of you and you were ready to start over. Why don’t you fix the two of you a drink and take a little time to yourselves before dinner is ready?”

I take a deep breath, knowing I’m not going to win with her. “What would you like, Felix? We have beer, wine, and whatever Mom is polluting her system with at the moment.”


“I’ll just have a beer.”

I take out a glass, one of Phil’s craft beers, and pour it for Felix. “Here you go.”

“Oh, Felix, make sure you let Phil know what you think about that one. He’s been asked to invest in a local brewery, and I’m positive he would love your expert opinion.” Mom winks in my direction, while I can only roll my eyes.

“The food is ready, Mrs. Dwyer.” Maria wipes the edges of the plates with a towel.

“James?” Mom yells.

“Yes, Renee?”

“Go tell the girls it’s time to eat. I think they’re out by the pool.” She waves her hand toward the patio door.

James leaves as Mom guides Felix and me to spots at the table. “Take a seat, you two. I’m sure you have a lot of catching up to do. I’ll get you a glass of wine, Isabella.”
Felix puts his arm around the back of my chair when I hear Victoria and Bree make their way inside.

“I’m not eating any of this,” Victoria complains.

“We can’t eat carbs, Maria. You’re so stupid.” Bree thinks nothing of hurling insults at the woman who has made a dinner possible, despite my mother’s inability in the kitchen.

“Girls, take a seat around the table and Maria will bring out the first course,” Mom directs.

I watch as Victoria and Bree pour martinis for themselves and take seats across from me.

“Underage drinking, Mom?”

She looks over at their glasses and shrugs. “Phil and Dori don’t care. Why should I? They do whatever they want when they’re in New York anyway.”

I shake my head, but immediately stiffen when James takes the seat next to mine, across from Victoria, who is sitting a little too close to Riley, Bree’s boyfriend.

Bree sits next to Riley and across from Felix. “Bella, you need to lighten up and mind your own business,” she informs me with a condescending tone.

“Here you go, Isabella.” Mom hands me a glass of wine, sitting at one end of the table between Bree and Felix while Phil takes his spot at the other end.

“This is wonderful. We’re all here together, eating a fabulous Italian meal prepared by Maria.” Phil looks around the table, pleased with his dinner guests.

Maria brings in servings of mushroom risotto for our first course. “Maria, won’t you join us?” I offer, while Victoria and Bree wave off her attempt at putting a serving in front of them.

“Isabella,” Mom warns.

“Thank you for the offer, Isabella, but I need to work on the next course while you eat. Enjoy.”

After Maria leaves, I lower my voice. “Mom, you asked the woman to come in on her day off. She’s missing Thanksgiving with her family. At least you can be kind and offer her a spot at the table. She’s a part of this family.”

“Oh, please. She doesn’t even celebrate Thanksgiving.” Mom scoffs at the thought.

I point toward the kitchen. “It was her day off and you’re the reason she’s here.”
“Why are you always so disrespectful to me? I’m your mother and I run this household as I see fit. Maria likes eating in the kitchen, and like she said, she’s busy and has a job to do.”

She gives me her *drop it look*, and Felix clears his throat.

“Isabella, your mother said you were quitting your job and moving to Miami.”

At his comment, I immediately choke on the spoonful of risotto lodged halfway down my throat and grab for my wine glass.

“Isabella, maybe not such large bites next time. No one wants a chubby wife.” I look over at her, as if she’s lost her mind.

“Renee, you’re out of line.” Phil appears as shocked as I am at my mother’s comments.

“I always like a curvy woman.” James winks when he catches my eye, while Victoria is now staring me down with looks that could kill.

“Isabella, I’ll get you a membership at my gym. Not a problem,” Felix reassures.

“No. I’m not quitting my job or moving to Miami.” I turn to Felix. “And I certainly don’t need you or your gym membership.”

“Isabella, listen to yourself. You’re not making any sense. I’m sorry, Felix. Isabella isn’t acting like herself. Maybe a little more wine—”

“No, do not apologize to this cheater for anything. I dumped *him* mother after finding him in my bed with another woman, not the other way around.”

“Isabella, if he cheated, it was because you weren’t being the woman he needed, and that’s on you. It takes two to make a relationship work, and your job is causing you to lose focus of what’s important.”

“This is ridiculous. I’m done.”

“Quit being so dramatic and eat. You’re the one ruining our meal and time together.”

“Nope. It’s the same thing every time, and I’m not going to do this with you again. Thank you for the invite, Phil, but I can’t stay here. I’m leaving. Enjoy your dinner everyone. Not that you’ll eat it.” I set my napkin next to my plate and push away from the table, leaving for the kitchen. “I’m sorry, Maria. I’m sure everything is delicious, but I have to get out of here.”
“Oh, Isabella.” She shakes her head, but knows firsthand how difficult it can be for me to be in
the same room with my mother when she starts her degrading comments. I’ve cried too many
tears on Maria’s shoulders during the visits of my childhood.

I walk upstairs to the guest room, grab my purse and suitcase, then carry it down the stairs to
find Phil waiting.

“Isabella, can I give you a ride or at least call my driver.”

“Please don’t bother him on his day off. I can take care of myself.”

“I know that’s true, but you don’t have to do so. You know your mother doesn’t mean any harm.”

“Unfortunately, I do know her. She can be really mean, and I’ve taken enough hits from her this
evening. I’ll wait outside.”

Maria appears with a bag full of food, holding it out for me to take. “I’m sorry you can’t stay, but I
understand, mi hija.”

“Thanks, Maria.”

Her arms enclose me in a motherly embrace I’ve never seemed to garner from my own mother;
when it comes to me, she’s always lacked a single nurturing bone in her body. For whatever
reason, the claws come out and it’s open season on my ass.

But I’m done being her emotional punching bag.

Phil holds open the door, and I carry my suitcase down the steps, pulling it behind me as I
depart around the fountain and along the driveway, taking out my phone and opening my ride
share app to request a ride.

I walk down Star Island Drive, and plan to wait at Bridge Road for my driver since it shows he’s
only minutes away. I open the text app on my phone to pass the time and find our last
conversation immediately.

Happy Thanksgiving. I hope your day is going better than mine.

Edward responds almost instantly.

What’s wrong?

Everything here. How’s Chicago?
Mom’s having a good day. Dad’s MIA.

*I’m happy for your mom. I didn’t last an hour with mine. Putting Plan D into action now.*

**Heading to your friend’s place?**

*Yes, waiting on a ride. Demetri has to work tonight, but at least I’ll see him again before my flight tomorrow.*

**Sorry to hear your visit with your mom was a bust.**

*It’s always the same. I don’t know why I ever expect a different result. I’m sick of trying.*

My ride pulls up to the curb, and I double-check the license plate, making sure I get into the right car.

The driver steps out from behind the wheel and helps stow my bag in the back.

“Good evening. Is it Isabella?”

“Yes, that’s me. Diego, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do you like Italian, Diego?”

“I do.”

“Then this bag is for you, for whenever you take a break later.” I hand over Maria’s Thanksgiving to-go bag. “I just can’t do Italian on Thanksgiving.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind. I want to confirm... I’m taking you to 2525 Third Avenue?”

I’d entered the address for Demetri’s apartment into the app originally, but now, I’m thinking about changing my destination, so I can catch his show. However, I’m starving and get a better idea, complete with traditional Thanksgiving foods, including my favorite pumpkin pie. It’s open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, including holidays. They haven’t let me down in the past when I couldn’t get home for Thanksgiving, and I may be able to salvage this day yet.

“Hang on. I think I’m going to change the address. Do you know of a Denny’s nearby?”
Chapter 12: The Retreat - Camp Edward

With my disaster of a Thanksgiving behind me, I’m looking forward to Christmas.

Sue and Alice have orchestrated the most amazing array of decorations at the White House. The theme is a handmade Christmas with plenty of ornaments decorating the trees, which have been expertly painted, carved, or stitched by artists from every state in the Nation. Everything has a natural woodland feel. Tribute is paid to forest animals like bears and deer, while pinecones, mushrooms, and evergreens take places of honor. There isn’t any glitz or glamour this year. But that isn’t the reason for my shock and awe at the moment.

“Sue, this is incredible.” I look around the warehouse at the volunteers bustling between tables like Santa’s elves, who are focusing on keeping Americans warm and fed this holiday season.

“All of the credit goes to Alice. When I explained how Native Americans focus on the giving part of Christmas, not the decorations, everything snowballed from there.”

“I’ve never seen so many winter coats or blankets.”

“We have lots of hats and gloves too. Food donations are at an all-time high with soup kitchens not just here, but those around the Nation who are busy fighting the battle against hunger and the weather this season. Are you still planning to help us serve Christmas dinner at the shelter?”

“Absolutely, I wouldn’t miss it. I love everything about this, Sue.”

“In Native American tradition, we believe Christmas is every day. We are grounded in the idea of Roving Angels, who hold out their hands, helping the sick and the needy. They feed and clothe the poor. We share our abundance, and are thankful every day, not just on Christmas.”

“Oh, Sue. You’re such an angel and a blessing to so many.”

“We have a responsibility in our hearts to love everyone, Bella, and take care of those in need. Every day we practice the spirit of giving and walk what is known as the Red Road, which means making everything we do a spiritual act.”

“I think I may cry with all of this care and generosity. What’s going on over here?”

“We are creating care packages or blessing bags to hand out to those who are homeless or in need. They contain things like gloves, socks, Band-Aids, deodorant, lip balm, tissues,
toothbrush, toothpaste, and wet wipes. The two most sought-after items are socks and pads for women. Can you imagine, Bella? Being a woman without money or access to feminine hygiene products every month.” Sue shakes her head. “We are also including edibles like beef jerky, breakfast bars, peanut butter crackers, dried fruit, snack cups, and bottles of water. We know some items will be traded for more important things needed, but at least it’s a small bag of hope.”

“Everything has been donated?”

“Yes, everything. We have been so blessed by the outpouring of support in the community. We have a lot of religious groups, who stepped up to help us with distribution at their local churches and synagogues, but we have some nonreligious groups too.”

“What if I do an article for the Post?”

“Bella, we aren’t interested in receiving any recognition for our efforts. This is about giving not receiving.”

“I understand that, but it could help spread the word about the need and reinforce your cause with supplies or money.”

Sue’s reluctant. “Okay, but—”

“I know what you’re going to say, and let me stop you right there. Photos are important. Americans need to see their First Lady in action and the causes that matter most to you. You’re here helping, not just dictating orders from an office in the White House. I tell you what, pick five women who are playing the biggest roles here, and I will feature them in the article. Plus, I want photos of you with them here working.”

She lights up at my offer. “Okay, I can do that.”

“Now, tell me about the Christmas Wishes Project.”

“Everyone who comes to the shelters during the entire month of December is given the opportunity to make a Christmas wish. The wish can be anything, and we have a team of volunteers ready to grant their wish. In order to receive their wish, they do have to return if we can’t fill it on the spot, usually a week later, and we will have whatever they requested.”

“What are some of the wishes?”

“Most are extremely practical items which we may have on hand that we can give them immediately, like: shoes, underwear, infant formula, diapers, a sleeping bag, or tarp. Other wishes are more difficult but still doable, like a post office box to receive mail or a night in a hotel
room to sleep soundly, without worrying that someone will steal their stuff. Then there are those who wish for things like jobs or the opportunity to see a doctor.”

“And you’ve been able to deliver on those wishes?”

Sue nods and smiles widely. “Even the more difficult ones. We are reaching out to those struggling and offering a hand of support in whatever way it’s needed.”

“This is incredible. You’re creating Christmas miracles.”

“One at a time, but my hope is that we are able to continue this year-round too.”

-BCD-

High off my successful article about Sue’s projects and helping with Christmas dinner at the shelter, I’m bouncing with energy despite my exhaustion at standing on my feet for hours.

I’m antsy when I knock on his door, but when it opens, Edward takes my breath away. He looks like an outdoors catalogue model in his hiking boots, jeans, and plaid shirt. But it’s the scruff that nearly sends me over the edge.

“Hey.” I reach up and rub my hand along his jaw, standing on my tiptoes to give him a quick peck on the lips. “I like this.”

“Hello, beautiful. The start of a beard at your request.”

I’m dressed similarly, but he wins hands down, in my opinion. “I’m not sure I can outdo you on this one—you look like some type of rugged fantasy I never knew I had. All you need is an axe and a snow-covered cabin.”

“You want me to chop some wood for you?”

I grin. “I can definitely go for some chopping.”

“You’re in a good mood.”

“I’m excited to see you and spend an entire week together. Are you packed and ready?”

“I’ve already loaded up the Range Rover. I was just waiting for you and your bags. Let me lock up and we’ll get on the road.”
We take the elevator straight to the underground garage of Edward’s apartment building and store my items next to his in the back.

Once we’re on the road, I try to get a little more information from Edward, who has been very tight-lipped about our destination.

“So, we’re heading to—”

“The middle of nowhere.”

“No Wi-Fi?”

“Wi-Fi is unavailable and your electronic devices are unwelcome.”

“Lucky for you I didn’t bring my laptop. Is there at least electricity and running water?”

“Yes. We will be experiencing seclusion at its finest.”

“What if we’re snowed-in and we can’t return after a week. Will my cell phone at least work?”

“Maybe.”

“Hmmm, how long will we drive?”

“Less than a couple of hours.”

“Are we crossing any state lines?”

“Maybe.”

“We’re traveling northwest. Are we going near Catoctin Mountain Park?”

“Past.”

“My very own Camp David?” I grin.

“More like Camp Edward.”

“And what will we do at Camp Edward?”

“There’s a queen-sized bed and a fireplace.”

“You’re going to build me a fire?”
Edward grins. “There’s a full kitchen and a single bathroom with a clawfoot tub.”

“Oh, Mr. Masen. You aren’t playing fair at all. Anyone around?”

“Not for miles. You can be loud.” He winks.

“Did you bring any board games?”

“Board games are the last thing on my mind, Miss Swan.” He lifts my hand he’s holding, pressing a soft kiss against the back before returning it between us.

When we pull up to our destination, I’m excited to see the most quaint, snow-covered mountain cottage nestled among the trees, a mix of deciduous and evergreens. I notice a large stack of firewood, standing at the ready, next to the side of the cabin, and I’m anxious to get out and see the inside.

“Ready?”

“Absolutely. Let’s grab our bags.”

Edward unlocks the door and moves to the side to allow me to enter first. It’s dark with the fading light outside as the sunset gives way to evening, but the wood scent overwhelms my senses.

“Let’s see if this works.” Edward tries the light switch by the front door, which turns on a dim light outside. “Maybe there’s another somewhere.”

Setting down our bags, we move farther inside, the wooden floor creaks with every step, and I locate a lamp near the front window. Turning the switch immediately bathes the room in a warm light, revealing its furnishings. A comfy-looking couch sits on a shaggy rug opposite the fireplace. I note a small table with four wooden chairs sits off to the side, as my eyes travel toward the shadows of the dark kitchen. I locate another light switch for the overhead light above the small kitchen island that illuminates the room, and I take in the gently used appliances and rustic décor.

“What do you think?”

“It’s cozy.”

“Let’s check out the bedroom and bath.” Edward reaches out, grabbing my hand and leading me to the only other rooms.
The queen-sized bed looks inviting with layers of white linens, and a small closet and dresser complete the room. The bathroom contains all the necessities—sink with rustic wooden countertop, toilet, and a single stall shower.

My heart soars at the antique clawfoot tub Edward mentioned earlier, which takes up a good portion of the room. Jars of dried lavender and other herbs sit to the side, while candles waiting to be lit cover every ledge and surface. It’s a romantic setting I can easily picture the two of us enjoying every night we’re here.

“This is perfect.” I let my finger trace along the edge of the tub and look up to meet Edward’s knowing grin.

“Are you hungry? I requested the kitchen be filled with a few things to hopefully make meals easier. I have no plans to leave.”

“I could eat. Let me take a look at our options.”

“I’ll go build you a fire.”

“Finally,” I tease. “You don’t want me to freeze up here in the mountains, do you?”

“We can always snuggle naked under the covers. You know, body heat and everything.”

“Have you been watching Bear Grylls again?”

“It’s called research, Bella. You should know that.”

“Maybe later.” I wink.

I head to the kitchen and check out the contents of the cabinets, refrigerator, and freezer. There are ingredients for soup or chili and plenty of breakfast foods like eggs, potatoes, bacon, and sausage. I find everything I need if I want to make chocolate chip cookies or brownies, which I’m sure Edward will love. The freezer has a few frozen pizzas, as well as steaks and chicken. I decide on an easy dinner of spaghetti with garlic bread and fill a large pot with water, placing it over high heat for cooking the pasta. In the process of locating everything, I need for dinner, I stumble upon the alcohol stash.

“Eureka! Do you want something to drink? A glass of wine? There are plenty of other options, including beer, whiskey, and tequila.”

“Wine sounds good,” Edward answers, while busy crumpling and jamming newspaper in the bottom under the grate that holds the logs.
I open a bottle of red and pour us each a glass. “How’s it going over there?”

“We should have a roaring fire soon,” he reassures, but he doesn’t sound as confident as he should.

“I can’t wait. I love the smell of wood burning in a fireplace.” I hand him his wine and we clink glasses. “To Camp Edward.”

“You’re funny. What’s for dinner?”

“Spaghetti and garlic bread. Something simple.”

“Sounds good.”

“Oh, look.” I move to a half-wall I missed earlier and look over the large collection of vinyl records. “Do you want to listen to something?”

“Sure. I’m up for anything.” Edward only gives me a brief glance.


Edward shrugs, which gives me the green light. I turn on the record player and load up my first selection, carefully setting the needle at the edge of the spinning disk.

Frank’s voice fills the space as he serenades us with the classics. I turn up the volume and return to the kitchen, keeping an eye on our dinner. Sipping my wine and swaying my hips to the up-tempo tunes, I focus on doctoring a jar of spaghetti sauce with all of the tricks in my cooking arsenal. I sauté a mix of onions, peppers, carrots, and garlic, then add some extra thyme, oregano, basil, and a pinch of red pepper flakes. I pour in a little wine from our bottle to deglaze the pan then add in the jar of sauce. As I’m adding a spoonful of sugar, I jump at the feel of Edward’s hands on my hips.

“What are you doing? You nearly scared me to death.” I stir the sauce and lower the heat, letting it simmer.

He moves my hair away from my neck and leaves a trail of kisses up to my ear. “Giving in to temptation.”

“I’m only making dinner.” I hold onto the handle of the oven as his lips make me shiver.

“But you’re so good at it.” His hands wrap around my waist while he starts to nibble on my ear.
“How’s the fire coming along?” I wonder.

“I’m looking for a lighter or some matches.”

“They aren’t on the mantle?”

“I don’t know.” He spins me around to face him, takes me in his arms, and leads us in a slow waltz around the kitchen, holding me close.

I stumble a couple of times and apologize. “I’m not the best dancer.”

Edward grins. “You’ll do. It’s all in the leading anyway.”

We glide around the cabin to the music, until he decides to spin and dip me, leaving us both chuckling at having so much fun together. He hums in time with Frank to Love Is Here to Stay, as we move back toward the kitchen where he returns me to in front of the stove, as Franks continues with the next song.

“Thank you for the dance, Miss Swan.”

“Anytime.”

He leaves me swooning, sufficiently stoking the embers between us, as he searches for something to light the actual fireplace.

Snapping out of my Edward-induced haze, I add the spaghetti to the boiling water then focus on the sauce, adding a bit of cream cheese and finishing it with a few tablespoons of butter. With the sauce ready, I lower the heat and prepare the garlic bread, then toast it under the broiler.

I glance over to see Edward has the fire started, but smoke is starting to fill the room.

“Did you open the damper? If no one has been here for a while, I bet the owners close it when no one is here.”

“I’ll check.” He grabs one of the fireplace tools and pushes on the damper handle, causing it to change position. The amount of smoke dissipates almost immediately. “I think you’re right. I’m going to open the windows to help get rid of the smoke before an alarm goes off.”

“Fan the front door once you do. It should help.”

I finish fixing our dinner and refill our wine glasses while Edward clears the air. We take our seats at the table and dig into our food.
“So, what should we do while we’re here?”

“Easy. Relax and unwind.”

“Did you have anything specific in mind?”

Edward shrugs. “Depending on the weather, we can hike or catch the sunrises and sunsets. Maybe check out the stars one night. Make a snowman, if we get more snow.”

“Those ideas sound cold.”

“We can stay indoors if you would like. There’s a bookshelf full of jigsaw puzzles, board games, and books. The vinyl collection looks promising too.”

“Are you saying you’re up for some dirty word Scrabble, Mr. Masen?”

“I can be. Let’s hope you bring your ‘A’ game, because I’m not one to lose.”

“That sounds like quite a challenge.”

“I’m confident I can rise to any challenge you throw at me, Miss Swan.”

“Always so cocky.”

He pulls me from my chair and encourages me to straddle his lap. “You like it.”

I brace my hands on his shoulders and tilt my hips, moving them back and forth. “Maybe a little.”

Edward holds my hips and moves me across his lap a little more roughly. “Or maybe a lot. I also plan to have my cock buried deep inside you every chance I get.”

“Mmmm.” I gasp at the feeling of him hard between my legs.

His fingers reach up rapidly unbuttoning my shirt. “In the morning.”

Edward’s tongue traces the subtle curves of my bra-covered chest. “During the day.”

Lowering the cups with his fingers, his mouth latches on and sucks on my nipples, puckering them instantly. “In the evening.”

A moan escapes my mouth at his attention to my chest.
He pulls my shirt from my body, letting it fall to the floor, then unhooks my bra, tossing it to the ground as well. “During the middle of the night.”

His thumbs toy with my nipples. “On your back here on this table.”

Edward stands, and I wrap my legs around his waist, locking my hands around his neck. “Bent over the back of the couch.”

He carries me toward the fireplace and leans down, setting me on the rug. “On all fours in front of the fireplace.”

Unbuttoning my jeans, he tugs them and my underwear from my body, leaving me completely nude. “On every surface, Bella.”

“I’m going to need a nap or two.” I pant while my hand moves between my legs.

I watch as he unbuttons his jeans and frees his cock from his underwear, shoving them down, not taking the time to remove them completely, but giving his cock a couple of strokes while watching my own hand.

“Turn over. On your hands and knees,” Edward instructs, kneeling on the rug.

I roll over onto my stomach, but he doesn’t wait long and pulls my hips upright until my ass is in the air, moaning when his fingers find me wet and ready.

I push myself into the requested position as he lines up his cock, thrusting inside me in one smooth motion.

“Oh, God, Bella.” He grits out, starting a slow pace of pushing and pulling my body to his.

“Faster, Edward.” I gasp, as he hits the right spot. “I need you to fuck me.”

He speeds up at my prompting, and soon I no longer have the strength to stay upright with his powerful thrusts.

When my knees give out, Edward’s cock follows me to the floor, continuing his relentless pace.

With his body pressed on top of mine, his hand moves underneath us, finding its way between my legs, rubbing me until I’m on the brink of my orgasm.

“Come on, Bella. I’m not going to last much longer.”
“Edward, I’m right there. Keep going. Don’t stop!” The muscles in my body tighten and a warm wave of pleasure courses everywhere, causing my toes to curl, plunging me over the edge and into complete bliss.

“That’s it.” Edward speeds up, thrusting until I feel him pulse inside of me. “Oh, Bella!” He growls out, slamming his hips flush against me, lowering his body until he’s covering me everywhere.

He pulls away to kiss my shoulder, moving my hair to one side. “You’re so damn sexy here in this firelight. We should sleep here.”

“Mmmm, the warmth feels good too.”

His hips tilt forward one last time before he pulls out completely.

I look over my shoulder and watch him through half-lidded eyes unbutton his shirt, toss it to the side, then pull off his jeans, underwear, and socks.

“You look comfy.” He grabs a blanket and a couple of throw pillows from the couch, setting them on the floor.

“This rug is so soft.” I wiggle my hips a little, trying to entice him to join me.

Edward steps over my body, grabbing another log, adding it to the fire, then lies down next to me.

After adjusting the pillows behind his head, he opens his arms. “Come here, sweetheart.”

I scoot closer until my head is on his chest, curling against his side.

He pulls my outer leg across his body and leaves a kiss on my forehead. “Are you cold?”

“A little.”

He spreads the blanket over us from the waist down, then his fingertips start stroking up and down my back. “We can move to the bed if you get too cold, but I just want to hold you like this now.”

“It’s heavenly.” I snuggle a little closer.

“We have a full week ahead of us, Bella.”

“Then let’s add a bath to our daily plans and put this day on repeat.”
Edward chuckles. “Whatever you want.”

“Camp Edward is the best,” I whisper, tightening my arms around him as I drift off to sleep.
Chapter 13: The State of the Union

I should know better by now not to read any of those gossip sites, but ever since I made news with Seth, I keep tabs on what’s being whispered about town. I don’t want to be caught off guard again.

Sighing, I try to figure out my next steps as I toss another used tissue in the direction of the trashcan. The front door opening jogs me from my current despair. I tighten my robe and hope my sickness will cover my red-rimmed eyes, which I’m certain are prominent.

“Bella! What are you doing home so early?” Angela pulls off her gloves, shakes off the snow, and hangs her winter coat in the closet.

“Emmett kicked me out and said I needed to stop infecting everyone.” I sniff.

“Oh, no. What have you got?” She pulls off her boots, placing them on a mat near the door.

“The crud. My throat is killing me. My head is pounding. My ears aren’t right. I alternate from a stuffy to a runny nose, depending on how I lay on the couch. It’s just a matter of time before I’m hacking up a lung.”

“Have you eaten anything?” Angela glances toward the kitchen at the mess I’ve left behind.

“I tried to eat some soup, but I can’t taste a thing.”

Angela comes over and puts her cool hand on my forehead. “Have you taken any medicine?”

“A couple of ibuprofen. They are probably keeping my fever at bay, but I ache all over.”

Especially my heart, but I can’t tell her that.

She points toward the television, which I have on low. “Are you going to watch the State of the Union?”

“Of course. Isn’t it required viewing for everyone in D.C.?” I cough with a little wheeze.

“I doubt everyone will tune in, since President Clearwater’s approval ratings are already at an all-time high. Most people don’t need to be told things are good. They can see it happening in their communities.”
“Making things better for everyone is a slow process,” I remind her.

“So, what are you working on now?” Angela leans forward and taps a key on my laptop sitting on the coffee table in front of the couch.

My screensaver disappears instantly, and I’m not fast enough to close the screen before she sees the last website I was reading.

“This doesn’t look like your normal research. Since when do you read the gossip sites?”

“I don’t know, since they tried to create a fake relationship between Seth and me. You know. The best defense is a good offense. I’m just trying to stay prepared. D.C.’s Daily Chatter covers gossip around our area.”

“So, you haven’t read the latest post?”

“I may have scanned it.”

“Wow, Edward Masen is a hottie. Did you see the photos? It sounds like he’s a romantic too. Listen to this:

‘Has the host of This Week with Edward Masen been holding out on us? If our sources are correct, then brace yourself because this next story will leave you swooning. From sources close to Edward and his show, we have confirmed he’s having a behind-the-scenes romance with fellow co-worker, Lauren Mallory, who does hair and makeup for the show. Everything came to a head recently when he whisked her away before the New Year for a romantic weeklong stay at a mountain cottage retreat. The lovebirds are trying to keep everything hush-hush, but our sources explain they are inseparable when he isn’t on camera, and the time away only strengthened their bond. What woman would be able to resist that hunk of a man in front of a roaring fire? We don’t blame Lauren one bit. D.C.’s Daily Chatter reached out to Edward and his agent, Shelly Cope, for comment, but neither would confirm nor deny our story.’

Oh sweet Jesus. You should see these photos of him, Bella. There’s a couple of Lauren too, but none together. She’s pretty.”

I feel like I’m going to puke. “I saw them,” I whisper, and shrug my indifference, hoping Angela will move on to something else. I can’t mentally take another rehash of the post. I have it memorized.

Angela looks up as I shift on the couch. “Bella, you look like you’re going to be sick.”

My hand is trembling as I reach out to grab my tea, and end up spilling it everywhere. “Shit.”
“Stay put. I’ll clean it up.” Angela grabs some paper towels from the kitchen and returns to soak up what she can from the rug. “At least the carpet is dark and no one will see a stain. Maybe you should go curl up in bed and take a nap.”

I shake my head. “I’ve got to watch the President’s Address and finish my article before I can call it a night.”

“Okay. Do you want another blanket or anything? I can make you another cup of tea.”

“No, thanks.” I submerge deeper under the covers and stare blankly at the television screen.

“I’m going to go shower and find something to eat, then I’ll be back, but I’m not sure how long I can watch. Kate sent me home with extra reading to summarize for her by tomorrow. So, I need to finish that up before I can call it a night.”

“How is she liking being on the Supreme Court?” I wonder.

“I think she’s thankful she isn’t the only woman, but in my opinion, she’s tougher than the men. She was yelling at one of her fellow Justices the other day for some mix up, and ever since, he’s been stepping all over his dick to make it up to her.”

I chuckle. “She’s a force to be reckoned with; there’s no doubt.”

“I’m out.” Angela waves, heading toward the bathroom, as my phone vibrates with an incoming text.

**Just a reminder, I need your article by midnight.**

_You’ll have it._

_Are you feeling any better?_

_No. Worse._

_Don’t come in to work tomorrow. Stay there and work until your fever is gone._

_Okay, Dad._

_I’m flattered, but we both know only Charlie Swan can pull off that mustache._

_Give Hercules a hug for me and tell him Auntie Bella misses him._
Will do. Get better.

I toss my phone back on the coffee table and let out another sigh at my sad state of affairs. I haven’t heard one peep from Edward about the latest online post. It breaks my heart to read about him having our week with someone else, even though I know it isn’t true. I’m positive this is Shelly’s handiwork, but it doesn’t make the hurt any less.

I doze off for a bit, but wake up when my phone starts vibrating with a phone call. The screen lights up, and I scramble out of the covers to answer the call.

“Hey, Dem,” I croak. My voice is raspy and I hope I don’t lose it.

“Bella! You sound like hell. Are you sick?”

“Yes. I must have fallen asleep.” I look at the clock, seeing it’s after 9:00 p.m.

“Oh, hell. I take the night off to watch the President’s Address and you’re sleeping through all the good stuff.”

“Shit. What have I missed?”

“I have no idea what they’re saying; it’s muted, but Seth is there, and let me tell you that boy is looking fine.”

“What happened to your older man?”

“Bella, you know I can’t be tied down by a single man. This butterfly needs to sample all the flowers.”

“So, it’s over?”

“More like a hiatus. Whenever he’s in town to visit family, he calls me up.”

“You’re like a booty call?”

“More or less. How’s your man?”

“Dem, I don’t know anymore. The highs are high and the lows are low. I’m feeling pretty low right now.”

“What did he do?”

“Well, nothing, I think.”
“I’m confused. Explain.”

“There’s some gossip floating around about him with someone else.”

“He’s two-timing you? Dump him immediately, Bella.”

“That’s just it. I don’t think he is, but he doesn’t deny a thing publicly. It’s all speculation, but I suspect someone close to him is trying to drive a wedge between us and push me out of the non-existent picture.”

“How do you get yourself in these situations?”

Angela emerges from the shower and heads for the kitchen. I hear her opening and closing the refrigerator. She pauses when she sees I’m on the phone, pointing toward her room that she’s going to go work in there.

I nod and focus on Demetri’s question. “I have no idea. I just don’t want to go down that road again like I did with Felix.”

“Oh, Lord, have mercy! Don’t get me started on Felix again. I want to wring your mother’s neck for that stunt at Thanksgiving.”

I chuckle. “I’m past it.”

“Are you? The Felix part? He’s a cheater, but not all men cheat, Bella.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “I hope so.”

“Good. Now, tell me how Daddy Carlisle is doing. I haven’t seen his handsome face in forever.”

“Daddy? He’s not married, nor does he have kids.”

“Then he’s available to be my sugar daddy.”

“Demetri!”

“Well?”

“He’s good. He just got back from a trip to Australia, working on human rights violations there. I need to talk with him soon.”
“Does he need an errand boy? I can fill that or any position he requests. I’ve been doing my yoga, and boy, does it pay off. Oh—” Demetri squeals. “Did you see that? They showed hunky Jacob. Has he split with the hag yet?”

I chuckle. “No. They are still together, publicly at least.”

“He needs to say good riddance to old news. Who’s the little sweet thing sitting next to him?”

I sit up and focus on the screen. “I don’t know. Maybe an intern from his office.”

“Well, she’s sitting a little too close in my opinion. I bet he’s dipping his wick there.”

“I doubt it. Jacob isn’t a cheater.”

“So, Leah is?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Bella, you can tell me. Who’s she with?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you suspect someone. Surely, Jacob has cried on your shoulder. You two are close.”

“Dem, I try to stay out of all the gossip.”

“You’re no fun.”

“I know. I’m sick too.”

“We better stop talking or you’ll lose your voice. Get better, babe. Put some honey in your tea. It will help your throat.”

“Okay. Love you. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Love you too, sweets.”

I end the call with Demetri feeling exhausted. I’ve barely heard any of the President’s speech and change to C-SPAN who should replay it in its entirety.

There’s no way I’ll stay awake in my current condition. I head to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom to try to find something to help keep me going at least until I can get my article finished.
Carlisle releases a deep sigh. "Bella, it’s worse than I thought, and the rest of the world has no clue what’s going on in Australia. The processing centers are abysmal with security issues and high rates of violence. The toilets are overflowing. Litter abounds everywhere, while graffiti covers the walls. People sleep like zombies slumped over on dirty mattresses, and the abuse of women and children is all too common.

“Manus and Nauru are full of refugees stuck in legal limbo. Asylum seekers aren’t clear to enter the country, but they can’t return home either. Some have been there for five years. The mental illness and medical neglect are unbelievable. There are children as young as ten years old committing suicide because of the conditions.

“Political authorities and the leading public figures only see them as 2,000 refugees. They are relegated to being prisoners without character, identity, or humanity. They portray them as objects without the capacity to think or feel. Objects without families left behind—their partners and children. So many husbands and fathers, escaping from countries like Afghanistan, Burma, Iran, Pakistan, Somalia, and Sudan. If they returned home, it would mean certain death.”

“Carlisle, why does this keep happening?”

“I have no answer for you, Bella. I believe leaders originally thought if they let them experience hell, then they will leave, but they can’t leave. They are stuck in this political gridlock. They arrived on boats, escaping persecution in their home countries, only to be sent to the islands with indefinite detention, having no time limits or future. Goodness, the stress and trauma to all of them, Bella.” I can hear the anguish and despair in his voice.

“Is there any hope?”

“A tiny sliver, but most have given up on the system. The process to resettle them in the U.S. and other countries is slow. I’m going to a meeting at the UN next week. I have no idea how to intervene for these people. We have to protect them. Even when they are allowed freedom of movement, they refuse, as they are aware of the abuse by locals on the islands. One man shared how a local came after him with a machete, while another had been a target for robberies. His fourth since moving to the transitional centers after the main detention center on Manus was closed.”

“This is devastating, Carlisle.”

“I know. I’m not my normal ray of sunshine.”

I chuckle. “I’m not much better.”
“I read your article about neglecting our children here in America. It was fantastic. There’s a reason why children at our borders are being treated the same way as low-income families. You nailed it—a lack of compassion. Let me find your article. I want to get the numbers right.” I hear him shuffling through papers. “There it is. Three million American children live in extreme poverty. Three million, Bella. Have you set up a meeting with the Secretary of Education, Esme Platt?”

“No.”

“You should. You can’t just stop with the article. You need to push for changes. She needs to read your article and keep the Senate from making tax cuts to early childhood programs that make a huge difference, like parent coaching, high-quality pre-kindergarten, lead-poisoning interventions, social worker visits, and mentoring.”

“Do you know Secretary Platt?”

“No, but I’ve heard great things. You should schedule a meeting with her and Volturi.”

“Which one?”

“The senator from New York—Marcus. He’s spearheading the tax cuts. Do a follow-up article and get quotes from both. Make them accountable for their actions or inactions and get things heading in the right direction. Push them out of their comfort zones, Bella. Remember, the pen is mightier than the sword.”

“Okay. Marcus is always a little evasive outside the Senate chamber, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Follow him to New York if need be. Whatever it takes to shut this down. You’re fighting for three million children, and if you don’t, who will?”

Carlisle is always great at firing me up and pushing me in ways I won’t push myself.

“I’ll do it.”

“Good. I can’t wait to read your follow up article. Enough figuring out how to save the world—how’s everything else? Dating anyone new?”

I let out a sigh and evade his question. “Same as always. I’ve been sick, but I’m hoping it’s mostly behind me for now. Emmett banned me from coming into work for a while, but it’s nice to be back at my desk again.”

“I bet he didn’t let you off the hook with your deadlines—did he?”
“No, not a chance. He has a dog now.”

“Well, I feel sorry for the dog. What kind is it?”

“A Chihuahua, he’s named Hercules.”

Carlisle laughs. “Of course. Only Emmett. I’ve got to go. Take care, Bella, and let me know if you need anything.”

“Okay thanks, Carlisle. Talk with you soon.”

I end my call and notice several unanswered text messages from Edward arrived during my call with Carlisle. It’s a little after 7:00 p.m. and his messages are recent.

**How about dinner and a sleepover?**

**I can pick up something, and we can meet at my place.**

**If you’re busy, I’ll understand.**

I quickly type out a reply.

*I’m still kind of sick.*

**I’m not afraid of your bugs.**

*I’m hacking.*

**I have medicine.**

I look down at my purse full of essential toiletries and wonder if I should stop by my apartment and get clothes for tomorrow or just wait and do it in the morning. I’ve started carrying some basics with me in case Edward invites me over on nights like tonight. It’s only ten minutes from his apartment to my work. So, I would rather make the trip to grab clothes tonight, than rush around extra early in the morning.

*I need to pick up some clothes for tomorrow.*

Then get going. I’ll see you soon.
Chapter 14: The Hearts & Flowers

Glancing at my phone to check the time, I’m rapidly coming to the conclusion Secretary Platt is going to be a no-show for our scheduled appointment twenty minutes ago. When the lady behind the reception desk finishes her call, she confirms my suspicions.

“I’m sorry, Miss Swan. Secretary Platt will be unable to keep your meeting. She’s running behind and already heading to her next one. Would you like to reschedule?”

“Yes. When’s her next available?” I take out my phone, opening my calendar app.

“It looks like next week. Wednesday at 4:30 p.m. Will that work for you?”

I scan through my calendar, knowing I’ll do whatever is necessary to get time with her finally. “Yes. That will be great.”

Even though it isn’t great. Now I will need to reschedule my own meetings.

“Very good. I have you down for next Wednesday at 4:30 p.m. If you find that time doesn’t work out or something comes up, just give us a call.”

“Thanks.”

Since my appointment is a bust, I decide to go straight to the airport rather than trying to stop back by work before my evening flight to New York.

Traffic is slow going due to the recent snowstorm, but being already on the road, I should still make it with time to spare.

When I’m seated outside the gate for my flight, I go through my most recent emails and find myself caught up with more time to kill before takeoff. Against my better judgment, I click my saved shortcut and proceed with my daily gossip check. I hope there isn’t anything new regarding Edward or me, but unfortunately, there’s a new post at D.C.’s Daily Chatter:

“*We know it won’t surprise our readers, but everyone’s favorite green-eyed ginger, Edward Masen, is at it again, sending hearts aflutter all along the East Coast. Our sources tell us while things are cooling off with Lauren Mallory, hair and makeup artist on his show, sexy times are heating up times two. Could it be double the trouble or double the pleasure? Edward was photographed with not one but both Volturi daughters, Chelsea and Corin, at the American*
Heart Association’s Annual Heart Ball last week. Their parents, Senator Marcus Volturi and his wife Didi of New York, were on hand for the event as well and couldn't be more taken by the popular Sunday morning talk show host. Word has it the sisters are feuding over Edward’s attentions, but our sources claim it's impossible for him to pick just one when he is head over heels in love with both. We won't be surprised to see Edward at Reagan National Airport, making plenty of quick trips to New York, or the girls in D.C. while they sort out this latest love triangle. Check out the photos below. Let us know who you think will win his heart, Chelsea or Corin? Both are gorgeous and either one would make the perfect match for Edward. There are no losers here.”

I scroll through the photos, and my chest gets a little tighter, each one feeling like a dagger, twisting my tattered heart to pieces. I didn’t say a word to Edward when the post about him and Lauren was published online, and I’ll try to put this one behind me as well. I know we agreed to talk about things if anything is bothering us, but I’m struggling not to let my insecurities grow into something else. I’m trying not to believe there is anything more to these relationships than what we see in the photos, but it’s difficult. If they had better photos, I’m positive they would already be out there.

With a deep sigh, I shut off my phone and lean my head back against the seat while I wait for boarding to begin. I’m heading to New York myself for a meeting with Senator Marcus Volturi, and hopefully, my dogged pursuit and determination will pay off for my latest article.

-BCD-

“Watch where you’re going!” I’m almost run over by someone in a hurry.

Shit. I always forget how different it is up here in New York City versus D.C. Even on a wintery day, no one cuts you any slack.

I’m in the morning bustle, heading to Senator Volturi’s offices for my scheduled appointment when the stiletto heel of my boot gets caught in a road grate.

Perfect.

I struggle to extract my foot, and when I do, it is without the heel completely intact. Actually, it is dangling in such a way that it will be impossible to continue. So, I rip the heel from the bottom of my boot and toss it into my bag, hoping it can be repaired later. I continue on my way, albeit a little slower than the constant stream of bundled New Yorkers and with an obvious limp with the height difference in boots. We all scurry to our destinations as new snowflakes start to flutter and drift across the dark gray morning sky.

The weather forecasters are calling for a new storm to push across the Northeast this weekend, but I’m hoping to nail my interview and be back on a flight to D.C. before it hits.
When I arrive at Senator Volturi’s offices on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, I check in with the receptionist and begin what feels like my continued day of wait from yesterday’s time in Secretary Platt’s office.

“Miss Swan?”

I’m startled from my thoughts. “Yes?”

“Mr. Williams will see you now. Right through that door.” She points to the only door in the waiting area.

“Mr. Williams? I scheduled a meeting with Senator Volturi.”

“No one meets with the Senator without speaking with Mr. Williams first.”

“Ah.” I grab my bag and head for the door, but it opens before I get there.

“Miss Swan?”

“Yes, that’s me. Bella Swan.” I put out my hand and shake his.

“I’m Alec Williams. Please call me Alec. Right this way.” He guides me through an elaborate maze of offices until we are standing outside of an empty room.

“We’re going to grab this smaller conference room where we can talk. Help yourself to coffee. I think there’s also tea or bottled water if you wish.”

I move inside the room, set my bag on the table, and start to unpack my items for the meeting.

“I’m fine. Will the Senator be joining us?”

“He’s in another meeting. So, we will see if his schedule will allow a few free moments a little later.”

“Okay.” I power up my laptop and wait for the screen to come to life.

I catch him staring at my lame boot missing its heel. “Road grate bit it off this morning,” I explain, as if it isn’t obvious.

“Welcome to New York, right?” He chuckles.

I smile. “You can always feel the love of the city.”
Alec takes a seat across from me. “So, you’re here about the latest proposed tax cuts of benefit programs?”

“Yes, I recently did an article for the Post on the far-reaching effects of those cuts. Did the Senator get a chance to read it?”

I pull out a paper copy of my article and slide it across the table to Alec.

He barely glances at the pages. “It’s doubtful, but I’m aware of it.”

“Then you understand the impact those cuts will have on our Nation’s children by limiting access to health care, nutritious food, and affordable housing, which will compromise their development at a critical time in their lives. I’m referring to programs like Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, the Low Income Energy Assistance Program, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. These types of programs help low income families make steps toward leaving lives of poverty behind them while allowing the basic needs of their children to be met.”

I spin my laptop screen around for him to see a photo of a single mother and her two boys. “This is Jackie from Kentucky and her boys David and Brian. Jackie is a single mother who grew up in a family that couldn’t cover her basic needs. She knows what it’s like to go hungry or be unable to visit a doctor when sick. Jackie works as a receptionist at a local auto shop while her boys are in school, then picks up evening and weekend shifts at a restaurant whenever they need extra help. She works two jobs to provide the basics for her boys, but still needs these programs if she ever has any hope at a better life for them.”

“Look, Bella—”

I change the photo to another family. “This is Andrea from Minnesota. She is a widow left with three teenage girls. They struggle every day to put food on the table and keep the heat on in their two bedroom apartment.”

Alec looks like he wants to interrupt me again, so I move to the next family. “This is Paul from California. He is a single dad with two children, a son and a daughter under the age of six. Paul needs the Senator to address the needs of low-income and middle-class families. Mothers and fathers need paid leave, childcare, and an increase in the minimum wage.”

“Bella, let me stop you right there. Our cuts aren’t aimed toward children. We are looking to develop the workforce.”

“But that’s who will be affected by them. Families share resources. They live under the same roof. Housing costs are one of the largest burdens on the family budget. Most live in
substandard housing, which has potential health hazards of damaged plumbing, lead paint, and gas leaks.

“Well-child visits and access to dental, vision, and hearing screenings are extremely important. Because the sooner delays are diagnosed, we can begin treatments in infants, toddlers, and children of all ages, which provides for a better outcomes as a child grows older.

“The National School Lunch Program provides low-cost or free lunches to 30.4 million children every day. When mothers receive the benefits of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, we find a decrease of infant mortality and low birthweight babies.

“These tax cuts will only benefit wealthy individuals and corporations. The increase of administrative burdens and work requirements will undermine the programs benefiting families with young children. You are putting barriers between the programs and those who need them most.

“Children need nutritious food for their developing brains. They need a safe bed to sleep in every night, and a competent healthcare professional to monitor their development. By limiting access to these and other programs, you are adding to the toxic stress on the family unit.”

“Bella, we don’t see it that way. These programs or handouts have gone on long enough. We need to streamline programs. Welfare reform is necessary in all areas and we’re putting Americans to work.”

“At what cost? The American family? American children? Is it because children don’t have the right to vote? The Republican controlled congress has lost sight of the American dream, and Senator Volturi is leading the charge against our Nation’s children and those at our borders.”

“Bella, don’t be ridiculous. Senator Volturi will always work toward beneficial legislation for all Americans. The Volturi brothers are the sons of immigrants who came to this country looking for a better life and have flourished for generations.”

“Yes, the Volturi family has always been known to be quite ambitious. I believe it is their father, Roberto Volturi, who they should thank, no?”

“Roberto Volturi was a wealthy businessman, Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, and U.S. Ambassador to Italy. It is Roberto who paved the way for his sons to enter American politics. They are carrying on his values and traditions every day as they represent those who elected them into office,” Alec explains.

“And would his voters still support him if they realized he was the one pushing for the same type of tax cuts lawmakers in Kansas experimented with, ending in massive failure?”
Alec lacks a response so I continue.

“Kansas lost so much revenue, schools were forced to reduce operating schedules, and public services lapsed across the state. By creating massive shortfalls in the state’s budget the Governor raided early childhood education funds until legislators blocked him from eliminating the entire fund. Kansas had their bond rating downgraded twice, funding for higher education cut, and they are experiencing slower economic growth than the rest of the country. Never mind the fact that an entire group of newborns, infants, and toddlers are completely disconnected from services needed to provide the best start in life.

“Alec, eliminating business taxes is detrimental, as is helping the rich to avoid income taxes completely. Senator Volturi needs to reconsider his position on these tax cuts before it’s too late and another generation of children fall between the cracks.”

“Perhaps the recent expansion of the child tax credit will help low-income families and appease your readers.”

“Yes, but it targets those in the U.S. illegally by requiring parents to submit their child’s Social Security Number. This will affect approximately one million children of low-income families who are currently receiving the credit, but do not have a Social Security number for their child. This will be a particular problem for immigrant families, as the children of undocumented immigrants won’t have a Social Security Number either.”

We’re interrupted when Alec’s phone vibrates, and he gives me the bad news. “Ah. Unfortunately, Bella, the Senator won’t be able to meet with you today and his position on the tax cuts remains the same. He will proceed with the plan, as he has the support he needs to pass. At this time, the Senator has no further comment for your follow-up article.”

“You’re underestimating the power of the Presidential Veto.” I stick out my chin, defiant in a last-ditch effort of hope.

“If the President wishes to see any kind of progress in his agenda, he will figure out a way to work with both sides of the aisle. However, in this situation, Senator Volturi has the votes he needs without the President’s signature.”

I’m shocked by this news, which means he has support from Democrats and possibly Independents too. I hope my voice doesn’t waver. “You have two-thirds in both the House and the Senate?”

Alec lets out a sinister chuckle. “Yes, Bella. We have a bipartisan effort on this one, leaving the President with little recourse. He will be forced to sign it.”
A lump forms in my throat, and I nod in my understanding, as the feeling of defeat settles in my bones. “I see.”

“I understand your fight. It’s admirable, but not how the system works. Everyone has a price. It’s how the world works.”

A new realization occurs to me. “You’re buying votes?”

“You make it sound so dirty. It’s more of a ‘you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.’ Everyone has their own legislation they wish to see pass, and if they want any type of progress in a Republican-controlled Congress, they will support the Volturi brothers’ efforts when given the opportunity.”

Releasing a heavy sigh of defeat, I gather my things and prepare to depart. “I understand. Thank you for your time, Alec.”

We stand, and he walks me toward the door to the lobby.

“It’s been a pleasure, Bella. Hopefully, the next time we meet it will be under different circumstances. Can I interest you in having dinner with me?”

He can’t be serious, but I don’t want to shut the door to the possibility of him being a useful resource if I ever need it in the future. So, I put on my more than polite smile.

“Uh, I’m only in New York for a short visit this trip. Perhaps another time.”

He grins. “I look forward to it. My offer is out there for this evening, if you reconsider. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

We part ways, and I leave the Volturi building, bundling up when I see a fresh coating of snow has covered the roads and sidewalks.

I’m lost in the fresh feeling of defeat while retrieving my phone from my bag when someone bumps me from behind, sending my phone flying through the air. It lands facedown on the concrete, and when I flip it over, the screen is completely shattered.

Shit. It’s going to be one of those kinds of days.

I step off the curb and flag down a taxi.

“Where to Miss?”

“The nearest Apple store.”
“Sure thing.”

-BCD-

With my new phone in hand and my afternoon completely wasted, I enter the lobby of my hotel and decide to locate the bar, because at this point, having a cocktail is probably in my best interest.

“What can I get you?”

I look around and notice an unusual amount of couples in the bar.

“I don’t know.”

“How about one of our specials?”

I look over the drink menu and question the large number of drinks with “love” or “sex” in the titles. “Kind of unusual names, don’t you think?”

“Not on Valentine’s Day. I can’t make them fast enough.”

“Valentine’s Day?” Shit.

“Yes. It’s today.”

Double shit. “I’ll take a ‘Sex in the Driveway’ then.”

“Coming right up.”

When my drink arrives, the obvious falls from my mouth. “It’s blue.”

“Yes. Like a ‘Sex on the Beach,’ but without the cranberry juice.”

“Well, I’m positive it will be the closest thing I’ll be having to sex tonight.”

“No Valentine’s dinner date?”

Oh, God. Alec asked me out for dinner on Valentine’s Day? Holy shit. I’m glad I dodged that one.

“No, I didn’t even realize it was Valentine’s Day. I’ll be having room service after this,” I explain, pointing at my drink, which is oddly quite tasty.
“You never know, maybe your luck will change and your day will get better, since it looks like this one has been a challenge.”

“It has. I’m almost ready to call it done.”

I down my drink a little faster than I probably should. The realization of all the couples around me makes me anxious, and I’m ready to flee to the safety of my room.

Checking my phone, I notice I don’t have any missed texts or calls from Edward, which leaves me feeling a little sad and lonely. In an effort to shrug off my gloomy, unsuccessful day, I decide on a long hot soak in the tub then order room service.

I’m bundled up in the hotel robe, waiting for my food, when my phone starts to vibrate with a call from Edward.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sweetheart. Happy Valentine’s Day. Did you get my flowers?”

“Uh...” I look around my hotel room and unload. Tears form, and I know my voice wavers this time. “No, I’m not at home or the office. I’m in New York, remember? It’s been a shitty day. I broke my heel, then my meeting was pointless. Carlisle is going to be so upset with me and how poorly my meeting went with Senator Volturi. I didn’t even get to meet with him, just his aide.” I pause and take a shaky breath. “Some idiot ran into me on the street and I shattered the screen of my phone, then had to get a new one. I had a stupid drink at the hotel bar, which turned my teeth blue. You know how much I hate that. I just finished soaking in the tub, and now I’m waiting for room service to deliver my dinner. I’m sorry I totally blanked on it being Valentine’s Day.” There’s a knock on the door. “Hang on; it’s probably my food.”

When I open the door, I find Edward standing on the other side bundled up in his winter overcoat covered in a fresh dusting of snow. He’s holding a bouquet of red roses in one hand and his phone in the other.

“How’s your day looking now?” He grins, and I pull him into my warm room. I melt in the safety and comfort of his snow-covered arms and cold lips. My heart feels like it could explode at seeing him, which is exactly what I need on a day like today.
Chapter 15: The White House Correspondents’ Dinner

“I’m going to go grab a drink. Do you want anything?” Emmett asks.

We are standing together, surveying the ballroom of the Washington Hilton, hosting our dinner this evening. It’s a black-tie event with plenty of tuxedos and sparkling, designer dresses as far as the eye can see.

“No. I need to locate Jacob. He texted me earlier to find him when I got here.”

Emmett nods and grabs my elbow before I go. “Hey, keep an open mind about Berlin. I think it may be the perfect opportunity for you and give you a chance to spread your wings without all the bullshit you deal with here.”

“I know. I’ll think about it. I promise.”

How can I forget? There’s an opening in our Berlin office they’re trying to fill, and Emmett recommended me for the job. I got a call a few days ago and did a telephone interview with the man who would be my new boss, Alistair Young. He’s Scottish and had me nearly swooning on his accent alone. It turns out he’s friends with Carlisle, who originally inquired on my behalf.

We hit it off, and I am tempted to say yes to his job offer, but my mind always goes back to Edward. I’m not sure where this thing between us is going even after almost a year. While everything is good, I don’t see anything changing our status, which makes me wonder how long we can continue in a relationship, solely behind closed doors.

It seems precarious at best, as if I’m always waiting for the other shoe to drop. I feel myself falling for him a little more every day, but I don’t know how to proceed. We have made no declarations of love. And while I may be feeling it, I don’t think Edward is. The sex is great, but I’m at a point where I need more than I think he’s ready or willing to give.

Shelly’s warning isn’t far from my thoughts, as I know she’s always in Edward’s ear working against our relationship. It hasn’t been easy making this work between us, but it’s feeling like a dead end. Maybe it has run its course.

“Bella?”

“Sorry, I was thinking about my conversation with Alistair.”
“No problem. It’s a lot to consider. Let’s meet up at the table in a little while.”

“You got it, Boss.”

I greet a variety of honored guests, award and scholarship winners, and many of my fellow co-workers, as I work the room while trying to locate Jacob. Eventually, though, I give up and head for the bathroom before dinner is served.

As I walk down the deserted hallway, I notice two security guards standing outside a meeting room. They eye me carefully as I’m about to pass by, but I’m stopped in my tracks when I hear loud voices coming from inside the room.

There’s no mistaking who’s in there.

“You can’t make me do this!”

Leah. I wonder if she’s in trouble. Maybe I should go in and offer my help. I step toward the room.

The guards move together, creating a wall of muscle, preventing my advancement. “Miss, you need to move along. The bathrooms are that way.”

“Leah, keep your voice down,” Jacob tells her.

“I can, and I will.” That sounds like Harry. “You’re no longer allowed to leave the White House grounds until further notice. I forbid it, and you’re not getting divorced. You will focus on your marriage to Jacob. It will be your only job. Unfortunately, it has come to this, but you leave me no choice. Security will escort you back to the White House because I can no longer tolerate your disrespect this evening.”

Oh, no.

“Uh…” I point toward the door as I look between the huge guards and the room. “Jacob asked me to find him.”

One of them nods and directs me to a bench along the wall. “Wait there.”

I hear Sue next. “Leah, you and Jacob need to spend time together. You can’t do that if you’re never with him. I understand he works a lot and you’re lonely, but we’ll bring in a marriage counselor. It will help, and a baby will fill that void, too.”

I wonder what’s happened, but I have a good idea as I take a seat and wait for Jacob.
Billy’s deep voice speaks next. “We have to think about the re-election. We don’t need her behavior coming to light.”

“Billy, do you know what I think about your re-election plans? You can all go to hell. Then you’ll be where I’m at and understand how I feel. Every day here—my life is pure hell. And now you’re taking away my one bright spot and holding me what? Prisoner? I don’t think so. Dad, I hope you aren’t re-elected, then this nightmare will be over.”

“Leah.” Sue’s anguish is clear.

“No. Not once do you ever think about how all of this affects me. I’ll let you know when I’m pregnant, since apparently, that’s all I’m worth to you, and trust me, Jacob won’t be the father.”

“Leah, the bloodline,” Harry warns.

“You and your damn bloodline. So, whose sperm is acceptable? It sounds like I need a list of who to do and who to don’t. Is it only Quileute? Or will any Native American suffice? What about Sam? Would he be acceptable? You probably already know we’ve been fucking for Emily’s entire pregnancy.”

“Leah! She’s your cousin,” Sue scolds.

“Surprised? You shouldn’t be. I had him first, and she stole him from me. I’ll never forgive her. What about Collin, the intern from Sam’s office? He was fun and easy. Should I go back for more with him? Can we use your desk in the Oval Office, Dad? Or, I know, Brady. He’s another one of those rising stars in the party you like so much. The things he can do with his—”

“Leah, stop this!” Harry demands.

“Heard enough? Well, I’m just getting started. I’m about to be your worst nightmare. You should have left me alone and not interfered in my life. Buckle up and get your paternity tests ready. This is going to be a wild ride. Remember, you asked for this.”

“Leah, you’re leaving us with no other choice,” Sue pleads.

Voices are lowered, and I can’t hear what’s being said.

A voice I don’t recognize takes over. “Hold her. I’ve got her arm.”

“Ow! What are you doing? Let me go. What is that?” Leah’s voice is muffled for a moment. “Fuck that hurt. What did you give me? Let me go, asshole.”

“This is for the best, Leah,” Harry reminds her.
She doesn’t see me when she shoves open the door, barreling down the hallway with her security detail barely able to keep up.

With the door wide open, I can see Sue next to Jacob opposite Billy and Harry.

“I’m sorry, Jacob. We had no idea how bad it was. It will get better. Trust me.”

Billy wonders. “Maybe we should send her back to Washington or somewhere else out of sight? She needs to be contained, and the reservation could be the perfect spot.”

Harry’s anger boils over. “She needs to learn her place in this family. I will not accept this behavior. We will contain her here and allow Jacob to do his job.”

Billy checks his watch. “Let’s table this discussion for another time. We need to get you to the ballroom for dinner.”

“Okay, but this is far from over.” Harry straightens his tie and refastens his jacket.

“I agree.” Billy wheels himself from the room with Jacob following closely behind.

I jump up and get his attention. “Jacob!”

He turns toward my voice. “Hey, Bella. Dad, I’ll meet you in there.”

Billy nods. “Hello, Bella. You look lovely this evening.”

“Thank you, Billy. You’re looking very handsome yourself.”

“See you in a bit, Dad. Let’s go this way.” Jacob points in the opposite direction and guides us toward the women’s bathroom. “Thanks for finding me.”

He pushes open the door and checks to find the room empty, locking the door behind us.

We’re staring at each other for a while, and I’m not sure who should speak first, but I can’t hold back.

“Holy shit, Jacob. What happened?” I point beyond the door.

“Just now? Or earlier?”

“Maybe you should start with earlier.”
“This conversation can’t leave this room. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“This is all so messed up. Harry caught Leah with one of her guards. They were in a limo together. I’m positive he’s out of a job now.”

“Wait. You didn’t ride here with her?”

“No. I rode over with Dad,” Jacob explains. “Harry and Sue were waiting in their limo to exit when there was concern that no one knew where Leah was or could locate her limo. It caused a bit of panic since we all left the White House at close to the same time.”

“Oh, no.”

Jacob nods. “We were walking toward the back entrance when they found her limo occupied in the garage. I think Harry suspected something and refused to go inside without her. They ushered him to her limo where he opened the backdoor to find her naked with the guard.”

“Oh my God. They were—”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry, Jacob.”

“I told you she was cheating. I knew it, but Dad and Harry won’t let either of us out of this marriage until after the re-election at least, which is still years away. I doubt even then, if I know them. Regardless, Leah won’t be able to outrun them and their demands.”

“Can they do that? It doesn’t seem right.”

“Tribal membership is a tricky thing, as many tribes keep lowering the qualifications. Harry and Dad have been demanding for us to have children—full-blooded Quileute children—or they will take matters into their own hands. We’re the next leaders of the tribe, and Leah is foolish to go up against them.”

“What do you mean ‘take matters in their own hands’?”

“There are sacred fertility rituals which will force her into compliance until she is pregnant. She’ll be watched over by our aunts through the entire pregnancy until she gives birth to full-blooded Quileute babies. The cycle will continue until the elders believe she’s honored the tribe by fulfilling her duty.”
“What if she can’t have kids? Has anyone considered that a possibility?”

“They won’t consider it until they’ve exhausted all other possibilities. I’ve been tested. So, we know I’m okay. They’re going to—”

“They’re going to what?”

“We’ll be monitored from here on out.”

“What does that mean? Like a chaperone?”

“Sort of. Leah will be confined to our room and only granted freedom to other areas of the private residence if she consents to marital relations. And those will be witnessed by three elders until she becomes pregnant.”

“Holy shit.”

Jacob nods and whispers, “Every night.”

“Billy?”

“No. Not Harry either. Um, ‘Old Quil’ who is Quil’s grandfather is one. Sam’s father, Joshua, is another, and Sam’s Uncle Thomas will also be here. They’ve been chosen to oversee everything.”

“What if she doesn’t consent?”

“They will begin a course of ‘medications’ to make her more compliant. She received her first injection before she left.”

“They’re drugging her? Oh my God, Jacob.” I am stunned speechless for a moment. “Wait! They were planning this anyway, weren’t they?”

“Her actions today sped up the timetable. Leah doesn’t realize how valuable she is. Other tribes could plot to kidnap her for this purpose under much worse, harsher conditions.”

“Jacob, this is all sorts of levels of wrong. How can you take part in something like this?”

“I don’t have a choice, Bella, and neither does she. They’ve given us plenty of time to meet their expectations on our own and we’ve failed them. We both knew what was expected going into this marriage. Not that we had much choice about that either, but I hoped they would allow us a divorce when they saw it wasn’t working. And now Leah has forced their hand.”
“Has she been using birth control?”

“Yeah, condoms, I think, but they’ll bring in a doctor to monitor her health and be certain she is clean and isn’t pregnant from any prior partners.”

“And if she is pregnant?”

“They’ll abort it.”

“Jacob, she has rights.”

“If she wasn’t a full-blooded Quileute, I would agree with you, but we aren’t working under normal tribal laws. They’re different—spoken and unspoken expectations exist for all members.”

“And the federal government…”

“Isn’t going to step in when it comes to tribal lands and their people, especially with her father overseeing the preservation of our tribe, and now, all jurisdictions—federal included.”

“But this would happen here in D.C.” I shake my head, not believing what I’m hearing.

“Look, I don’t care if she loves me or not, and it isn’t like we haven’t had sex before. Hell, she’s having sex with anyone and everyone. The two of us—we need to do this and move on. It’s our responsibility to our heritage, especially when I’m expected to take over leading our tribe one day. We’ll have kids, then she’ll be free to do whatever she wants. Everyone will be off our backs and I’ll hire a nanny to help raise our kids if she wants nothing to do with them.”

My mind sifts through the implications for other members of their tribe. “Your sister, Rachel?”

“And Paul, have similar pressures. She’s not pregnant yet, but I know they’re trying, and at least they love each other.”

“What about Rebecca?”

“She left after Mom died and married a man in Hawaii. Trust me. The elders aren’t happy about it. They’ve talked about forcing her to return.”

“But she’s married.”

“Which presents another issue.”

“Leah was right. This is a nightmare. And if you have daughters?”
“Their marriages will be arranged just like any sons we have. Most people don’t get it. I don’t expect you to understand either.”

“You would force your daughter or son to have sex repeatedly with someone under the watchful eyes of tribe members for the sake of bloodlines?”

I know Jacob can see my resolution to do something to help Leah when it passes over my face, because he’s quick to issue a warning.

“Bella, I know this is so beyond fucked up, but don’t be a hero on this one. Leah will be fine. You need to let it go. Women have babies all the time. Don’t think they won’t come after you if you try to interfere, and I want nothing to happen to you. You’re my friend and I trust you to keep this quiet.”

He waits, but I’m speechless, and my only reply is a small nod of my agreement to a code of silence against my better judgment.

-BCD-

After my discussion with Jacob about Leah’s future, my appetite is gone and I can barely focus on the small talk at our table. This dinner is a fundraiser with awards and scholarships being presented, but I feel like I’m going through the motions while trying to keep a polite smile on my face the entire time and clap in all the right places.

Emmett knows something is up, but I’ve shrugged off his questioning looks. Our dishes are cleared and I’m sipping on a cup of coffee, when I get the feeling of being watched.

I keep my eyes down and focus on the cup as my hand trembles when I bring it to my lips. I’m worried one glance will find Harry, Billy, or someone else more sinister, watching me closer than they should.

This is part of the problem with knowing too much. Paranoia sets in and I find myself second-guessing everything and everyone. When I do find the gumption to look up, a familiar set of green eyes is watching me—a picture of concern.

I avert my eyes and my body sags with relief when I realize it’s him. I had no idea he would be here this evening since he said nothing about attending. But then I didn’t tell him I would be here either.

While I would love to find comfort in his arms right now, we can’t both stand and leave, as we’re in a room full of bloodhounds. Everyone would know our departure wasn’t anything coincidental.
I hear my phone vibrate in my purse then the room erupts in applause and everyone stands as Harry moves to speak. I remove my phone from my purse before sitting back down and hold it under the table to read the message.

**You look beautiful.**

A smile immediately forms on my lips.

*Thank you.*

I barely press send before another text arrives.

**The first real smile I’ve seen from you all night.**

**I wish you were my date this evening.**

I have no idea how to answer that, but the texts don’t stop. His words feel like a life preserver, and I want to grab onto them with both hands to save me from drowning.

**Are you going to any after-parties?**

**We could sneak off and find a closet or something. ;)**

Dread fills my stomach at the thought of him sneaking off with someone else at one of those parties once he hears my answer, but despite the gossip, I try to believe he wouldn’t do that after we agreed to be exclusive almost a year ago. I cringe, thinking about the fallout from his attendance at any of the after-parties around the area tonight. I’m positive all cameras will be trained on him with tongues wagging in every direction.

*No. I’m going to call it an early night.***

**Are you feeling okay?**

**I can make an excuse and see you home.**

*I’m fine. Go. Have fun.*

**I have a job to do. Don’t forget that.**

I don’t reply that he always seems to enjoy his job a little more than he should because I know he won’t turn down a photo with a fan or any opportunity to make new connections that may further his career.
I do, too.

My mind immediately wanders to Leah and my heart breaks at what went down this evening, knowing she’s trapped and feeling helpless or probably medically numb at this point. I have no idea if she’s ever wanted children, but it’s a crime to force her into being a breeder. Perhaps, a surrogate would be a better answer, but then her family would force the harvest of her eggs to make that happen, which gives me chills at the thought. My stomach churns again as my phone vibrates.

Text me once you’re home.

I will.

I close my phone and slide it back into my purse, then chance a glance in his direction to find him laughing at something someone said at his table. I don’t look over there again, since I don’t want to give us away, but focus on Harry who is busy poking fun at himself, as he has the room in stitches and hanging on his every word.

If only they knew what he’s putting his daughter through. Another dirty little secret. This room is overflowing with them.
Chapter 16: The Show - This Week with Edward Masen

I rush back to my apartment in the dark, early morning hours, knowing I need a shower and a change of clothes, something more professional, if I’m going to appear on Edward’s show. My current sexed up appearance wouldn’t be appropriate despite his encouragement it’s his favorite look on me.

I also need to spend some time doing a bit of research if I’m going to be prepared to debate issues about gun control and school safety. I have no idea who else is on the panel, but it’s a good idea to be prepared for anything.

“You’re up early.” Angela’s voice startles me.

I close the front door. “Hey. I’m surprised you’re up. I didn’t want to wake you.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

I know she has questions regarding my whereabouts, but I’ve been evasive with my excuses lately, trying to make them about work, but I think she suspects something. Normally, she’s distracted by Ben, but it looks like I have her undivided attention.

“Well, I’ve got a limited time window and too much to do. I’ve been asked to fill in on one of those Sunday morning talk shows.”

“Oh? Which one?”

“This Week.”

“Edward Masen?”

“Yes, that’s the one. They had someone cancel at the last minute, and I’ve been asked to fill in for the roundtable discussion.”

“I didn’t know you knew him.”

“Oh, well, yes. We’ve met.”

“Where did you meet?”
Holy fuck. What do I say? My mind shuffles through our past year together, wondering what she'll believe. I decide on the hockey game, hoping she won't remember a lot of details about that night.

“Do you remember about a year ago when you set me up on that blind date?”

“Blind date?”

“Yeah, the hockey game. We all went.”

“Yes, Tyler.”

“He left, then you weren’t feeling good, so Ben took you home, and I told you I was going to stay because I ran into a colleague?”

“That was Edward Masen?”

“Yeah, we sort of bumped into each other. Apparently, he knew me from the White House Correspondents’ Dinner last year.”

“I see. And you stayed to watch the rest of the game.”

“Right. He’s a fan and asked me to join him in his seats, as the people he was there with left early too.”

“So, you and Edward Masen.”

“Watched the hockey game together.”

“How did you get home that night? I don’t remember.”

“He dropped me off.”

“And that’s how you know each other.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sure he’s had other guests cancel over the past year, why hasn’t he asked you before now?”

I shrug. “We saw each other again recently and I guess he thought of me this time when he needed a favor.”
“Hmmmm. Well, this sounds like a wonderful opportunity for you.”

“I know, but I’ve never done television, so I’m extremely nervous. I need to go prepare.”

“I know you’ll do great, Bella. I’ll be sure to watch.”

“Thanks, Ang. That reminds me. I need to let Emmett know too. I’m off to shower.”

-BCD-

I tuck my notes into my briefcase and grab my overnight bag, which has some necessities for fixing my hair and makeup once I get to the studio. It doesn’t take long for me to arrive. As I enter, I’m directed to the green room to finish getting ready and find it isn’t empty.

“Finally. You’re cutting it close.”

“Pardon me?”

“My hair is still a little damp, but it shouldn’t be a problem. And we probably need to use some cover-up on this spot on my neck. Men can be animals sometimes.”

“I’m not here to do your hair or makeup.”

“Then where is that girl? Oh, well, I’ll take a decaf soy latte, with an extra shot.”

I roll my eyes and set my bags on the opposite side of the room. “Get your own coffee,” I grumble.

“Look, you better change your attitude or I’ll have you fired.”

“Good luck with that one.” I notice someone pass by our door, and Tanya is quick to get their attention.

“Jasper!” she yells.

“What can I do for you, Tanya?”

“This little intern of yours is useless. She refuses to do my hair or makeup and actually rolled her eyes at me when I gave her my coffee order. Do something about her!”

Jasper walks across the room with his hand extended. “I’m so sorry about this—Miss Swan, is it?”
“Yes.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Jasper Whitlock, and I can’t thank you enough for helping us out this morning. The show will start shortly and you can view it from the monitor over there. Do you need anything else before I head into the studio?”

“Whitlock? Do you know Alice?”

A huge grin spreads across his face. “That would be my wife.”

“Well, it’s a small world. I haven’t seen her in a while. Tell her I said hi when you get a chance.”

“Will do. I’m off. Tanya, Lauren will be in shortly to help you with hair and makeup, and Heidi will get your coffee.”


“That isn’t Heidi. Let me introduce you. Tanya Denali, this is Isabella Swan. She’s a reporter for the Washington Post and has graciously agreed to fill in for Eric, as Katie went into labor this morning.”

“Oh. You could have said something and not let me go on and on. Nice to meet you anyway.”

I wish I could say the same, but after our start this morning, I can barely crack a warm smile for her.

Tanya focuses back on Jasper. “Where’s Edward? Maybe I should go get him warmed up for the show.”

“Lauren is finishing up with him, then he’s headed into the studio. You’ll see him soon enough. You should have about fifteen minutes before we need you.”

“Thanks, Jasper.”

My phone vibrates with a text.

**Break a leg! I’ll be watching. Text me later.**

*Thanks.*

“Your boyfriend?”

“No. My boss.”
“Ah. And how do you know Edward? I mean he doesn’t let just anyone on his show.”

“We’ve known each other for about a year. Work colleagues.”

“That explains it. I’m not a fan of this early morning hour, but if it means I’ll have Edward in my bed later, then I’ll certainly make the effort to accommodate him.”

“You’re seeing Edward?”

“Now, now, Miss Swan. Let’s not start any rumors. I’m a married woman.” She winks. “You reporters are always looking for your next headline.”

We’re both startled as an unwanted, familiar face stands in the doorway to the green room.

“Tanya! It’s wonderful to see you here again. Edward needs to make you a co-host with as many times as you’ve appeared on his show.”

“Shelly, I haven’t seen you in forever. We should have lunch together soon.”

“That would be wonderful.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Do you know—?”

“Yes, Miss Swan. I’m surprised to see you here.”

“I’m sure you are.”

“Miss Swan is a close friend of the President, while her father works at the FBI.”

Tanya whistles. “It must be nice. I wish I had the privilege of those connections.”

“Don’t we all. I’ve got to run. Have a great show, Tanya. Isabella.”

“Isn’t Shelly the best? She’s been after me to sign with her for ages, but what in the world would I do with an agent? I’m not interested in being famous.”

Says the woman who never fails to miss a day in the society pages.

-BCD-

“It’s time to head to the studio, everyone,” Heidi directs.
As I walk through the hallway, a man falls in stride with me. “Hey there, little lady.”

“Excuse me?”

“Are you the newest little filly in Edward’s stable? He knows how to pick them.”

His head turns, and his eyes drift to my behind.

*Pig.*

“What did you say?” I slow my pace, recognizing him immediately.

“Edward can’t help it. He’s a man’s man who knows exactly where a woman’s place should be.”

I can’t resist letting him make an ass of himself. I’m positive his answer will confirm my suspicions. “And where would that be?”

“On her knees, of course—”

I gasp.

He chuckles and nudges my arm, then attempts to make the save. “—praying. Every man loves a devoted woman.”

His words and implications are inappropriate and at odds with his religious, self-righteous image. What does Jessica see in him?

Tanya overhears our brief conversation and rushes to my aid. “Mike, don’t be crude and leave her alone. This is Miss Swan. She’s from the Post and filling in for Eric this morning. It was a last minute change.”

“Oh, then allow me to introduce myself. I’m Reverend Michael Newton, Former Governor of Florida.” He holds out his hand as we wait for the intern to attach our microphones.

I spy Secretary Esme Platt, speaking with Edward, then giving him a hug before leaving the studio.

I garner a polite smile and gently squeeze his hand. “Hello, Reverend Newton. I’m Isabella Swan, and I believe we’ve met.”

“I doubt that, as I would remember you. How do you feel about the number four?”
Oh, God. Is that supposed to be some kind of joke about me becoming his fourth wife? He has no idea who I am.

Jasper waves us over. “Tanya, why don’t you... Oh, okay. You’re next to Edward. Reverend, sit next to Tanya, then Miss Swan, why don’t you take the seat on the end opposite of Edward.”

I clear my throat ready to end this conversation and let him off the hook before he digs himself in a deeper hole. “I’m friends with your wife, and I believe you know my step-father and mother.”

“And your step-father would be...”

“Phil Dwyer.” I shuffle through my notes and stack them carefully together.

“I know Phil. We go way back. I thought he had daughters still in high school.”

“Victoria and Bree are out of high school now and working in New York, but I’m Renee’s daughter.”

“Oh, that’s right. I remember there was one who was shy and awkward. Those teen years can be difficult, but it looks like you’ve blossomed into a beautiful woman like your mother. Not as big in the chest, but I’m sure you can find a man who will help you fix that later. I bet you know your way around a credit card too. Don’t worry, this show will only help you get the exposure you’re seeking. Rubbing elbows or other things with Edward is never a bad thing.” He winks.

“Good morning, everyone.” Edward smiles, glancing briefly at all our faces.

“Hello, Edward.” Tanya gushes with a twinkle in her eye as she pushes out her chest.

I notice the top button of Tanya’s blouse is now unfastened, revealing more cleavage than appropriate for a Sunday morning talk show. I’m surprised she’s able to hold back and isn’t naked on the table with her legs spread wide open in front of his face. I’m positive it would be her preferred position as opposed to being seated next to him where she’s touching him every chance she gets. And that’s only what I can see above the table.

This should be interesting.

-BCD-

I am barely holding onto my emotions at this point and refuse to let any of these people see me shed a single tear.

This entire experience has been one where I’ve alternated between so many emotions—with anger, rage, and jealousy being the top three. Disappointment is high on the list too. Not once
did Edward step in when I was being personally attacked. I didn’t expect him to, but it would have been nice to know he had my back with these sharks. I stood my ground, but there’s one thought my mind continues to circle.

I’m done.

With this show.

I’m done.

With chauvinistic assholes.

I’m done.

With bitches without boundaries.

I’m done.

I think it could be my new mantra.

Clearly, I’m not cut out for television. Doing this show has opened my eyes in ways I’ve never considered, and I feel like I’m seeing things as they are for the first time.

I’ve been an idiot, swimming in the sea of denial for the past year where Edward is concerned.

I can’t wait to grab my stuff and leave. When Jasper gives us the all clear, I make a beeline for the studio door and drop my microphone into the hands of the waiting intern.

Once I’ve made it to the green room, I throw my stuff in my bag, making an even greater realization.

I’m done.

I’m done hiding this relationship.

I’m done lying about us.

I’m done being his secret.

The door to the green room opens and I hear it close then lock. I don’t have to look up to know who it is.

“I can’t do this anymore, Edward.” I gasp as my heart breaks.
Fuck. I think I’m in—no. I’m not. I can’t be. And I’m not going to let him know. Not now. Let this be a lesson. Never let someone have this kind of hold over you because they have the power to crush you and your heart then never look back.

“I’m sorry. I’ll never ask you to be on the show again. I needed a favor. Just this once.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “The show? You think I’m upset about the show? The show is just the final straw that broke the camel’s back. I saw you eyeballing that intern before I ever set foot in the studio, and how about the flirting with the Hair and Makeup woman when I was sitting directly across from you? And Tanya with the innuendos? Whatever is going on between the two of you, I want no part in it. You’re no different from Newton and his good ol’ boys network who subtly demean women by reducing their worth on your show to their appearance only. Women fight this battle for credibility every day in the world, and I never would have guessed you would perpetuate the problem. I’m done.”

“What do you mean you’re done?” he questions.

“Um, let’s see. I’m finished. I’m through. Or here’s a better one. This—” I point between the two of us. “—is over. I can’t do this secret relationship, or the lies that accompany it, any longer. Whether they are lies by omission, little white lies, or lies of deception, they are eating my sanity alive, one bite at a time.”

“Bella, please. You don’t mean that,” he begs.

It’s time to come clean, so he understands exactly how serious I am. “Oh, trust me. I do. I’m so sick of living in everyone’s shadow. What about my career? Well, for once, I’m going to be selfish and do something for me. I didn’t tell you, but a week ago, I was offered a position in our Berlin office.”

He falls heavily into one of the chairs without a response, so I continue.

“Emmett has been after me for an answer, and I didn’t really know what to say. But I think it’s crystal clear for me now. I’m taking the position. I’m pretty sure you can understand my desire to put myself first. You’re quite the pro at that yourself.”

“Bella.” He reaches out for my hand, but I pull away quickly.

“I need to prove to myself and everyone else that I’ve got what it takes without my father pulling strings, or my connections to the President and his family.” My eyes fill with unshed tears. “Or I would sleep with a talk show host in order to secure a guest spot on his Sunday morning show to further my career. I want to be taken seriously, Edward. I deserve that. I deserve better.”
Anger flashes across his face. “Did Newton say that? Or Tanya?”

“We both deserve better. This isn’t a relationship. This is us, doing whatever this is—a few late nights here and there when we can find the time. We aren’t roommates. I don’t even have a drawer at your place. I move around D.C. with a bag of essentials, just in case you decide to throw a breadcrumb in my direction. I have no claim on you. As far as everyone knows, we are only acquaintances, business ones at that. And it hurts, more than you can ever understand. I don’t know why I ever thought I could keep our relationship a secret. It’s killing me.” I zip up my bag, knowing I need to get out of this room before I break down completely.

“Bella, why didn’t you tell me before now? How can you think you have no claim on me?” Edward asks.

“Oh, I don’t know. Just ask every woman—married or single, in a fifty-mile radius, probably even farther—if they think they have a chance with you. You certainly don’t act unavailable. I get it now. I understand why I shouldn’t be here witnessing you flirt with anyone with boobs or a skirt. And before you say it, it’s not just me being jealous. It is absolutely heartbreaking to watch, and I can’t do it anymore. I thought it was more about your career, but the truth is, it never was. You like your image and have no plans to change it.”

I wait for him to contradict me, but a response never comes, which breaks my heart open even wider because that means every word I’ve said is true.

“Goodbye, Edward. Good luck with chasing your dreams. It’s time for me to have a shot at mine.”

I’m out the door and never look back. There’s no “Bella, wait,” or “I love you.” He doesn’t make a single attempt to stop me, and I’m left with the sound of my shoes, shuffling along the hallway and walking out of his life.

I’m almost at the exit when Shelly comes around the corner, and when she sees me her face transforms to that of the cat that swallowed the canary—already gloating, as if she heard every word of our conversation.

Maybe she did.

“Congratulations. You win!” I snarl, pushing past her.

She smirks. “I always do.”
Chapter 17: The Break Up

I’m taking the Berlin job.

Yeah?

Yes.

Are you sure?

100%. I’ll call Alistair to let him know. And Carlisle.

All right. I’m going to miss you, but I’ll always have a spot open if you ever need it.

I’ll keep that in mind. But right now, this is what I need. It’s the right move.

Congratulations on the show! You were great. I loved how you stuck it to ol’ Newton.

Thanks. I’ve got plans to make. Let’s talk about it later.

Okay. Let me know if you need anything.

I tuck my phone into my bag after texting Emmett and wipe away a few stray tears. When I walk through the door of our apartment, Angela is still where I left her, quick to offer her praise.

“Congratulations, Bella. You did amazing.” She holds her hand up for a high-five.

I smack our hands together, then collapse on the couch beside her. “Thanks.”

“I have no idea how you kept your cool with Newton. He’s a grade-A asshole. I bet he isn’t any better off camera.”

“Worse, actually. You have no idea.” A few more tears escape, but I don’t catch them before Angela notices.

“Hey, what’s going on? I expected you to be more excited post-show. Have you been crying?”

I crumble at her question and fresh tears trail down my cheeks.
“Bella, what is it? What did Newton say? You’re scaring me.”

I shake my head. “I’m such a fool. It’s not just him. It’s Edward too. And me.”

“I doubt that’s true at all. What did Edward do? He seemed like the typical host. The hosts of all those shows stir the pot then sit back and watch the fireworks.”

I sigh deeply, catching my breath, and sniff back more tears. “We’ve been seeing each other privately, but after today, not anymore. I ended it.”

“You and Edward Masen?” Her brows distort in confusion.

“Yeah.”

“Holy shit. For how long?” Surprise fills her features.

“About a year.”

“Bella—” She’s shocked and starts to say something then stops. “Wow.”

“Yeah. We met like I told you earlier and have been meeting up secretly ever since then. I’m so sorry.”

“You’re sorry? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“His agent. Shelly Cope. She threatened me and warned against pursuing a relationship with him. She said I would hurt his career with my connections and baggage.”

“What a bitch. That’s not her call.”

“I convinced him to keep our relationship between us, because I was thinking it was the right move for him. I’m already battling the critics from every angle. He doesn’t need my problems too.”

“And he went along with this?”

“Yeah. But lately, I’ve been feeling like we’re stuck in this relationship limbo with no way out. And his show—oh, God, Ang. The women are everywhere. It’s like a harem, and he’s lapping it up. And has been for, I guess, our entire relationship. And that woman—”

“Which one?”
“Tanya Denali. She was practically riding his face the entire time, and in the green room, she was hinting how they would spend their time post-show—in bed.”

“Isn’t she married?”

“Apparently, not happily. Or maybe they have an open marriage. We saw her sister, Irina, with Tanya’s husband, Laurent, at the airport. They were clearly together. It was actually very sweet. Perhaps he married the wrong sister.”

“Wait, wait, wait. When were the two of you at the airport together?”

I pause as realization of my slip tugs at my heart, then share a few of the details. “Edward took me to a private resort in Arizona for my birthday last year.”

“How did I not know you were in Arizona?”

I start to explain, but stop not wanting to admit to lying to her.

She senses my hesitation and redirects. “We’re going to come back to that in a minute. So, if this relationship was a secret, then it wasn’t exclusive? He’s seeing other people.”

“He says, he isn’t, but he could easily be lying too. And I’m positive Shelly is feeding the D.C.’s _Daily Chatter_ details about our relationship only she’s attaching other women to the facts because she doesn’t want me in the picture.”

“Oh! Now, I’ve got to pull up their website and read what the two of you have been doing.” Angela grabs her laptop, opening it immediately. “So, he’s lying to you and juggling Tanya as well?”

I let out a groan. “I have no idea. We aren’t together every day and sometimes we go for days without talking or weeks without seeing each other. We’re both busy. I get that, but I thought it was more. Maybe I wanted to believe it was something it wasn’t.”

“Here we go.” She starts reading, mentioning the highlights. “Lauren… New Year’s… mountain cottage… This was you?”

“Yeah. We spent a week together at a cabin in the mountains.”

“I thought you went away for a work retreat.”

I shrug.

“Let’s go to the next post. Marcus Volturi’s daughters? You were at the Heart Ball?”
“No, but he was.”

“I see the pictures, but it doesn’t mean he was with either one. Have you read all of these posts?”

“Most, but after a while, I can only take so much.” My heart breaks at the thought of him with someone else or the possibility he’s been lying all this time.

“This next one speculates about him being involved with an ex-girlfriend, Katie Marshall. She’s clearly pregnant and having dinner with him in New York it says. The lighting isn’t great, but they look cozy. Do you think they’re together?”

“Oh, God. Let me see.” I glance through the pictures, feeling nauseous with each one. “I don’t know. He never said anything, but we never talked about our exes. It’s like he’s living this other life without me.”

“Did you two ever talk about having kids?”

“No, only birth control.”

“I hope you were using condoms if he’s screwing other women.”

“You know I’m on the shot and I thought that was enough.” My body sags as I lean over burying my face in my hands, as I realize that won’t keep me from catching a sexually transmitted disease.

Angela’s hand rubs soothing circles on my back. “Oh, shit. I’m sorry, Bella. I shouldn’t have said that. Maybe an appointment with your doctor would be a good idea, regardless. Let me ask this—are you seeing anyone else?”

“No.” I lean back against the couch and stare at the ceiling. “Oh, God. What if—people get back with their exes all the time.”

“Did you go on any dates?”

“No.”

“Did he use the L-word?”

“Ang, we talked about work and had lots of sex. Great sex. Love was never mentioned.”

“Bella, I hate to say this, but it sounds like you were his booty call.”
“I realize that now. What was I thinking?”

“Okay, you’ve been lying to me. Only about Edward or is there other stuff?”

My stomach flutters at what I’m about to reveal. “There’s something else, but I haven’t been lying exactly. It is a recent thing, and I only made my decision today.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve been offered a job.”

“Okay?”

“It’s overseas, and I’m going to take it.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yeah, I think it’s time for a new view.”

“Bella, I hope this isn’t you running from your problems.”

“Edward Masen is no longer my problem, but he was never really mine in the first place. I need a break from everything and to stand on my own for a while, focusing on my career. My head is so messed up and I need some space away from D.C., the White House, and Edward. He doesn’t want me.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Maybe to warm his bed, but that’s it. Trust me. There’s a line behind me. When I told him I couldn’t do this anymore, do you know what he said?”

“No.”

“Nothing. He said nothing to stop me from leaving. He didn’t declare that he loved me or even that we should date and have a real relationship in public for all to see. He let me walk out the door and didn’t utter a single word to prevent my departure.”

“The truth has a funny way of coming out.”

“It all blew up in my face, and I’m so sorry about the lying, Angela. I know it was wrong, but at the time, I felt I had no other choice.”
“I feel a little betrayed that you didn’t trust me enough.”

“I do trust you. I’m telling you now. You’re the only one who knows about us.”

“But others probably suspect, especially now, after the show.”

“Demetri guessed I was seeing someone when I was there for Thanksgiving, but I didn’t tell him anything.” I wipe away more tears. “Angela, I’m sorry. I don’t know what else I can say.”

“I need time to process all of this. When are you leaving for Berlin?”

“Sometime during the next month.”

-BCD-

“Girlfriend, I’m sweating, and we both know I only like to glow.”

“Dem, thanks for helping me.”

“Anything for you, sweets.”

We stack the final load of my boxes into my newly rented storage space near Dad’s home. I’m spending my final week with him before I leave, and Demetri was willing to fly to D.C. and help store my things before the big move, plus it may be the last time I see him for a while.

“I can’t believe my life, or what was my life, fits in such a small space.”

“It’s only temporary, right?”

“Oh, Dem. I don’t know how long I’ll be there. Maybe you can come to visit me in Germany.”

“I’ll try my best. We both know I’m a fan of sausages. Now, didn’t you promise me margaritas?”

“I did. Come on, let’s go.”

It’s a short trip to a local Mexican restaurant where Demetri and I settle into a corner booth ordering food and margaritas.

“Is Daddy joining us?” He grabs a chip, dipping it in the salsa.

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”
“Call him Daddy,” I whisper, as our server drops off our margaritas.

“Are you afraid I could be your step-mommy one day? Your father can’t resist me forever.”

“Dem, you’re ridiculous. Trust me. My father isn’t gay.”

“It isn’t like I’m asking him to be the catcher, only the pitcher. I’m positive he would like it.”

“I think he has a new girlfriend.”

“Oooh, that’s exciting. A possible Mommy Dearest. Who is it?”

“We both know Mommy Dearest lives in Miami. I think it is one of Billy Black’s sisters. They are here and staying in the White House for a visit.”

“Oh, that reminds me, how are Jacob and Leah? Are they calling it quits yet?”

“No, actually the opposite and trying for a family.” I cringe with my insider knowledge.

“I’m shocked.”

“Yeah, nothing seems to shock me anymore.”

“How’s your secret man? Is he still putting those sneaky smiles on your face I saw at Thanksgiving?”

“No. Uh, I ended it.”

“Oh, my. You’ve been holding out on me. I need all the details.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“I’m pretty sure there is.”

“He only wanted sex.”

“And you wanted more.”

I shrug. “I don’t know what I wanted.”

“Aww, sweets. I’m sorry. Maybe you’ll meet someone new in Berlin.”
“I’m going to cool it on relationships for a while and focus on my new job.”

“Oh, no. That sounds bad. What did he do to you? Do I know him?”

“Maybe.”

“Is he a co-worker? You said ‘no’ on Emmett, right?”

“Not a co-worker or Emmett.”

“That’s such a shame. He’s so sexy. Does Angela know?”

“Yes.”

“How can you tell Angela and not me?” Demetri whines. “I’m calling her.”

“Dem, don’t. I’ll tell you, but Ang only found out recently.”

“So, tell me.”

“It was… It was…”

“Girl, don’t play games with me.”

“I know, but I’ve spent so much time trying not to say his name, it’s just weird to tell anyone else.” I lower my voice. “It was Edward Masen.”

Dem whispers. “Edward Masen. The Edward Masen? This Week with Edward Masen, Edward Masen? You were on his show—”

“Yeah.”

“Is he big? Because he looks like he would be.”

“You’re just wishing and fishing. Stop.”

“Can you blame me? I bet the sex was hot. I see why you agreed to whatever he wanted. I would too. Do you think I’m his type?”

“Dem!”

“You know I’m kidding—sort of. What happened?”
“Let me put it in terms you can understand.” I think for a minute. “There were too many people in our relationship, and I didn’t like getting fucked by the other woman, but I went along with it for him.”

“Holy shit, B. I didn’t know you were such a kinky bitch. Who was the other woman?”

“His agent, Shelly Cope. She warned me to stay away, then she spun our relationship to her own narrative, casting someone else as his love interest at every turn.”

“That had to hurt. So, it wasn’t an actual threesome—”

“Dem!”

“Girl, don’t knock it until you’ve tried it, but for now, I understand your reluctance, especially after Felix. Oh, shit. Was he cheating?”

“I don’t know what he was doing when he was away from me. He said he wasn’t, but he could be lying. How do I trust anything at that point? There were so many cracks and Shelly always found another woman to fill the spot. The sad part is I think I’m in love with him.”

“Oh, B—”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever get over it, and I can’t stay here. This is such a small place, and he’s everywhere. The next big thing.”

Dem grins with a twinkle in his eye. “See, you said he’s big. I knew it.”

“I’m not talking about his ‘thing’ with you.”

“Edward knew his agent was meddling?”

I shake my head. “To an extent. He knows she’s looking out for his career, but I don’t know if he realizes her heavy-handedness in his relationships.”

“You didn’t tell him she approached you?”

“No. Because deep down, I knew she was right. I do have a lot of baggage. People don’t believe I’m not working for the President or I got where I am on my own, which is why this move will be good for me. I’ll have a somewhat fresh start.”

“He hasn’t tried to contact you?”

“Nothing. Clearly, I wasn’t as important in his life as I thought I was.”
“He’s a fool then. You’re worth so much more than that.”

“That’s what I told him. We both deserve more. I’m sick of the secrets and won’t ever agree to another relationship like that again. I’ve been lying to everyone for too long.”

“B, you’re not that good of a liar. I knew something was up in November.”

“I hated lying to Angela. She’s hurt and I don’t blame her.”

“She’ll forgive you. Give her time. How is she handling you moving out?”

“She’s pissed about everything, but you know her.”

“You two have been friends for a very long time. Nothing and no man will change that. Not even Berlin.”
Chapter 18: The Moving On

After exiting the airport terminal, I glance along the curb, looking for my driver. Alistair said a woman with short blonde hair, named Hilda, would be here to pick me up after my flight, but no one matching that description is in sight.

I’m about to send him another text when a sleek sports car races near my location, screeching to a halt. The driver opens the door and scans the people waiting. I notice her hair immediately, thinking my ride is finally here. She smiles when her eyes land on me.

“Bella!” She waves.

“Hilda?” I ask the tall, slender woman.

“Ja.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

She grins and opens the front cargo hold. “Let’s put your luggage in the trunk.”

“How did you know it was me?”

“I saw your picture on Post website. You’re very beautiful.”

“Thanks.” I stow my bag.

She closes the cargo hold, then swiftly moves toward the driver’s side. “You’re welcome.” She smiles.

I walk around to the passenger side door as my eyes sweep over her car. “What kind of car is this?”

We slide into our seats that fit like a glove.

“Audi R8. Do you know Tony Stark?”

“Ironman?” I wonder, adjusting the seat belt straps.

“Ja. This is his car. I von in a bet.”
“A bet?”

“Ja. I like to drive fast, buckle up.”

A squeak escapes my lips as my hands grab onto the seat and door when she peels away from the airport, squealing the tires. I can’t stop the giggles, which erupt as she races through the streets, creating a nonstop blur out my window.

Her grin never leaves her face as she smoothly maneuvers the car through light traffic. “Do you like to dance?”

“I’m not much of a dancer,” I hedge, hoping they don’t have a how-to-embarrass-Bella plan in place.

“Tonight, ve vill go to the club. You can dance—drink. Get to know everyone. But first ve vill go to the office.”

“The office?”

“Ja. You vill meet Halistair.”

“I can’t wait. We’ve only spoken on the phone. His accent is divine, but I’m really enjoying yours too. Your English is great.”

“Danke schön. Halistair is extremely sexy.”

“Is he married or dating?” Please let him be taken; I don’t need a distraction at work.

“Nein. He is zingle.”

“Are you and he...?” I suggest, hoping to figure out the relationships without overstepping any boundaries.

“Nein. Ve are not dating. You?”

“No. I’m single too.” It feels weird to think of myself this way, but I’m determined not to focus on the break up and move forward with my life and career.

“Good. The club vill be fun.”

“Where am I staying?” I wonder.
“Vith me at my apartment. Ve are roommates vith Rozalie.”

“Rosalie?”

“She’s an American too from New York. She takes photographs. Rozalie likes to drink and dance. She’s fun. You’ll like her.”

Maybe some drinking and dancing are in order for me—I can’t remember the last time I let loose. I don’t want to give everyone the wrong first impression of me, but I also don’t want to insult anyone by not accepting their offered hospitality.

We arrive at the offices of the Post, a very unimpressive, unkempt building, and I follow Hilda inside. I’m a little surprised when she heads down the stairs to a location below street level. I’ve never worked underground. It feels a little edgy and mysterious, but I wonder if it’s for safety reasons or maybe it’s simple economics and the space is cheaper.

There isn’t anything distinctive about the first heavy metal door she opens, bearing the number 1078, or the second door either. With only the click of our heeled shoes echoing in the corridor, we walk along a dark hallway, which opens to a space filled with dim lighting and desks scattered about the room.

There are maps taped on walls, papers bursting from filing cabinets, and books stacked everywhere. No one seems to notice our arrival as they continue pecking away on their computers.

“Everyone! Bella is here.” Hilda grins and steps to the side, putting me in full view.

I give a small wave. “It’s me.”

Before Hilda can make introductions, a hearty woman with shoulder-length, bronze hair and blue eyes walks over from her desk to greet me, offering her hand. “Nice to meet yer. I’m Siobhan.”

“Hello. I’m Isabella Swan, but my friends call me, Bella.” I smile and give her hand a polite squeeze. “You don’t sound German. I’m sorry that was probably rude and I’m stating the obvious.”

“Naw. I would think not. I’m Irish. This is me lassy, Maggie.”

“Hi, Bella. That’s my mom if you couldn’t understand her,” Maggie explains.

I notice her bouncy curls move when she speaks. Her hair is a darker red, but she has blue eyes exactly like her mother.
Siobhan shakes her head. “Naw need to translate. I’m speaking Sasanach.”

“Sasanach?” I wonder.

“English. You’ll meet my father, tonight. His accent is worse.” Maggie laughs. “We’re a hodgepodge of nationalities here at the Post. I’m positive you will fit in with everyone.”

“Great.”

“Where’s mah new reporter?” A good-looking man heads our way after ending a call.

“Alistair?” I question, thinking, if this is him, then I’ve hit the sexy boss jackpot.

“Och aye, that’s me.” He grins from ear to ear. Alistair is quite the sight with his darker blond hair and blue eyes with a light bit of facial scruff, making him look ruggedly handsome. He looks even better than the few photos I was able to find of him on the internet. “Hullo, Bella. Ye come highly recommended. Carlisle has been singing yer praises. Emmett too.”

His Scottish accent leaves me hanging on his every word, but I blush wondering what Carlisle or Emmett has said about me. “Let’s hope I can live up to those.”

Another gorgeous blonde steps forward, and I’m noticing a distinct blonde trend here with me being the only brunette in addition to the two red-heads. “Hi, Bella. I’m Rosalie.”

“Nice to meet you. I hear we’re to be roommates.”

“It should be fun.” She looks at my driver with a twinkle in her eye, then gives me a warning. “Watch out for Hilda; she’ll get you in trouble, but sometimes that’s exactly what we need.”

A glance at Hilda’s smirk tells me I should take Rosalie’s advice, but there’s something about Hilda that makes me feel comfortable and more at ease than I’ve felt in a long time. I’m more than happy to embrace her friendship in whatever form that may take.

A younger man with longer, wavy blond hair steps forward, taking my offered hand and kissing the back. “I’m George. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Bella.”

“Likewise.” I offer a small smile at his British accent.

Rosalie rolls her eyes. “Really, George? Ignore him, Bella. He’s a player.”

“Rose, I am always a gentleman.” George winks.
“He didn’t deny it, did he?” she whispers.

“Binyamin is out on assignment. Ye will meet him when he gets back in the next couple of days. Aw right, let’s gather round and share with Bella what we’re working on right now,” Alistair suggests.

With voices full of passion and excitement, I’m immediately immersed in the current issues facing Germany and all of Europe, which leaves me excited and wondering exactly how I will fit in with my new location and multinational colleagues. But from what I can tell so far, this will be one adventure I will never forget.

-BCD-

“You know they say the best way to get over someone is to get under someone,” Rosalie tells me, as we lean against the bar, looking out over the dance floor.

I’m startled by her quick assessment, but shake my head, knowing I’m carrying the break up like an albatross around my neck for all to see. “I’ve heard that. He—”

“It’s always a ‘he’ isn’t it? Let’s forget about him, get wild, and have fun. I bet you’re long overdue.” She clinks her shot glass with mine, and we down them quickly. “Come dance with me.”

Rosalie doesn’t wait for my response and pulls me onto the dance floor to sweat away our problems and forget our worries for the evening with plans to stay until the early morning hours.

We came straight from work after I changed in the bathroom into one of the few dresses I brought with me, a simple spaghetti-strapped black dress with cutouts across the midriff. While the top of the dress looks more like a bra, it makes me feel sexy, revealing a bit of cleavage. Rosalie tsked when she saw the skirt length as it goes to above my knees, claiming next time out she will find something much shorter for me.

We’re at Feuer und Eis, which translated means Fire and Ice—a bar owned by Siobhan’s husband, William. The main room is lined with a flickering inferno of massive computer screens and lights, casting dark shadows on dancers from the red and orange flames. The place is packed and the dance floor is a hot, steamy mass of swaying bodies.

The ice bar is the complete opposite and enclosed in another room blanketed in blues and grays. Massive blocks of ice are used for seating and the room is kept at 10 degrees below zero. They have fur coats and gloves available for keeping you warm, but we’ve been hitting the Jägermeister ever since we arrived, which has us feeling no pain.
William has been talking with Alistair ever since we got here. Apparently, they are close friends, but I don’t miss when Alistair’s eyes follow me as we move about the dance floor.

Maybe I’m overthinking his interest and he’s just looking out for me. I know I need to stop being so cautious and start taking some chances when it comes to my life. I’ve been playing it safe for too long by not taking risks or speaking up, and look where it got me with Edward—another failed relationship.

I glance at Alistair again, wondering if I should ask him to dance. He’s extremely easy on the eyes, but before I can make a decision, I notice another woman pulling him from his seat and onto the dance floor.

Shaking off my indecision, I dance with Rosalie, Hilda, and Maggie. George is busy working the room, but he finds us too. We alternate between rooms, and it seems my time between shots is getting shorter and shorter before returning to the dance floor and losing myself in the music.

“I can be him, if it helps.” George holds onto my hips, moving in sync with me as he speaks directly in my ear over the loud booming beat.

I turn around and lock my hands behind his neck, giving him a questioning look, as his never leave my waist. I thought I was doing better at keeping Edward far from my thoughts, but maybe I’m not doing as good of a job as I thought.

“Him?” I try to play dumb, but George can see right through me.

He pulls me tightly against his body, his lips next to my ear. “Whoever fucked with your head—you’re clearly hung up on somebody. You need to let go.” He leans back slightly and nods in her direction, clarifying his offer. “Hilda will even join us, if you prefer.”

I’m shocked at his suggestion. “I don’t think—I mean, I’ve never—”

“Whenever you’re ready. The offer stands. Not just tonight. We’re all here for each other. We work and play together.”

My bleary eyes find Hilda’s as she sends me a wink, and I return a small smile, considering a whole new world of options.

George continues after taking my hand and pulling me from the dance floor. “Look, Bella. You’re smart and sexy as hell. He was a fool. You deserve better and should be living in the moment—not the past.”

I shake my head. “Maybe you’re right. This is a new beginning for me and I don’t want to repeat my previous mistakes. I made too many.”
He leans closer, kissing my cheek. “I’m certain he did too. Let’s get another round, my treat.” George guides me toward the bar, slipping a fur coat over my shoulders before we step through the door.

The bartender fills shot glasses with ice cold Jäger, then I’m prompted to take another one from the tray. This one goes down easy as I sway to the beat, letting the warmth take over my body. Our entire group gathers in a corner of the bar, which is dark but cast in deep, gray-blue shadows. While the cold air is a wonderful reprieve from the heat, it chills my skin and nipples, heightening the desire that’s been building between my legs from the not-so-subtle touches while dancing with my new co-workers all night.

I slide my arms into the heavy fur coat, but its large size causes it to fall from one of my shoulders. The fur brushes softly against the bare skin of my legs, back, and arms until I feel a shoulder strap from my dress being replaced with warm lips. An arm slides inside my coat and around my waist, pulling me closer. My eyes close as I enjoy the exploring touches of curious lips, trailing lower until a finger nudges away the material of my dress and a hot mouth wraps around my bare, pert nipple. I’m leaning against the cloth-covered wall when my head falls backward, and a moan escapes my lips lost among the pounding bass.

A hand squeezes and teases my breast while another hand slides lower, then higher, moving past the hem and pushing aside the dainty material of my damp panties as a cold fingertip glides easily through the warm, wet heat of my arousal. A gentle finger becomes two, dipping in and out of my body as I readjust my stance, opening my legs wider, silently begging for more. A tongue circles my nipple, lapping and sucking the hardened peak before finding my mouth. I break away as my chest heaves, gasping for breath when I hear words whispered in a language not familiar to my mind, but one my body knows all too well. I’m helpless but to surrender, falling over the edge of oblivion at the prompting of a relentless mouth and masterful fingers.

-BCD-

It feels like a dream with darkness all around, but I’m floating on a cloud of bliss, numb in some areas, tingling in others. My dress lost somewhere between the door and bed. My back is cushioned by layers of fur and silk, cocooning me in a nest of warmth. My eyes no longer attempt to open as my body responds to the pushes and pulls of sweet caresses then more adamant twists and tilts. Mouths and hands worship curves of soft, smooth skin. Tongues tangle and probe areas full of need and want. Soft nibbles and delicate licks give way to a more fevered pace of desperation, as cries, pleading for more echo throughout the room. The fire inside me builds over and over, reaching the highest highs, diving into great depths of pleasure until I drift off deeper into dreamland unable to move and thoroughly sated.

Soft light of an early morning bathes the room in a gentle glow when I wake gradually noticing my surroundings. I’m naked in a bed full of soft covers, but I’m not alone. I wonder where I am
as nothing about this room looks familiar. I glance to the body next to me and push back the wild blonde hair, revealing the face of my companion for the night. The arm wrapped around my waist tightens slightly as a soft moan escapes her lips. Hilda.

Bits and pieces of our evening together take shape as I try to recall the previous night and early morning hours. My nipples pucker and my arousal increases at recollections of her loving touch and reverent care to meet my instinctive needs. Gently, I stroke her hair, then my fingers move lower. They drift along the soft skin of her back, following the path of her spine, up and down as she wakes slowly.

“Mmmmm, Bella.” Hilda brushes her lips over my shoulder, then her sleepy blue eyes find mine. “Good morning.”

She’s on her stomach and reaches up for a quick peck of my lips, but I hold her head in place, returning her kiss with a little more heat than she’s expecting and groaning when she pulls away.

“You’re happy?” She grins. “More?”

“Mmmmm. Good morning. Yes, I’m happy, but…” I’m a little embarrassed by my next admission and look away from her concerned expression, insecurity seeping into my voice. While this may be some sort of normal for Hilda, nothing about this situation is normal for me. “I-I’ve never… I’ve never been with a woman before. Dear God, did I even know what to do? Was it…?”

Her finger tilts my chin until our eyes meet. “I did not know. You are a natural lover. Man or woman, it does not matter. I’m honored to be your first.”

I let out a gasp of relief. “This isn’t going to be weird, is it? With us working together?”

“Vy wouuld it? I don’t care who knows. Do you?”

I pause, thinking about my answer for a moment, and smiling at Hilda when I realize that, for the first time in forever, I don’t care who knows. “No, I don’t, but I probably should have told you I ended a relationship not long ago.”

“Edvard?”

“Oh, okay. It sounds like I told you.” A new wave of embarrassment warms me from head to toe.

Apparently, new me has no secrets, which is probably an improvement over old me.

“You said last night you wanted to forget him and have fun.”
“What if I can’t? Forget about him, I mean.”

“He broke your heart. I will fix it. If you take him back, it will be stronger next time.”

“I don’t see that happening any time soon. If ever. I’ve had my fill of being dicked around.”

“Lucky me. I will not dick you, promise.” She eases away the sheet covering my naked form, then settles between my legs, kissing and licking until I’m gasping with need and begging for more. “I will make you feel good, Bella. Then I will make you breakfast. My special hangover cure—it’s exactly what you need.”

As Hilda makes my toes curl and back arch, I realize she knows me better than I know myself. While my memories from last night are hazy, I find I’m more than happy to bring her to dizzying new heights. And this time around, I don’t miss her in the throes of ecstasy when she calls out my name and begs me for more. It’s something special I’ll never forget.
Chapter 19: The Letting Go

I’m thrilled when my work visa and residence permit arrives, making my stay here more permanent. It’s been two months since I landed in Berlin, and I’m settling into work and my new home with Hilda and Rosalie nicely when the texts begin.

Perhaps he’s lonely, but I snort at the impossibility of that thought and try to ignore his attempt at a conversation, since I’ve said all I need to say. Instead, I reach out to a friend who is more like a sister and I will always need in my life.

The six-hour time difference means it’s late, after midnight for me, while she’s just made it home from work.

“Tell me about life in Berlin.”

“Angela, it’s incredible. Everything here feels more real—raw and gritty. As if I’m on the frontlines and on the cusp of something groundbreaking rather than stuck in an office building only focused on my next deadline. I understand why Carlisle travels so much.”

“How’s your boss?”

“Generous and kind.” I giggle. “Incredibly sexy.”

“Like Emmett sexy?”

A smile spreads across my face at her admission. He’s always had a bit of a crush on Angela, and I’m happy to know that he hasn’t gone unnoticed by her. “No, definitely higher levels than that.”

“You’ll have to send me a picture. Are you getting along with your roommates?”

“Absolutely. Rosalie is a dream, but her work is just unbelievable. One picture captures so much. Wait until you see it. We’re working on a project together.”

“And your other roommate?”

“Hilda. Oh, God where to start.” Let’s hope the bottle of wine we shared earlier doesn’t reveal too much truth as I can hardly hold back. We spent most of the evening kissing and cuddling on
the couch, sharing the details of our day apart while working on different stories. But now, she’s at the dining table, typing away, and I’m calling Angela from our bedroom.

I have my own bedroom in her apartment, but I have yet to sleep a single night there, choosing only to use it to store my clothes and other items I brought to Berlin. It feels good she wants to share it with me and has no trouble making me an important part of her life. We just click. She makes me feel not only needed but wanted.

My attraction to her wasn’t something I ever expected happening, but it grows stronger every day. There’s no hiding our relationship, which is easy and refreshing. I never have to wonder how she feels or what she’s thinking because she is always open and honest, leaving no room for any insecurities.

“Ang, she is so badass and doesn’t give a shit what anyone thinks. She’s strong and confident. She knows who she is, and heaven help anyone who crosses her. I’m always in awe of her network of friends, and I know deep down, I wish I were more like her in every way. She’s so free and passionate—purposeful about everything she does.”

“You sound quite smitten.”

And turned on at the thought of Hilda in the other room, waiting for me to finish my call so we can crawl into bed together. “I am definitely that. I can’t wait for you to meet her.”

“Hmmm, we’ll see. I saw your dad the other day.”

“You did?” I’m surprised.

“Yes, Ben and I saw him out at a restaurant with Nora. I think they’re still going strong.”

“Good. I want him to be happy, and if she does that for him, then I’m all for it. I haven’t talked to him in a while since I’m sure he’s busy.”

“We only said ‘hi’ briefly, but he looks good.”

I laugh. “You sound like Dem.”

“I doubt that. Have you heard from him?”

“Yes, he said he’s moving clubs. A new one is opening in Coral Way. He’s excited.”

“We should go watch his show when you’re back.”
I’m silent at the suggestion, since I’m only beginning to hit my stride here. “Ang, I’m not sure when that will be.”

“Are we talking months?”

“Uh, my residence permit is for three years.”

“Three years? You aren’t coming back for three years?”

“Like I said, I don’t know.”

“What if something major happens, like I get married or have a baby? Are you going to miss those events?”

“Did Ben ask?”

“No! But maybe I should, if it will get your ass back here, if only for a visit. I miss you so damn much. We’ve been together for years and it’s weird not having you here.”

“Ang, I miss you too.”

“I know you have to do this, Bella, and I’m sorry for sounding so clingy. Maybe I should ask Ben to move in with me.”

“Does it feel like the right thing to do?”

“Yes, I love him so much. I don’t know what I’m waiting for because when you know what you want, why wait, right?”

“Sounds like you have it figured out.”

“I have some other news you should probably hear.”

“Why does that sound ominous?”

“It’s a mix. I found out who Katie Marshall is... as in Katie Marshall-Yorkie. She’s married to Eric Yorkie and also happens to be someone’s ex.”

“It’s okay; you can say his name,” I reassure, but that uneasy feeling in my stomach at the mention of him never seems to diminish.

“It turns out those pictures we saw on the D.C’s Daily Chatter’s website had Eric cropped out.”
“Why am I not surprised? Now that I think back on it, I believe it was someone named ‘Eric’ who I replaced on the show. Maybe they’re all friends.”

“Because some people actually have mature relationships with their exes? Maybe you should take note, Bella. I would say with 100% certainty that Edward was there with Katie and Eric—her husband.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat. “He keeps texting and emailing. I believe there are a few voicemails too.”

“Finally, it took him long enough to get his head out of his ass. I can’t believe he waited until you were gone, but it probably took him that long to find his balls. Did you listen to what he had to say or simply tell him to go to hell?”

“Uh… I haven’t responded yet.”

“You’re ignoring him?”

“I’m at a loss how to respond. I start feeling like a better version of my old self, then bam, it’s like a grenade at the beginning of my day and I’m completely lost after that. I suspect he only texts or emails when he’s in bed or alone. It sucks that’s the only time when he thinks about me, which is one of the reasons why it wasn’t working between us. Maybe I should block his number and email.”

“Don’t do that. Your heart doesn’t want you to do that and you know it. You love him, and what if he loves you? Why would you want to throw that chance away?”

“I don’t know, Ang. What if loving someone isn’t enough? Or maybe he loves a lot of someones. We never got the words out after a year together. A year.”

“Did you feel like you wanted to say them, but didn’t because you were already hiding your relationship?”

“Possibly.”

“That’s what I thought. There was another post on the Daily Chatter recently you should know about. It was one of those blind items where they don’t share the names, but everyone knows who it is.”

“I can’t believe you’re still reading that site. I don’t dare take a peek.”

“I’m kind of addicted, but it’s probably good I filter it for you.”
There’s a long pause as I wait for the details. “Well?”

“There’s a vague post about a foursome on the rocks—a husband, wife, her sister, and the wife’s boyfriend.”

“Oh, God. I knew it.”

“Apparently, the husband and boyfriend were overheard arguing about the wife, as the sister was threatening to expose all in an effort to break up the marriage and keep the husband for herself.”

“Holy shit. I’m so glad I’m not there for that.”

“Now, remember, it doesn’t mean Edward’s actually her boyfriend and Irina could be using him to get what she wants. She and Tanya are masters of manipulation.”

“Maybe that’s why he’s contacting me?” I mumble to myself, groaning at a new realization. “Oh, God, Ang. A single Tanya, now there’s a frightening thought. If she hasn’t landed Edward before now, after the divorce, she will be relentless and ready to swoop in at any vulnerable moment.”

“She can’t be that bad.”

“You’re entitled to your own opinion.”

“I know, but when we hate, we hate together. I’ll always have your back, Bella.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too. I better let you get to sleep. Maybe I’ll talk with you in a week?”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll look forward to it. Bye, Ang.”

“Good night, Bella.”

I end the call, plug my phone into my charger, and wait on the bed as I listen to Hilda move around the apartment, shutting everything down for the night. I consider ripping off my shirt and underwear, thinking she may enjoy finding me completely nude in bed, but I don’t get a chance before she enters the bedroom, turning off the last of the lights.

I watch as she unbuttons her jeans, pushing them from her legs and leaves on only her T-shirt and underwear. She crawls across the bed until she’s hovering above me. “Now, you are all mine?” She kisses the tip of my nose.
My hands start at her waist, then move upward until I’m cupping her chest over the thin T-shirt, squeezing her breasts. “Yes, all yours.”

She moans when the nails of my thumbs flick across her nipples, and I urge her to move higher on my body. I alternate sucking her nipples over her shirt.

“Zo good, Bella.” She grinds against me, seeking the friction I know she so desperately needs.

I pull away from her chest. “Higher.”

She moves until she’s straddling my mouth and my tongue reaches out to touch her cloth-covered clit, licking at the wet spot while my hands squeeze her ass cheeks.

My tentative licks aren’t enough for either of us, and I slide her underwear to the side, then my hands urge her closer to my mouth. “Hold on to the headboard.”

Her legs shift and widen when she moves, and I immediately dive in licking and sucking everywhere my mouth will reach.

I use my fingers to trace between her legs, coating them with her wetness until I pause sliding a single finger in her opening, beginning a slow, gentle pace, fucking her with my finger.

“Bella, pleaze,” she begs, then gasps when I ease a second finger inside her, never faltering when I suck her into my mouth as my tongue swirls across her clit.

“Mmmmm.” I moan when my fingers glide more easily and readjust my position until I’m lapping the wetness of her opening, shoving my tongue inside her, thrusting it in and out as far as it will reach.

“Ohhh.” Her hips tilt back and forth furiously across my mouth and tongue as I brace my hands on the backs of her thighs, holding her tightly.

I hang on as she rides my face and work my tongue diligently where she needs it most. Her body seizes, but I continue to draw out her pleasure until she is too sensitive for me to continue.

“You’re a fast learner.” She chuckles, peeling off her T-shirt and dropping it on the floor.

I pause between licks not wanting to miss a single bit. “I have an excellent teacher.”

She pulls away from my face and settles next to me on the bed until we’re spooning with her front to my back.
Her arms wrap around me as one hand reaches under my shirt, squeezing my breast, and the other slides under the edge of my panties between my legs.

“Zo vet.” A fingertip toys with my clit as my hips thrust forward seeking more.

I’m worked up from making her come, and I know she’ll have me out of control in no time at all.

With one hand, Hilda pulls my shirt from my body, tossing it to the floor, then plucks at my nipples while her mouth sucks on my neck and a second finger rubs me with increased fervor.

“Oh, God.” My back arches as my ass moves against her, loving the feel of her bare breasts rubbing against my back.

Her fingers are precise, playing me like a fine instrument as I feel the distinct pressure of teeth marks, then sucking on the side of my neck.

I gasp, stilling as my orgasm begins and her fingers continue, massaging my clit to completion as I’m tumbling through waves of euphoria.

I glance down to where she’s touching me, and I watch her hand move lower under my panties to my opening where her fingers slide easily in and out of my body.

“Oh, Hilda.” My eyes close in a wash of submission at the rush of feelings she creates.

She leaves a trail of kisses along my back and shoulder until she urges me to roll from my side and onto my back with her hand still buried between my legs as her fingers pick up their pace.

“Again,” she requests. Her mouth moves along my neck, assaulting it with her kisses, and I’m compliant to her demanding lips, tilting my head back and giving her greater access. “I’ll make you come again.”

Her mouth lowers to my chest, sucking my nipples as I grab onto her arm, needing to hold on to her, and moan when the overwhelming feeling to come builds once more.

“Mark me,” I beg as my hips tilt, writhing against her hand. “Please.”

My nipple falls from her mouth as her half-lidded eyes find mine. “Zo everyone can zee or only me?”

“Everyone.” I guide her head back to my neck where she increases her efforts. My hand laces through her hair as I hold her in place and encourage, “Harder.”
She obliges, and the sting from the suction of her mouth leaves me feeling victorious while two of her fingers fuck me vigorously, pushing me near the edge and barreling headfirst into another orgasm.

“Bella.” Hilda moves back to my chest, sucking and nibbling my nipples. Her fingers and mouth never relent until I fall over the edge of a second release.

Her hand slows, bringing me down slowly while her tongue pushes past my lips, sharing gentle kisses until I’m a pile of mush and at her mercy again.

She pulls away, admiring her mark in the only light of the moon pouring through the window, as her fingertip traces along my neck and over the spot she’s left. Her eyes find mine and her smile is contagious as a lazy one spreads across my lips. I feel drugged from the endorphins pulsing through my body and can no longer keep my eyes open, drifting along the edge of dreamland.

“Zleep, beautiful Bella,” she whispers, wrapping her body around mine. “I vill love you again tomorrow.”

-BCD-

“If we can’t get in, then I will never find them, Bella.” Binyamin sags against the wall in defeat before we’ve made any new progress.

He’s been searching for his mother, Amina, and sister, Saarah Aldeen, who left Syria, while he was attending college in England. Binyamin fled Syria years ago when he was given two choices: join ISIS or die. With a little money, he successfully made his way to his destination through the Balkan route, but not without enduring his own share of heartache along the way.

During his time in England, he received word from a childhood friend who said his mother and sister were headed to Germany from Turkey. But it has been years without contact and he’s afraid they didn’t survive the trip. With Hungary establishing a rigid, permanent border made of high razor topped fencing with Serbia, a new Western Balkan route has emerged, and now he fears for their safety, if they were to attempt this dangerous route.

We got a tip that there are lists held in this office of refugee affairs that may hold the key to finding his family or at least give him some answers. This is the location where they turn the original handwritten lists from years ago into computer-generated ones. The lists then become easily searchable, but it’s a slow process and not available to the public or anyone outside of the office. Volunteers from years ago were overwhelmed with processing the numbers of asylum seekers and resorted to handwritten logbooks.

We aren’t exactly here on business, since this particular trip is personal, but with some persistent prodding, Binyamin has confided in me what he’s been doing with all of his free time
outside of work. He requested access to search the logbooks, but was denied, giving him no reason or explanation. After seeing his disappointment at the setback, Rosalie and I offered to do everything possible to assist him, and it turns out she’s a master locksmith. Her skills have been essential in getting us this far, and I have faith she’ll come through again.

“Binyamin, if they’re in Germany, we’ll find them. We’ll use Hilda’s connections if we need them or figure out a way to get inside the camps here. This isn’t over by a long shot. Once Rosalie unlocks the door, we can get into the office and have unfettered access to the lists until morning. I’m hoping between the three of us searching, they will tell us which camp they are in and where to find them.”

“If they made it. My mother doesn’t speak English or German and we don’t have enough time to go through everything so closely. What if what she told them and what they wrote were two different things? What if they used different versions of their names to protect me or themselves?”

“There are Arabic translators.”

“Now, but not then when they may have arrived.”

“We have to stay positive that they made it. She’s strong like you. Remember that. Are you sure your father isn’t with them?”

Binyamin shakes his head. “He joined the Free Syrian Army when it all began and was fighting with those who opposed the President. There have been massacres for years of innocents and opposition fighters. No one knows where he is. He could be anywhere, but if they have left the camps in Turkey, then I believe he could be dead and they were coming to find me. What if they are sick or hurt?”

“Let’s worry about that when we find them.”

Rosalie returns around the corner with a smile on her face and waves for us to follow her as we move silently through the open door of another room. We may not be able to create another opportunity like this one, and I’m hoping we will find Binyamin’s answers.

Once we’re safely enclosed in the dark room, I point my flashlight around and realize the magnitude of our task at hand. There are hundreds of books lining the walls, and I open one to find logs of handwritten pages. I can figure out some of the writing, but still need help translating most German. “Todesursache?”

“Cause of death,” Binyamin whispers, pouring over the pages of a logbook.
“Shit,” I mutter, re-shelving the book, moving to a different section in favor of another. I’m not about to give up hope by searching through the death lists. I have to believe they are still alive, and only after we’ve gone through the other lists will I consider going back to those.

The hours tick by and we’re no closer to finding Binyamin’s family than we were when we began. We carefully return everything to its original location and leave the building undetected, agreeing to part ways for a few hours of sleep until we all need to arrive for work.

Hilda is gone when Rosalie and I return to our apartment. I collapse exhausted from our overnight search, but my mind won’t calm, as it races through other avenues and possibilities for how we may locate Binyamin’s mother and sister. Someone somewhere has to know something, and I’m determined to find out. We need the ability to search all refugee camps, and not just those in Berlin, but all of Germany and neighboring countries.
Chapter 20: The Kidnapping

“Carlisle, there were fifteen hundred empty beds. Empty! The people here spent so much time and money establishing these emergency reception centers, and they aren’t even being used because the government has chosen not to accept more refugees. It’s unbelievable!” I pace back and forth.

“Bella—”

“Communication is the biggest struggle since most don’t know English, let alone German.”

“Language is always a barrier.”

“I’m still struggling with the language and I didn’t just survive a harrowing escape from a country where my continued presence would only lead to my torture or death. Do you have any idea the traumas they have experienced to make the journey here? Many suffer from depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and PTSD. Mothers, children, and adolescents have witnessed murder or violence along the way, and don’t get me started with the splitting up of families.”

“I know.”

“The reception center we toured was an abandoned hospital with bathrooms in most rooms. There’s even a playground—they built a playground for the children. Can you believe it?

“Translators, doctors, and psychiatrists are available too. They have this incredible volunteer network in place to help refugees transition to a better life, but there’s an expiration date. They only have access to these services for six months. When their time is up, they are transferred to one of the municipalities, which can’t support their needs because they lack funding and manpower. The refugees lose whatever privacy and social services they gained for a bed in a gym until residential housing becomes available. And who knows when that will be, as it’s all tied up in political bullshit.”

“Bella, be careful when speaking out against any government policies,” he warns.

“But they have the power to make this right and are part of the problem.”

“You’re an American living in a foreign country. Respect and follow the laws,” he reminds me.

“Carlisle, you told me to fight for them, and that’s what I’m here doing. I will not back down now.”
“You can’t do that from a prison cell or worse. Bella, your safety—”

“Do you expect me to stand by and do nothing?”

“Of course not, but please be careful.”

“Have you heard about the other camps? The ones outside of Germany?”

“Yes. The conditions in Italy and Greece are deplorable. And now so many refugees are being sent back by the governments to those locations.”

“What? What are you talking about, Carlisle?”

“The ruling was handed down recently by the European Court of Justice that countries can return refugees to the point of entry—the first country in the European Union where they claimed asylum. They can’t claim asylum in Greece then migrate to Germany and claim asylum there too. They are already protected in Greece.”

“So, despite all the suffering to get here, they can’t stay.”

“Correct—countries can send them back beyond the borders to camps in other neighboring countries.”

“Oh, God. I wonder if that’s what happened with Binyamin’s mother and sister?”

“Is that your co-worker you told me about?”

“Yes, we can’t find them here in Germany. What if they were here then sent back to Greece? There has to be documentation, right?”

“There should be, but of the eight thousand deported by Germany, most went to Italy and only a few went to Greece.”

“You think they could be in the Italian camps? But I doubt that was their initial port of entry.”

“Yes, and you said it’s been years since he’s heard from them. If their reception permit has expired in one country, they could seek asylum in another country. There’s also the possibility they didn’t—”

“They made it. I have to believe they made it and we will find them somewhere.”
“I understand your need to help, but stick to Germany and write your stories from there. I’m sure there’s plenty to keep you busy.”

“Bella!” Hilda shouts from the other room.

“I have to go, Carlisle. Thanks for listening.”

“All right, Bella. Keep me in the loop and be safe. Oh, and Bella—”

“Yeah?”

“Happy birthday. We’ll have dinner on my next trip to Berlin.”

“Thanks, Carlisle. I’ll look forward to it.” I end my call and wonder what has Hilda yelling for me. After pocketing my phone, I find my roommates at our kitchen table. “What’s up?”

Rosalie grins. “You’ve been keeping secrets from us.”

“I don’t follow.”

Hilda crosses her arms over her chest. “Vy didn’t you tell us it vas your birthday? Halistair just texted me.”

“We should make plans. I’ll call Binyamin.” Rosalie takes out her phone.

I groan not wanting to make a big deal about my birthday. Last year Edward and I escaped to Arizona for a few days together. I was so happy to enjoy the hot desert sun and be us without having to look over my shoulder, wondering if we were recognized by someone from the small fishbowl of D.C.

What a difference a year makes. While those memories are special, they are also bittersweet, and I know if I don’t give in to their plans, they will get out of control. Maybe if I’m involved, I can contain their ideas.

“Nothing too wild. I’ve got interviews scheduled for this afternoon and tomorrow,” I hedge.

Rosalie suggests, “What if we all meet up after work? Have drinks and a little dinner. Maybe a cake—”

I hold my hands up in surrender. “All right, but that’s it. Nothing fancy; think easy and casual.”

Hilda smiles. “I know the perfect place. I vill text you the address, Rozalie.”
“Okay, keep me posted.” Rosalie grabs her camera bag and walks toward the door. “I’m off. See you later.”

“What about me? Don’t I get to know?” I pout, hoping she will share the details with me too.

Hilda leans over and pecks my lips. “I will pick you up and maybe a zurprise for later? Ve can invite George back.”

“George?” My brow cringes in confusion. “Why would we want to invite him here?”

“I understand you are probably mizzling things.” Her hand cups my breast gently, then her thumb brushes across my nipple.

I groan. “You don’t play fair.”

My nipples have a mind of their own ever since I had them pierced at Hilda’s suggestion. We were out one night, and she suggested tattoos. But when we got to the shop, I bailed on the idea, and she suggested we get our clits pierced instead. While she went through with it, I ended up getting my nipples pierced, and once they healed, I’ve been in an almost nonstop state of arousal when I’m around her. The slightest look or casual touch has me ready for more.

“I like you a little on edge.” Her lips press against mine once more.

“Hilda,” I say, and hold her in place, staring lovingly into her eyes, “I want you to know that in no way do I feel like I’m missing a single thing.”

She smiles, stands, and gathers her things to leave. “I can wear a cock for you. Penetration is good. Vibration or not?”

I shake my head, but know I’m willing to try almost anything with her. “Surprise me—you always do.”

After a lingering kiss goodbye, Hilda is out the door, and my phone vibrates with a notification of another new message, and I decide it’s time to look at them.

The first is from Dem.

**Happy birthday, hot stuff! I’m coming to see you soon. Berlin will never be the same when we’re through with it. X**

The next is from Dad who is a man of few words, but at least there are words.

**Happy birthday, Bella. Call me.**
I know there won’t be a peep from my mother who thinks my career is the worst idea I’ve ever had, let alone being in Berlin. She wasn’t pleased when I told her about my moving abroad, and now, she’s giving me the silent treatment.

I’m excited with the news that Angela and Ben are living together, and she includes a recorded video of them waving at the camera with her birthday wishes.

“I hope you’re having a great birthday, Bella. I miss you so damn much! Love you!”

I move on to Jacob’s message, which includes an ultrasound photo.

Happy birthday, Bella. I have good news—I’m going to be a dad! Not much to see yet, but there’s a little sprout.

My heart breaks at what Leah must be going through if she’s pregnant. I know Jacob will be a great dad, but I’ll never be okay with the way they are forcing Leah to have children.

Emmett sends a photo of him with Hercules, which makes me miss them more than I thought possible.

HBD! Don’t be mad at me. I let it slip to Al the last time we spoke. I’m trusting him to embarrass you with an inappropriate birthday toast!

Let it slip. I don’t believe him for a second. He probably called Alistair specifically to let him know of my birthday and the best ways for embarrassing me.

Then there’s the last message I’ve been trying to ignore, but open it when my curiosity gets the best of me. There’s only a picture, and it’s one I didn’t know Edward took of me from behind while naked in the infinity pool, watching the sunset in Arizona. The warm colors of the area contrasting with the clear blue sky and dark shimmering water take me to those good times from our trip a year ago.

I wish… I wish we had gone about everything so differently. Who knows where we would be now. Maybe in the same place or maybe we would have crashed and burned, not making it even a year. I don’t regret the time with him or where I’m at now, but if we had a chance for a do-over, I wonder if our relationship would really be that different.

-BCD-

“Hilda, he was such an asshole. I mean, what about common courtesy?” I know I’m beating a dead horse, but I’m pissed and have been rehashing my disappointment over the abrupt way I
was dismissed from my last meeting of the day with the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

She hums her disapproval while her eyes shift slowly between the road and rearview mirror, weaving through traffic until something behind us gets her attention, her expression concerned.

“What is it?” I turn in my seat, trying to see behind us.

“Ve are being followed.”

My breathing increases with the roar of the engine. “What?”

“I vill loze them.” She shifts gears, and we fly past the other drivers along the highway.

“Are you sure? Who would follow us?”

“Ja, I’m zure. Perhaps, one of us asked the wrong question.” Her eyes glance over to mine, taking in my panicked state. “Calm down. I vill keep you zafe.”

“But who would it be? Someone from the refugee center? Why in the world would they be following us?”

Hilda shrugs. “I don’t know. Could be a government agent.”

“Fuck.”

“It vill be fine, Bella. Our exit is zoon.”

While Hilda races through evening traffic, I rack my mind with the possibilities, thinking over the interviews I’ve had the past week, wondering if I’ve unknowingly struck a nerve with someone.

I’m lost in thought until we pull into a parking spot and she shuts off the engine then turns off the lights.

I look around at the darkness and whisper, “Did you lose them?”

“Ja, don’t worry. Ve are here to celebrate.” She smiles then leans over and pecks my lips. “Come on, time for fun.”

“Hilda, wait.” I grab her arm before she gets out.

“What is it?”
“Thank you.”

“It is only drinks and dinner as you requested.”

“Not just for tonight, but ever since I arrived. You’ve been such a wonderful friend a-and lover—everything I needed. I can’t thank you enough.”

Her eyes scan my face as she tucks my hair carefully behind my ear. “Bella, I know you still love him, but it’s pozzible to love more than one perzon at a time.”

“I’m realizing that.” I smile and reach over, threading my fingers through her soft blonde hair, tilting her head, and pulling her closer until our lips meet over and over.

Familiar moans fill the tiny interior of her car as leather seats groan in protest with our movements while wandering hands seek more of everything.

Hilda pulls away from my bruising kisses, gasping for air as I continue my assault on her neck while my hand finds its way between her legs caressing her there.

“Bella—oh fuck!” She moans as I apply more pressure. “There’s not enough space.”

“God, you drive me crazy.” I pant, ignoring her protests, crushing my mouth to hers once more, and pushing my tongue past her soft lips.

Our tongues tangle together until she pulls away, panting as her chest heaves. “Oh, Bella. What you do to me.”

“Mmmm. The feeling is mutual.” I grin and lean in for one more kiss.

“Good. I vill fuck you vith cock later.” She smirks.

“You bought me a strap-on for my birthday?” I ask, only slightly shocked after our conversation this morning.

She shrugs. “Double dick—pleasure for both of us. There’s nothing wrong vith cock. Uzually, the problem is the man connected to it.”

I chuckle at her honesty. “Oh, Hilda. What am I going to do with you?”

“Hopefully, everything your heart dezires.” She winks and smiles, leaning in for one more quick peck on the lips. “Let’s go have fun.”

We exit the car, meeting at the back, and walk hand in hand toward the restaurant.
“Bella, ve have a chore for you.” Hilda hands me a toothbrush tied with a pink satin bow.

“A toothbrush? What do you expect me to do with it?” I wonder.

Rosalie explains, “It’s German tradition for an unmarried woman turning thirty to clean the doorknobs. It shows you know how to keep house in an effort to find you a match. You will have completed the task when someone of the opposite sex gives you a kiss.”

“This is one of the craziest traditions I’ve ever heard. You expect me to clean the doorknobs here? In this bar?”

“Yes, and while you’re busy, we’ll be here eating your delicious cake.” Maggie giggles, shoving another forkful into her smiling mouth.

I turn to my right. “George, will you kiss me and save me from this humiliation?”

“Oh, sure. Now you want my kisses.” He winks. “Not a chance, love. Get to cleaning and show us what you’ve got.”

I glance across the table. “Binyamin?”

His eyes dart to Hilda. “Sorry, Bella. I’ve been warned to keep my lips to myself.”

I look over at my boss who’s grinning from ear to ear. “Alistair?”

“Emmett had me swear Ah would send him pictures and video. Maybe you’ll attract attention with yer skills. Ah hear the ones here are especially dirty.”

My eyes scan the table, finding everyone excited to watch me complete the chore, and direct my comment at Hilda. “Fine. You and your traditions.”

“You only turn thirty once.” Her smile widens. “My kizzes von’t zave you, Bella. Svay thoze hips! You need to attract more than me.”

I raise an eyebrow at Hilda in challenge, then unfasten two buttons of my blouse, playing along. “Sounds like you want a naughty housekeeper.”

“You know it!” She grins, clapping her hands.
Everyone hoots and hollers at my suggestion as I move toward the front door of the bar with my new toothbrush in hand. Thankfully, I’m a bit buzzed or else I would never have the courage to create a display of such seductive moves here in public. I make a show of every bending and stretching movement, taking each opportunity to tantalize and tease with my body while moving from door to door around the bar.

I’m heckled playfully the entire time by not only my co-workers, but also the other patrons of the bar. Everyone laughs and shouts encouragement in my performing this birthday chore until George slides his hands around my waist. He spins me around and bends me backward for a heart-stopping kiss.

My reaction takes me by surprise and I kiss him back with everything I have, giving me tingles from head to toe. I’m overwhelmed as I realize how much I miss the comfort of being held in a man’s arms and the scratch from his scruff along my neck while George kisses a trail to the tops of my breasts, leaving me wanting more.

When George pulls away, his eyes lock with mine. “That was quite the show.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You liked what you saw?”

“I always do. Come on, love.” He smiles, standing me upright and lacing our fingers together.

We are showered with a room full of applause as we walk back to the table where he takes my seat next to Hilda and settles me on his lap. I wrap my arm around his shoulders while his large hand rubs against the top of my thigh as the other holds me in place.

“Congratulations, Bella.” Maggie giggles, then elbows Binyamin. “No one saw that coming.”

I catch a wink from Hilda before my eyes close at the touch of George’s lips on my neck.

“Aw right, lovebirds. Settle down, settle down.” Alistair pours another round of shots and proposes a toast. “Happy birthday, Bella. We can all hope to have our knobs cleaned with such expertise.”

“To Bella!” everyone cheers, then we down our shots.

I smile down at George who gives me a lingering kiss on the lips, then I whisper in his ear. “I’m going to go find the bathroom.”

“You want some company?” He wiggles his eyebrows. “We can be quick.”

“George, I don’t think speed is going to win me over.” I chuckle and shake my head at his persistence, wondering if I’m ready to be with a man again.
“It’s like running a marathon with you. I can be patient, but if you’re interested in all night, I can do that too.”

“You wait here. I’ll be right back.”

George helps me stand from his lap, and I don’t miss how his hands linger along my legs and ass, giving it a squeeze.

“Bella, are you going to the bathroom?” Rosalie asks.

“Yes.”

“I need to go too.”

George reaches out for my hand, pulling me closer, tilting his head back, and puckering for another kiss. “Hurry back.”

I smile, kissing his lips once more. “I will.”

We weave between the crowded tables until we see the sign directing us down a dark hallway. The bathroom is small but empty. With only one stall, I go first while Rosalie waits by the sink, primping in the mirror.

I hear the door to the bathroom open as Rosalie chuckles. “Bella, you are such a good sport. Isn’t George a good kisser? I turn thirty next month and—”

I wait for her to finish her comment, but sober immediately as it sounds like someone is struggling outside the stall.

“Rose?”

I hurry to finish and unlock the door to the stall as the door to the bathroom closes. I rush outside the room, looking for Rose, when I bump into someone coming from the opposite direction.

“Oh, sorry. I’m looking for my friend. Did you see anyone go—?”

I’m yanked into the darker area of the hallway where I’m pulled tightly against another body and a hand closes over my mouth. All of my years of Dad’s self-defense training kick in, but I’m no match for my attacker. I struggle against this other person who is much taller and stronger than I am. I can’t make out anything in the darkness, and whoever it is drags me easily toward an exit at the back of the bar past the bathrooms.
As we are pushing through the exit door and toward a waiting vehicle, I hear the words of an angel.

“Bella?”

I kick and squirm, fighting to be released from the strong hold of my captor with no success as my muffled voice shouts for Hilda.

I look back toward the door as Hilda pushes through the exit, shouting for me.

“Bella!”

Another dark figure appears beside me, raising a gun. I lunge toward the person, but I’m held in place as the gun goes off, stopping Hilda’s pursuit immediately. I see her drop to the ground as my muffled screams rip through me.

_No! Hilda! No!

I’m shoved into the back of a dark vehicle where someone else grabs my wrists and ankles, binding them quickly. I struggle against the restraints, then there’s a pinch to my arm, and I know that soon whatever fight I have in me will drain away. It’s dark where I’m sitting, eliminating all hope of recognizing anyone around me as my blinks slow.

The hand that’s covering my mouth pulls away eventually, and my chest heaves for air. My pleading words change to sobs for Hilda, hoping someone will find her and get her help.

I’m still struggling against my tight bindings as the vehicle begins moving. It’s difficult to hear anything in my panic with the blood pounding in my ears, and it doesn’t take long before my mind becomes fuzzy.

Gradually, I feel all of my muscles relaxing and my body go limp as the sound of the tires against the road lulls me into a deep sleep.
Chapter 21: The Captivity

My head is pounding as I shift on the bed. I can feel the warmth of Hilda sleeping beside me. I roll over snuggling up next to her, wrapping my arm and leg around her body as my lips seek hers, but only find the soft skin of her neck here in the darkness. My hand moves under her shirt to her chest until I’m cupping her bare breast that feels larger than normal. I thought she wore a bra to dinner and the bar, but maybe she took it off at some point. I don’t think twice, giving it an appreciative squeeze, rubbing my thumb across the nipple as it stiffens at my touch. We must have fallen asleep with our clothes on last night since it feels like we’re both fully dressed.

“Mmmm,” she moans, waking slowly when I tweak her nipple.

I shift higher until my lips find hers, then she returns my kisses gradually, her desire building with every kiss as she wakes. My hand releases her breast and slips past the waistband of her pants and underwear, moving between her legs. I stroke her back and forth until my fingers move easily through her wetness, pushing one then two fingers inside of her as she groans, spreading her legs wider. Her hips tilt upward, seeking more, and I pick up my pace, slipping my fingers in and out of her body.

I know Hilda swears by her favorite hangover cure of orgasms and pancakes. But despite how horrible I feel, I’ll take care of her first, then get up and make us breakfast.

My thumb moves to her clit as I rub back and forth, but I realize something isn’t right.

Something’s missing.

Her piercing.

My brow furrows in confusion when I pull my lips from hers, but my eyes can’t focus or make out any of her distinguishing features without light. “Hilda?”

“Bella?” She pants, gasping for breath as her hips tilt higher, seeking more of my touch.

My fingers still inside her as I recognize that voice. “Rose?”

“Oh, fuck. You’re so loud and my head hurts,” she groans.
“Oh, God.” I withdraw my hand from between her legs instantly. “I was about to—I thought you were—”

Rose pants with need, clearly worked up from my touch, but I’m not about to continue when she probably thought I was someone else and I thought she was Hilda.

I try to get my bearings of our situation, lowering my voice. “I’m so sorry, Rose. I didn’t know it was you. Fuck. I can’t see anything. Do you think we’re alone?”

“I don’t know, Bella. I thought I was dreaming. Are we in my bed? I can’t tell.”

I reach out to my side, trying to touch anything familiar, and lean over until my hand hits the floor too soon. “It feels like we’re on a mattress on the floor. Is there anyone on your other side?”

“No, it’s the wall.”

I listen for anything other than Rose’s labored breathing coming from the darkness, but hear nothing. The silence between us is comfortable until my mind races away with more questions of our current predicament.

I keep my voice low and soft, not wanting to alarm Rose while my own fears start to surface. “I think it’s only us. Where do you think we are?”

“Not the apartment,” she whispers, twisting and turning next to me. “I can’t see anything either.”

“What’s the last thing you remember from last night?”

“You sitting with George. It seemed like you enjoyed yourself.”

Her words distract me for a moment from my own growing panic at the realizations of our current situation. I wasn’t only sitting with George. His kisses were… or maybe my reaction to them was unexpected. I let that roll around in my head before I answer carefully. “I think… I think I miss Edward. Or at least the idea of us having a relationship that wasn’t hidden. I would have loved sitting on his lap with a group of friends or kissing him in public.”

The mattress jostles as I feel her nodding. “I understand what you’re saying, breakups are never easy. What’s the last thing you remember from last night?”

I pause, remembering more. “We… we went to the bathroom.”

“That’s right. I remember that too.”
“But, there was someone else a-and… and I think Hilda was looking for me. Then I couldn’t move my hands or feet.” I rub my wrists and ankles, feeling the tender muscles there. “The next thing I remember is drifting off to sleep.”

We’re quiet as we both consider what I’ve described. My hands and feet are not bound but free. Maybe I was hallucinating or something. My muscles ache everywhere, and this doesn’t feel like a normal hangover headache. I don’t remember falling down, but I could have hit my head and blacked out.

I sigh. “We weren’t drinking that much. I can’t remember how we got here. Wherever here is exactly. It’s odd; it’s only the two of us. I think we’re missing some important details.”

“Do you think somebody put something in our drinks? GHB?” Rosalie wonders.

“We were having shots poured straight from our own bottle.” I sit up and a wave of nausea rushes through my body. “Oh, shit.”

“Are you going to be sick? Maybe there’s a toilet nearby or a trash can.”

“I hope not. I’m dizzy.” I take a few deep breaths, hoping my head will clear. “I remember struggling with someone outside of the bathroom. You—you were gone, and I didn’t know where you went. I was looking for you.”

“What time do you think it is?”

“I have no idea how long we’ve been out. Hours? Maybe it’s morning or afternoon. Maybe this is one of those places below ground like the office where you never know what time it is.” I ease my legs over the side of the mattress and try to stand, but sway and grab for the edge before I fall. “Shit. Standing isn’t easy. I’ll feel my way around. There has to be a door somewhere. If I find it, then we can get it open and leave.”

Carefully, I walk along the edges of the room, stumbling in spots and catching myself before I land on the floor.

“Here.” I pause and let my fingers trace the ridges along the wall, realizing immediately what I’ve found. “This feels like a door, but there’s no knob on this side. Fuck. What the hell does that mean? Someone has locked us in here? What kind of sick joke is this?”

I bang on the door repeatedly with my fists, which barely makes a dull noise, and my screams for help go unanswered. I’m exhausted from my exertion and out of breath when Rose gets my attention.

“Bella. Bella, stop. Come lie back down on the bed. I think we need to conserve our strength.”
“But I need to find a way out of here.” I pant as dread fills my system with resignation.

“We’ll figure this out. Come toward my voice and find the edge of the mattress.”

“Rose, this is bad.” I sigh and reach out in the darkness, shuffling my feet until I come in contact with her leg, then follow it back to my spot, crawling in bed next to her.

“I know,” she whispers.

Rosalie wraps an arm around me as we try to stay awake, but eventually, we can’t fight the pull and drift off to sleep once more.

-BCD-

The next time I wake, I’m in a different room. This one has a window with the afternoon sun pouring through the dirty glass, but I’m strapped to the only piece of furniture in the room—a single chair with my arms bound behind me—and I’m not alone. A tall, armed guard dressed entirely in black stands to the side observing me. I pull against my restraints and know I’m not going anywhere.

I can’t make out his face, but there isn’t a gag in my mouth, so I’m guessing I’m here for a conversation. I hope he speaks or understands English. I clear my throat, squinting in the sunlight. “The gun is unnecessary. I’m restrained.” I tug on the restraints, showing I’m stuck.

The guard pushes back the hoodie concealing his face, and I’m shocked when I realize my mistake after hearing her voice. “It is mostly for your protection.”

“Mostly.” I echo with a sad chuckle. “I doubt that.”

“You will be in immediate danger if you try to escape. A select few know you are here, and we will keep it that way until we’re ready.”

“I’ve been kidnapped?”

“Acquired.”

“What do you want?”

“To keep you alive before they silence you. Permanently.”

“Who are they exactly?”
“The hornet’s nest you rattled. Government officials don’t like reporters putting their noses in places where they don’t belong, and they especially don’t take too kindly to being exposed in ways that will only make them to be perceived poorly.”

“You’ve been following me?”

“No. We’ve been following them, following you.”

“Where is Rosalie?”

“In your room. Your other roommate is fine.”

“Other roommate? Hilda? Why wouldn’t she be fine? Is she here?”

“You don’t remember.”

“No. I believe I have you to thank for the lapse in my memory. I know you’re drugging us, which, like these restraints, is also unnecessary. What happened to Hilda?”

“We need to build trust between the two of us. So, the restraints will remain for now. Your friend was attempting to follow us during your... acquisition, and one of my partners stopped her pursuit.”

“Stopped her pursuit. How did you—?” A dark image of Hilda falling to the ground rattles around like a recent memory in my mind until I remember what happened. “You shot her.”

“She was shot—not fatally, but we could not jeopardize her getting too close and being involved. She’s German. Americans are always worth more, even though your government will never pay a ransom and only focus on your rescue. Your connections make you an extremely attractive target.”

“Hilda may be German, but she has great connections and speaks the language. So, don’t tell me she isn’t valuable.”

“You’re entitled to your opinion, but I have no use for her, only you and the other American. We left her behind.”

“You know who I am.”

“Isabella Swan. Reporter for the Washington Post who recently moved to Berlin.”

“Finally.” The tiny burst of joy in my heart at being recognized for my job is short-lived as she continues.
"Daughter of Charles Swan, Deputy Director of the FBI, who is the bestfriend to Harry Clearwater, President of the United States of America."

Shit.

I blink slowly at the realization my kidnapper knows exactly who I am or more specifically my personal connections. “You’ve done your research.”

“Your voice and contacts give us a worldwide stage that will be felt globally.”

I wonder who she’s referring to, but decide to work with what I have at present. “You are…?”

“For now, you can call me, Z.”

I nod. “Your English is good, but you aren’t a native speaker.”

“I am from Brazil, and I speak Portuguese as well as many other languages. I studied in London with my sisters, which is where I learned English. We are here on a peacekeeping mission, which you’ll learn is far from peaceful.”

“Where are we?”

“Calabria.”

My brow cringes in confusion. “Where?”

“Italy. We drove for almost twenty-one hours from Berlin.”

“What day is it?” I wonder—as we were out celebrating my birthday on Friday night.

“Sunday.”

“Afternoon?”

“Yes. You are probably hungry. It isn’t much, but food and drink will be brought to your room when you return.”

I nod, but suspect it will be laced with something to keep us quiet and sleepy. “What do you want from us?”

“Your words with photos—exposing the crimes being committed here in the camps.”
“Refugee camps,” I confirm.

She nods. “You are here to document the forgotten and will be speaking out against the Italian government—which is dangerous and will put an immediate target on your back. They will hunt you and offer a ransom, but I will do my best to protect you until we can get your words and pictures out. We will travel at night and give you an opportunity to witness the living conditions and speak with the refugees. I will translate for you along the way. If we make it out of Italy alive, then we will travel to other areas. I’m trying to get you a computer, but it may be easier to keep notes with paper and ink. We don’t need electricity with that plan, but we grabbed your roommate’s camera bag she had with her. You were all so easily distracted Friday night. No one noticed it missing.”

I remember Rose taking pictures at the bar, but I’m interested in the answer to another question. “Why me?”

“Because what’s happening in the camps is wrong, and in my opinion, you’ve been asking all the right questions. We may need your father and your President’s help in keeping all of us safe for as long as possible. You will give us credibility, but there will be concern over your disappearance. We plan to shoot a video and release it soon. Think about what you want to say, which will give us the time we need to expose the crimes against the people here.”

“And if I refuse to help?” Not that I would, but it doesn’t hurt to gain any insight into their plans.

Z eyes me cautiously. “You won’t, but your options are limited. You are now in Italy illegally and without proper documentation. In the wrong hands, you could easily be charged as a spy, working for your government, or sent back to Germany for the prosecution of crimes there. I’m not the only one aware of your breaking into government offices. You need to realize there are eyes everywhere.”

“People know I’m missing.”

“They do, which is why you need to throw them off our trail. We will give no one any information to our whereabouts, but you need to stop your government from searching.”

I consider my options, which are limited, but push a little further. “The food. Don’t—don’t drug the food or drinks. Please. We’ll need a bathroom too.”

“You need rest and to see only what is necessary.”

“I need to think without being in a drugged out fog, and we can be silent. Trust me. I give you my word.”

“I’ll consider your request.”
“I have another one.”

“You’re not exactly in a position to make demands.”

“I understand that. I’ll do whatever you need, but I’m looking for someone. Two someones—a mother and sister. I think we may find them here or possibly elsewhere, if we’re headed where I think we are.”

“I make no guarantees.”

“Thank you.”

Z nods as her eyes move past me. It is then I realize there have been two guards standing behind me the entire time. It’s the sting of the needle that makes me realize she never considered letting me return to my room not sedated.

“Maybe next time,” I tell her, as the sedative pumps through my veins. My eyes grow heavy as I fight to keep them open with long, slow blinks while my head sways from side to side.

“We’ll see.” She looks past me and nods. “I’ll talk with you soon, Isabella. Put together what you plan to say for the camera before our next meeting. I need to read it first. Remember, the fewer people searching for you, the better.”

I feel someone free my arms and legs then pull me from the chair before I drift off to sleep.

-BCD-

“Bella, I’m so sorry for everything. I need you. We can make this work. Just say the word, and we can be together. Don’t overthink it. You know how I feel and we can figure everything out.”

“You don’t want me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. You know I do want you. I love you. Don’t deny it any longer. Come home to me. Your place is here.”

“But what about—”

“You know what to do and how to fix our relationship. Are you listening? Listen to your heart…” His voice trails off as he continues speaking.

I try to catch what he’s saying, but it’s jumbled as he fades from view. “What did you say? Edward, where are you?”
“Bella, can you hear me?”

“Bella?”

“Bella, can you hear me? Wake up. We have food and a light.”

My eyes crack open as I see a glow in the room at an overhead light bulb, and Rosalie leaning over me.

“It was a dream,” I whisper, missing his voice already.

“Did you hear what I said? They brought us food and we can see.”

I blink, trying to remember what he said, but any trace from my dream evaporates and I focus on Rose’s excitement. “Food. Rose, the food is drugged.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.”

“I don’t care. We need to eat. They also brought us a bucket.”

“Five star accommodations.” I release a sad chuckle. “I visited with our captors. Women, if you can believe it. Someone who calls herself Z. She seems to be the one calling the shots.”

“You left?”

“I came to, I suppose. They’ve been keeping us sedated. It’s Sunday or was during my conversation. I don’t know how long I’ve been out again.”

“Sunday? It was just Friday.”

“Did you see someone bring the food?”

“No, but when I woke up I could see, which made me realize we had a light and there’s a plate by the door with food on it and I think water in a bottle.”

“They said we’re in Italy.”

“Italy? How in the hell did we get here? Maybe we can try to escape given the right moment.” She stares at the light above us. “The bulb is probably glass. If you climb on my shoulders, you
could probably reach it. We could cut someone with it or use the plate to knock someone out. I think it’s plastic, but with two hands—"

“Rose, these people have guns. They have an agenda. Fuck, they shot Hilda.”

“What?” Her confused eyes focus on me.

“Z said she was fine, but I don’t know what to believe. Fine means different things to different people. Any time I’ve ever told anyone I was fine, I was most definitely not. If we don’t do what they want, they will hand us over as spies. Rose, they know what we’ve been doing with Binyamin while searching for his mother and sister, but my gut says we’re on the same side in this whole mess. They want my words, your photos, and for us to be the ones to expose what is happening in the refugee camps because we’re Americans. They are expecting us to take the blame for outing the crimes of those in charge.”

“Bella, this is good."

“Good?"

“We can do this, but then what? Will they release us? Will we be returned to Berlin?”

“Z said there are others looking for us and at our disappearance. Not just our co-workers or the American government, but those who want to silence our message. She discouraged any plans I had of escaping, saying we could easily find ourselves in danger beyond these walls. I didn’t tell you, but Hilda and I were followed the other night. I don’t know who it was, but she lost them. She wasn’t certain, but thought it could be a government agent.”

“I wonder how long you’ve been followed or any of us. I never noticed a thing.”

“Well, Z knows all about us. Who we are, where we’re from, and what we’ve been doing.”

“You didn’t recognize Z?”

“No.”

“What did she look like?”

“Tall, probably six foot, if I had to guess. Dark-bronzed skin tone with light-brown eyes and short, black hair.”

“She spoke English?”

“Yes, but it sounded like she had an accent at times.”
“German?”

“No, she said she was from Brazil and speaks Portuguese as well as many other languages.”

“I don’t remember seeing anyone with that description recently. What else do you remember?”

“I don’t know. I was in a room with a window and strapped to a chair.” My panic building as I recall the details. “At least two other guards. The door to the room must have been behind me.”

“Were there bars on the window?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Could you see anything else?”

“Another building.”

“Do you think we’re in a neighborhood where someone could hear us or help? Maybe that room is a way out. I wonder if it’s above us.”

“I have no idea. After the conversation, I asked they stop drugging us or I won’t be able to put two words together for what they want.”

“Then maybe the food is fine. We need to eat.”

I nod. “Go for it.”

“You need to eat and drink something too.”

“I will, but I need a moment.”

“Okay.”

I watch as Rose retrieves the plate and returns to sit next to the mattress, dividing everything in half. My eyes return to the ceiling, trying to recall what he said in the dream. It’s been so long since I’ve had any dream, let alone one about Edward. But, why now? It must be the drugs making me believe in things that aren’t real—hallucinations. My subconscious needs to stop dwelling on what could have been with Edward and focus on our task at hand.

I have a job to do, and more than anything, I’m determined to keep the two of us safe and alive. I can’t let down Rose, and I know Hilda would tackle this challenge with both barrels blazing, and I intend to do no less.
Chapter 22: The Reality

I stare at the dim light, trying to collect my thoughts about how different this experience is from the last time I was sitting in front of a camera. This time, it isn’t an exercise in research or debate or even one of juggling over-the-top personalities and insults or innuendos, but one about composure and pleasing those recording my words.

Another woman, K, who we know as a sister of Z, is less than pleased to be in our company, believing we are more trouble than we’re worth. She’s more than happy to back up her threats physically as Rose and I are reminded constantly when we overstep or ask for too much. She treats Rose worse than she does me, which isn’t saying much, as I look down at the fading bruises on my wrists, knowing there are similar new ones on my arms and back. K has a fondness for blindfolds, cable ties, and “a lucky knife.” She revels in our fear and relishes in our pain, which is teaching us to keep our emotions concealed as tightly as possible given the current conditions. I also suspect she’s the one who shot Hilda, and I don’t want to give her a reason to pull the trigger again.

Then there is S, another sister of Z. We’ve wondered privately what the “S” stands for—since I’ve started calling her Dr. Syringe in my head while Rose refers to her as Dr. Sleep. S told me once she’s trained to be a vet, which makes sense, as I feel like a lab rat every time she shows up in our doorway. I have to believe that eventually they will run out of drugs, or at least conserve their resources, and use less. But so far, that isn’t the case since Rose and I drift in and out of consciousness while S continues to overmedicate us, keeping us perpetually drowsy and fatigued.

The mental and emotional toil is mounting daily as they move us in the dark of night from location to location, or we may be moving in circles for all I know. I’m growing used to being disoriented and haven’t decided which is worse: being drugged or K’s favorite—blindfolded, gagged, and bound. I’ve lost track of the days, and I’m no longer certain how long we’ve been here, but I think we’re still in Italy. If they are trying to break us down, I have good news for them—it’s working.

Clearing my throat and pulling my thoughts to the present, I catch the movement of Z who nods for me to begin, pointing the phone camera in my direction. She says it’s time to make our presence known and has edited heavily what I originally planned to say, which I know will set off warnings in certain corners of the world, some of them closer than others.

“My name is Isabella Swan.” I exhale deeply and focus on keeping my hands from shaking the small piece of paper I’m clutching, not wanting anyone to see them tremble.
My eyes catch the shift in movement to my left, reminding me that we are not alone as K readjusts a gun pointed in Rose’s direction. She’s always quick to react with a knife or gun to keep us in line at the slightest bobble or waver, forcing us to be careful with our movements, not wanting to give her a reason to distrust us.

“I-I’m with Rosalie Hale.”

The pounding of my heartbeat echoes in my ears, and I can’t seem to catch my breath as I take my time delivering our message. “We are American journalists with the Washington Post located in Berlin.”

Glancing down at my words, I focus on the tattered piece of paper as my fingers worry the corners and edges. “We have been unexpectedly detained.”

Z tsks in the darkness.

Right.

Don’t venture off the paper.

She didn’t like my direct approach when I wrote that “we’ve been kidnapped” and crossed it out completely. But I believe we need to say something more about our lack of freedom, which by the look on her face isn’t making her happy.

I swallow down the lump in my throat, closing my eyes and willing my voice to continue. “We are collaborating with a peacekeeping organization, R2P—”

I search my brain, realizing I should have noted what it stands for, but memory lapses are all too common for me due to the drugs S is still giving us. When I pause for longer than necessary, Z softly gives me the reminder.

“Yes. Right.” I nod as I prepare to repeat her words. “R2P, which stands for ‘Responsibility to Protect.’ Um…”

I rub the sweat from my palm against my pants. “We-we are here to record and detail the crimes being committed daily by local and national governments of the downtrodden and forgotten.”

Z’s smile is victorious, as she knows detailing our threats will put a bounty on our heads and cause a new sense of urgency for all parties involved, moving her agenda forward immediately.
“They will be held responsible for their actions or inactions—whatever the case may be. We have been thrust into a war on humanity and won’t stop until these wrongs have been righted with no sacrifice being too great.”

My heart breaks knowing Rose and I have our own expiration dates if we aren’t successful in the tasks given to us—now that I think of it, maybe even if we are.

A little too loudly and in perfect English for our ears, K has supported taking whatever money is offered for us and putting it toward their cause. She overrules Z in the tug between sisters as K knows S is ready to turn us over to the highest paying bidder too.

During our last discussion, I warned Rose and made her promise me that if we are separated to stay focused and record everything. Carlisle always says the road to brilliant journalism is paved with reporters who hold decision-makers accountable for their actions, illuminating their misdeeds in the process.

“Good.” Z pauses recording, handing me another piece of paper. “Now, I want you to read this.”

I clear my throat, keeping my voice even and begin reading. “R2P has mobilized operations throughout the world and is prepared to use whatever means necessary to see justice served. We are putting the European Union on notice and holding its members accountable for their anti-immigration, anti-refugee, and anti-Muslim policies, especially but not limited to the countries of Italy, Hungary, and Austria. Every country whose leaders pass legislation criminalizing the aid of services, advice, and support for migrants and asylum seekers will be held liable. We ask President Clearwater of the United States and those in positions of power to stand with us around the world and hold your fellow leaders responsible for human rights violations by withdrawing your country’s financial support and uniting to implement sanctions against abusive regimes founded on discrimination and intolerance. Years of corruption and fraud will be exposed for all to see. You have nowhere left to hide. Your time is up.”

“That’s enough, Isabella,” Z says.

I nod and take a deep breath, knowing I’ve not only given them what is necessary to get the ball rolling, but also poked the sleeping bear with a sharp stick.

K roughly grabs Rose by the arm, shoving her toward the door. “Time to move. Let’s go.”

-BCD-

My hand hurts as I frantically write my thoughts, filling every page of a ragged notebook after the recent meeting at the San Ferdinando migrant camp in Southern Italy. Rose sits on my other side viewing photos from the small window of her digital camera, while Z reads over my shoulder, always monitoring my every word and thought, holding a flashlight to help me see.
We’re jostled constantly as K drives over rough terrain with S at her side in the front seat while Rose, Z, and I squeeze together in the back seat of a vehicle I’ve never ridden in before.

Something happened during our visit at the nearby camp while I was speaking with several men who refer to themselves as the “new slaves” with no way out of the system when everything came to an abrupt end. I didn’t miss the alarm on their faces when Z declared our interviews over and we needed to leave immediately.

I’m no longer in a drug-induced haze as Z decides we aren’t a flight risk, and it’s time for us to get the full experience of life in the refugee camps. Z and her sisters accompany us everywhere. They are heavily armed and a constant threat to anyone who dares to think otherwise.

While most refugees are African, what awaits them as they land on the shores of Italy is something they never dream possible while leaving their families and villages long behind and escaping certain death.

The men find themselves destined to a life of slavery and manual labor, picking tomatoes, olives, and oranges on the local farms for three times lower than the minimum wage. The fate of the women is a hell much worse—sex trafficking.

It didn’t take me long to figure out the real hand at work here—the Italian mafia, who has infiltrated the razor wire topped chain link fences with little effort. The camp is overrun with sinister criminals who brag about making more money from refugees than drugs.

This location is overwhelmed with the horrible stench from festering trash, attracting insects, rodents, and flea-infested dogs. People sleep in tents and on the ground while others use whatever they can find to make conditions tolerable.

Once a new arrival completes their paperwork, they are free to come and go from the camp during predetermined times. Many set off in search of materials to reinforce their makeshift homes and protect them from the weather, but it is always at a risk to their safety. A sad story is shared repeatedly with us about a man shot and killed with little thought or remorse by a local while out looking for sheet metal scraps from a nearby trash dump.

While shelter is a struggle at times, there is an unexpected bright spot with nourishment. An allowance for food and amenities is provided for each new arrival, but unfortunately, corners are cut at every turn, giving the minimum to those in need while pocketing the profits of those in charge. When someone goes missing, no one alerts the authorities, and the money continues to funnel into the camp. The open spot is filled by a new asylum seeker and the camp is granted another new stipend from the system.
Z’s connections put us in contact with a variety of women whose suffering goes far beyond the scars on the surface. The narrative is all too common as there isn’t a woman we met who hasn’t been forced into making decisions she would never make otherwise.

We sit helpless listening to story after story as the women recount threats, violence, and gang rape, if they don’t comply with the Nigerian gangs running the lawless camps and prostitution rings here.

With over four thousand asylum seekers awaiting their fates, it isn’t difficult to imagine how the vulnerable become easy prey for traffickers. We do our best to inform and convince every woman we meet to take a stand and tell them “no,” but they only shake their heads, telling me their voices will never be heard, and they are doomed to this fate.

I’m pulled from my thoughts as I listen to Z’s side of an incoming call. She hums her responses, leaving me wondering what’s going on until S’s voice eliminates all doubt.

“How much? Millions, right?” S asks excitedly.

Someone is looking to buy us, silencing our voices. I remember being told at one point that governments and private parties offer ransoms for journalists who find themselves on the wrong side of issues abroad. However, I know any government in question won’t be my own, as the United States refuses to pay ransom for Americans, even my father’s best friend.

Z ends the call with disgust, pocketing her phone. “Nothing.”

K’s alarmed eyes shift to the rearview mirror meeting Z’s. “What do you mean nothing?”

“They are threatening to bulldoze the camp if we don’t turn them over.”

“Wait. What?” I can’t believe someone is threatening to level the camp we just visited.

“You heard me.”

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

I’m at a loss for how to prevent this from happening and remember how Carlisle always told me to take my problems to the person who has the power to make the decision for change. Without knowing whom we are up against, I can’t do that and know I need to figure out another plan. “What about everyone there?”
“They start over.” Z shrugs and stares out the window. “You are worth far more to those people than food or shelter. You offer a better life than what you saw they are living. We’re fighting for them in a different way. It’s what they need.”

“Four thousand people will go without everything they’ve known since coming here tomorrow—all because of our visit and the threat of us revealing the truth.” I’m stunned with disbelief. “When is someone important enough going to be on their side? We can’t let this happen. I have to do more than what we’re currently doing. My words alone can’t possibly be enough.”

Z chuckles at my defiance. “And how do you propose stopping them? Are you willing to take the places of those women? It wouldn’t matter if you did. That’s a fool’s errand. You mean nothing to them and are only a pawn in their game. Keep writing—that’s how we make a difference. They are busy hiding like sniveling cowards. We will expose what they are doing and scream it from the rooftops. They can bulldoze the place. The people are resilient and we will not give into their threats trying to silence us.” She jabs a finger toward my notebook. “Keep writing.”

“You’re as bad as Emmett,” I mumble. Looking over my last notes, I take a quick glance in her direction and don’t miss her small smirk.

“I have no idea what that means, but I’ll take it as a compliment. We will be at the ferry in two hours, but we need to stop and change vehicles.”

“Ferry?”

“Yes.”

“Are we going east?” I prompt for answers I know will never come.

“You ask too many questions.”

“But isn’t that why I’m here?”

“Isabella, I brought you with us not only for your connections, but also because you are trustworthy, and work willingly outside of the formal power structures of your country and employer. You are a warrior for peace and humanity. While I don’t see you as passive or weak, others do. They underestimate you and your ability to tackle an extraordinarily difficult task, like the one I’ve put before you. Will you rise to the challenge and silence your critics standing behind your words with strength and determination? That’s up to you.”

-BCD-
We’ve been traveling east for over a day with only brief stops. I suspect we are headed for the migrant camps on the islands of Greece found in the Aegean Sea that border Turkey where most migrants choose to cross since it is a short distance. K likes to keep us in the dark to our whereabouts, but after passing through Athens, I suspect we will be taking another ferry soon.

It’s weird not having a phone or some type of electronic device, keeping me connected to the outside world. I know my phone was on our table at the bar on the night we were taken, but Rose said she recalls hers was in her pocket and it’s been gone ever since we woke up.

I miss simple things like a GPS app or even the ability to know the time. I have no idea what’s happening out there beyond this vehicle or the next camp on our agenda. My mind drifts from time to time when I’m not writing, wondering if anyone is searching for us.

From all the time I’ve spent with Rose, I have concluded that her family is well off financially. The combination of her family money in New York and my connections in D.C. must be getting someone’s attention to our whereabouts. Or maybe I was convincing enough in that video for everyone to believe we weren’t kidnapped but simply working with a peacekeeping group while tracking down leads for a story.

I have no doubt Hilda is a tigress in her wrath—daring, fierce, and determined to find us. I chuckle thinking of how Alistair must have his hands full with her, healing from a bullet wound or not.

My mind drifts to Edward, and I wonder if he knows or cares about my disappearance. It’s been almost five months since our breakup. Am I barely a passing thought on the news, while he moves on with someone else and focuses on his career? Maybe he’s the toast of D.C. and a half of a new power couple under Shelly Cope’s clever—and mostly likely deceitful—guidance.

I know it isn’t good for my mind or my heart, but sometimes I fantasize about being that woman—one full of courage and strength while he stands proudly at my side. In my fantasy, we’re equals in every way. It’s us against the world, championing the underdog and fighting for justice. I chuckle to myself at the impossibility—we sound like superheroes in that scenario. Maybe Z is right and I only have foolish thoughts, especially when it comes to Edward.

I glance over at Rose who is quietly sleeping with her head against the window, and I’m reminded how comforting it is that we’re in this together. I have no idea how long we will be held or if our captors are considering a release any time soon. While Rose accumulates photos from each stop, I’m filling notebooks and anticipating an ending of some sort for us. I mean, there has to be a better one than the possibilities of us being sold or shot. I’ve tried to get information from Z of when they are going to release us, but she has refused to share any answers.

Keeping my emotions at bay is a constant battle as anxiety ebbs and flows inside of me, and I wonder how long our current state can continue.
Chapter 23: The Rescue

Hell on Earth. It’s the best way to describe life beyond the gate at this island migrant camp in Greece. The sheer magnitude of people trying to live and survive is beyond what we should ask of any human beings.

Samos, which we are touring, is built to accommodate six hundred and fifty people, but there are over four thousand people living here, which is seven times over capacity.

Rose is taking photos quietly the entire time, as I hear the constant whirl of her camera’s shutter. It’s how she works—never speaking only observing, while my questions bring passion to the worn, tired faces of those who fear they have no way out.

My brain is overflowing with mental notes, but a deep breath keeps my anxious emotions at bay, wanting to make the most of our approved forty-five minutes we have inside the camp. I jam my hands into the pockets of my pants, trying to contain their building nervous energy. I know I’m not only ready to write but also need to write, purging my overwhelming thoughts and feelings upon the blank pages of a tattered notebook as quickly as my hand will allow.

There are many sides to the issues here, as Greece is the main port where all refugees attempt to land their makeshift boats and rafts. Officials continue in their attempts to move many to the mainland while nearby countries agree to settle hundreds, but not more than a thousand at a time. The process of resettlement is just that a process—one that is long and drawn out with no immediate end in sight, as the number of new daily arrivals exceeds the number of departures.

“That’s it. We have to go,” Z prompts, at the direction of camp officials who have been monitoring our every movement.

I nod my agreement, but a large hand wraps around my arm, jerking me backward. “Miss, please—”

“Hands off.” Z shoves the man as K points her gun in his direction.

He releases my arm, putting up his hands in surrender.

“Now. Move.” Z growls at me, even though I have done nothing wrong.
We’ve pushed the limits of our stay here, but her lack of patience is probably somehow my fault as I’m in no rush to leave. There are so many sad stories to tell, and most just want a chance to be heard. They will have to wait for another time, and I softly thank those who granted us access despite their hesitancy.

“Let’s go.” K pushes us toward our car without another word.

As we depart the camp, S directs K to a nearby location where we switch vehicles again with someone K knows, but Z’s phone alert gets my attention during the ride there. I glance at the screen before she pockets her phone, and I see one word, “Kos.”

Z doesn’t give any kind of reaction to the message, as she appears to be contemplating something.

Everyone is surprised and confused when she finally speaks. “Maybe we should head south.”

S turns around in her seat. “The plan is north.”

Z glances my way briefly and shrugs. “There’s another camp—Kos.”

“Kos? We’re going to Lesbos next,” K reminds, as she and S share a worried look.

I listen to their debate and think nothing of her change in direction until she drops another bit of information.

“There are Syrians who have some information that could be useful, but we may be too late. Never mind, let’s stick with Lesbos.”

At the mention of Syrians, I watch her more closely.

“What type of information?” I ask, as K continues driving north to the Chios to Karlovassi ferry.

“Papers issued.”

I want to ask another question, but stop myself, trying to piece together what she isn’t saying, until one word pops into my head, a name that could connect everything: Binyamin. “Have you found...”

“No.”

“Bella.” Rose warns from beside me not to push, but I can’t hold back and will gladly take a backhand from K if it means I’ll get answers.
“But you know something.”

Z stares straight ahead. “Papers are issued for refugees at the police station on Kos.”

“So, what’s the big deal? If there’s any chance that Binyamin’s mother and sister could be there, then we need to find them—especially if they are trying to get to him through Greece. Maybe we can help.”

S is quick to dash my hopes. “They may not be there. Many Syrians get their papers, then head for Athens before starting their journey to other parts of Europe. It’s doubtful we would learn anything other than what we already know.”

“Then let’s go back to Athens and search there.”

“Have you forgotten there are people searching for you? We can’t walk into a police station with you in tow and make our demands.” Z huffs, muttering under her breath loud enough to where I hear it. “Americans can be so stupid and arrogant.”

“You must have a contact. Someone inside if you’ve been able to find out this much.”

Z nods. “Access to the list of processed individuals. On the list—Mina and Sarah Aldeen.”

My heart soars at her words and hope fills my every thought at what this could mean. They’re alive and still fighting to be with Binyamin. “Z—”

“We can’t deny the possibility there are people out there looking for you or others who see you as a quick ransom. We need to focus on our task at hand and not become distracted.”

I sigh in frustration. “We’re going to let this opportunity pass us by?”

K’s narrowed eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror as she tells me with a condescending tone, “You don’t have a choice.”

While I haven’t gone crazy, and I know it’s all in my head, I’m sure I’m the only one who heard her evil laugh, but a quick glance at Rose tells me she probably heard it too.

-BCD-

I look out over the brilliant blue, sparkling waters and try not to hold anything against our current location, as the beauty of Greece is a sight to behold. I can understand why people vacation here with families or friends, as it would be easy to get used to the easygoing island life and never want to leave.
While I’ve never had the chance, I can picture myself lying on the white sand beaches of the Aegean Sea, soaking up the sunshine without a care in the world. I haven’t decided yet, but in that daydream, I’m not alone. I have no idea who is there with me. Maybe it’s Angela, Rose, Hilda, or all of us together, as we drink cocktails and flirt shamelessly with the wait staff.

These thoughts make me miss Hilda. I worry about her, but probably not as much as she worries about me. It makes me really wonder, at times, what we’re doing together and what she sees in me. Maybe she’s a fixer and drawn to broken things. If Rose and I make it out of this experience, Hilda may decide finally that I’m not worth the investment and move on with someone else. We haven’t really defined our relationship with any type of exclusivity, and Hilda hates labels. But I know deep down that if I can’t maintain a relationship with her, is there really a chance for me with anyone?

There’s always a moment or two when I wonder if Edward has ever been to Greece and how romantic it would be to experience it with him. It isn’t easy, but a part of me knows I may never get over him. When I’m not writing or sleeping, my brain constantly examines and re-examines where it all went wrong like one of those frustrating puzzles that can never be solved. With a slight shake of my head to clear my thoughts, I stop daydreaming; tucking away any fantasies I conjure of Edward and focus on my current realities.

We’ve been spending a lot of time traveling between the islands of Greece, as it can take an entire day to get from one location to the next while needing to board multiple ferries to make what should seem like a normally short trip even longer. Sometimes, I wonder if it is because Z suspects we are being followed, then other times, I decide I just don’t care and do what is asked of me, resigning myself to the reality there is no end to our task in sight.

In a few of the less populated areas, Z rents a room, giving us the opportunity for a shower and time to hand-wash our clothes. It isn’t ideal, but I’m grateful they gave us something other than the clothes we were wearing on the night we were kidnapped—a fact I refuse to forget.

Rose and I aren’t here of our own free will, and with much of our recent travel, I’ve thought about ways we could escape, wondering how far we would get. While I believe K would consider shooting us both dead, I know her well enough to know we wouldn’t get off that easy. Her ruthless plan is to use us then sell us to whoever is willing to pay the most money, but not before inflicting her own brand of torture.

We sleep in our vehicle when necessary and are monitored closely when we interact with anyone. Food is always an afterthought, and I don’t know about Rose, but I’ve lost weight over the past couple of months since my birthday. I wasn’t overweight then, but I can tell my curves are dwindling.
I’ve been storing my notebooks and extra clothes in a backpack that Z keeps, while S thoroughly inspects Rose’s camera bag after every stop. There’s no privacy to be had by either of us.

Rose and I are never allowed a moment alone or together, and I’m relieved to be outside of our vehicle when we arrive at our next destination, which is a thought I doubt anyone inside this camp shares.

Moria refugee camp in Lesbos can accommodate approximately three thousand refugees, but there are over ten thousand people here contained and waiting for their next steps.

It looks more like a prison than a camp. We aren't allowed inside the main camp, but there is an overflow area full of tents set up outside the high fences where plenty of people are willing but anxious to tell us their stories about life past the gate.

Many refugees attempt to protest and riot against the unsanitary conditions, but they do little good as objectors suffer brutal beatings at the hands of police. The camp overflows with streams of raw sewage, making the availability of clean drinking water nearly impossible. There are lines for everything: insufficient food, stagnant toilets, and ice cold showers, which are welcome in summer, but not in winter.

People wait for two or three hours to receive a meal of meager portions, which includes a small packet of food, like chicken and rice, with a piece of flatbread. Many tell me this is where most of the fighting begins with everyone hungry. It’s baffling to know that despite the wait, the food will run out and many will go unfed until the next meal is distributed. Some have given up eating at the camp after numerous people were poisoned by spoiled food, bringing levels of frustration to new heights.

Sexual violence is prevalent, as unaccompanied minors are housed with unrelated males while many women never stray farther than their shelter for the dangers that exist only steps away. The collective mental health of the camp declines daily with a surge in those who self-harm or attempt suicide. Many of the teenagers wish the sea had claimed them during their trip to Greece rather than continue to be subjected to the horrors of life here in the camp.

With uncertain futures, no one seems to know their next steps, and many are prepared to wait in Moria for years for a transfer to elsewhere. Some struggle with depression, but most don’t see an end in sight as hopelessness is the only constant in their daily life. Everyone understands the risk of deportation and refuses to speak negatively about the camp or demand answers from authorities about the status of their paperwork when we prompt them.

Asylum seekers are desperate and disillusioned for reasons I understand completely. This isn’t living—it’s surviving—not only the inhumane living conditions but also the fear of the unknown.
Volunteers at the camp recall a time when the attitudes of locals were ones of kindness and compassion, which has changed over the years to the disappointing current climate of frustration and anger. Residents have found themselves victims of the desperation of migrants while their government continues the daunting task of processing the overwhelming numbers. They are all ordinary people making some of the greatest sacrifices imaginable while standing up for the rights of the lost and forgotten.

-BCD-

I’m exhausted, as we’ve been driving all night, and nod off for what seems like only a moment when I’m jarred awake by the sound of loud pops—gunshots and the yelling begins. I realize our vehicle is no longer cutting a path through the darkness toward our next destination, as we are stopped on a dirt road.

We scream when the glass window behind our seat shatters, and I hear K yelling in the front seat while it sounds like S is returning fire.

“Z—” I attempt to nudge her awake, feeling around for her gun.

I consider the possibilities and conclude we’re probably being ambushed and robbed. I have no idea where we are or even have the ability to protect Rose or myself without a weapon. Z still isn’t moving next to me. As a matter of fact, she’s slumped against the door. How can she sleep through this?

“Get down!” Rose pushes me until my head is between my knees, and we huddle together as the yelling continues.

“But I think Z’s shot.”

“Shut up, Bella,” Rose hisses. “Do you want to die here?”

“Drop your weapon! Now!” Someone orders from outside our car.

More shots are fired, and I do my best to muffle my ears from the loud noise.

Whoever it is can speak English and continues to yell, “Out of the vehicle. Hands where I can see them!”

I hold up my hands, squinting at the bright searchlights, which move about the inside of our vehicle, then remain trained on our faces. I’m blinded and can’t see anything when Rose’s door is ripped open and we’re pulled abruptly from the back seat.
I can’t get a good look at anyone’s face, but everyone is wearing a similar military uniform as others swarm our car.

“On your knees. Hands on your heads,” another voice commands. “Check the other one in the back seat.”

I sneak a glance in Z’s direction, then at Rose who has her hands on her head and eyes trained on the ground, and do the same before I upset anyone for not following orders.

“Cuff them. Not those two.” The one giving orders taps the bottom of my shoes. “Stand up. Take Swan and Hale and put them in the front seat of the truck.”

My heart sinks—they know who we are.

When I turn around, I’m met with the steely gaze of a tall, muscular man who is clearly in charge. While he’s intimidating physically and could crush me without a second thought, this may be my only chance, depending on where we are headed, so I push for answers.

“How do you know who we are?” I huff, jutting out my chin. “And what makes you think we’re going anywhere with you?”

Dad always told me in a situation like this to let no one take me to a secondary location if I can help it. I think we’re still in Greece, and we could probably get help at a border crossing station, unless we’ve already passed through one while I was asleep, then we would need to go back.

Maybe my talking will buy me time while I put together a plan for Rose and I to run for it or at least put up a fight. I’m looking around and counting how many men there are—three? No, there are two more over there. I count five men and another in the driver’s seat of their truck. Six. Shit. We’re outnumbered and one knee to the groin won’t get us very far with those odds.

For the tiniest second, I consider if I can free K and S, adding them to the plan, as I’m not sure if the devil I know or the one I don’t is a better choice.

He chuckles, as if he knows what I’m thinking. “You’re going with us. Orders are orders and these come from the top.”

“I want to speak with your boss.”

“I’m sure you do.” He waves toward K and S who are cuffed and kneeling beside the road. “Let’s load the others in the back. Is the car drivable?”

“Yes, sir, only superficial damage.”
“Follow us back.”

I panic, not trusting whoever this group is, and play the only cards I have left. “I know people and have connections. We can get you money, if that’s what you need.”

He gives no response only waiting for Rose and me to follow orders.

“I said—”

“I heard you. Let’s move out!” With his words, everyone takes their places while I hold onto Rose’s arm, preventing her from moving. I’m adamant about knowing who we are dealing with and where we are headed at least.

“Who are you?” I press once more.

“Lieutenant Clapp, United States Navy SEAL, ma’am. Now, get in the truck.” He points toward the cab, then turns toward the back of our vehicle.

My body sags in relief as I let his words sink in.

It’s over.

Finally over.

K’s abuse, S’s drugs, and Z’s grand plans for vigilante justice are over.

“Where are we going, Lieutenant?”

“We have a base and airstrip nearby.”

“And from there?”

“Germany.”

The thought of being back in Berlin or nearby fills me with a hope I haven’t felt for the past couple of months.

“Okay.” I agree happy to have some answers finally, then remember something—my notebooks and Rose’s camera bag and want to grab them before they get lost in the shuffle. “Wait. Our stuff—”

“Is it in the vehicle?”
“Yes.”

“Then it will be returned once we go through everything.”

“Thank you.”

I follow Rose into the cab of the truck, and she laces our hands together.

“It’s over,” she confirms my thoughts, her eyes filling with tears.

I nod, watching her wipe away the few that fall. “I know, but we still have a story to tell—a lot of them. We’ll come back. Maybe I’ll volunteer in some way. People in the camps need everything, but especially to be heard.”

“I like that idea, but it will be on our terms.”

“And with Binyamin. We’re close to finding his answers.”
Chapter 24: The Return Home

“Miss Swan, you have a phone call.”

“Thanks. Hello?”

“Bella.”

“Dad?”

“Oh, thank God, Bella. How are you?”

“Uh, I’m exhausted, but glad to be here—wherever that is.” I wave my hand around, even though he can’t see it. “Europe is as specific as anyone will get, but I know we were in Greece or close to it when they caught up with us. We’re getting ready to board a plane for Germany.”

“I know.”

“Of course, you do.”

“I’m getting ready to get on a plane myself. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Dad, I’m fine—”

“Bella, don’t object. I need to see you in person.”

“Okay.”

“Here’s Harry.”

“Hello, Bella.”

“Hello, Mr. President.”

“Hey, none of that. It’s good to hear your voice.”

“Thanks, Harry, and I understand you’re the reason we are here.”
“It was an easy decision, Bella.”

“What will happen to them? K and S? Z didn’t make it, did she?”

“Zafrina Dias died during your rescue, and her sisters, Kachiri and Senna, will be sent back to Berlin. Our State Department is working with the Germans since that was the location of your and Miss Hale’s kidnappings. They will be prosecuted for illegally capturing and detaining two U.S. citizens.”

“Rose and I gave our statements. They were recorded on video.”

“I understand, but you will be asked many of the same questions after you arrive in Germany, and may remember more over the next few days when you are in a less stressful environment and given a chance to rest. If you recall anything new, do not hesitate to tell them. We want to build the strongest case possible for you and Miss Hale.”

“Okay. Thanks, Harry.”

“Is everyone taking good care of you?”

“Yes, they are. We met with the doctor, then we were able to eat a small meal and clean up. I have to say I appreciate the change of clothes, but camouflage isn't my color.”

“I would imagine it isn’t.” Harry lets out a hearty laugh, then his voice softens. “Sue and everyone here at the White House are overjoyed you are safe. It has been a very stressful time for all of us. Your father has already left for his flight and is eager to see you.”

“Thanks. Please tell everyone I said hello and I look forward to talking with them over the next few days once I’m back home.”

“We’ll look forward to seeing you then. D.C. isn’t the same without you.”

“D.C.?”

“You’re coming back to D.C. with your father, correct?”

“Uh, no. I’m going home to Berlin. I still have a job to do, and I may need to return to Greece soon on another matter.”

“I’m not sure that’s a wise decision. You’re safe now, but—”
“But it’s my decision, right?” I defend, and somehow hold back a biting comment about his daughter and her rights and decisions. I may not be in D.C., but I haven’t forgotten his methods for getting what he wants when it comes to family. I told Jacob I wouldn’t interfere, and I intend to keep that promise, but I’m struggling not to fire back with what I know.

“Of course, it is. You should consider making a statement while your dad is there with you. I’ll have Jacob write something up for you to read. We weren’t the only ones searching for you.”

“But what I said was true, even if it was under duress and they weren’t my words.” I’m also hurt he’s discounting my abilities as a journalist by suggesting I can’t handle writing a statement by myself. “I don’t need Jacob to tell me what to say.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to have his input. This is an international matter, and he has been monitoring the situation from our side since the beginning.”

I expel an exaggerated huff. “Fine. I’ll talk with Jacob.”

“Bella, I understand you have been under a lot of stress. You should take some time off. Don’t go out in public unless necessary and never alone. I would recommend staying out of sight for a while.”

“Harry, I wasn’t alone when I was taken. You should know that I couldn’t live like that—hiding and afraid of my shadow. That’s what they want—to silence me. Dad didn’t raise me to be a coward, and I’m not about to start now. Despite what has happened over the past months, Rose and I coped. We did what was asked of us, and trust me, when we didn’t, they made sure we got the message and we didn’t repeat our mistakes. Rose and I survived this, Harry, and there are a lot of others out there who have it much worse than us. I have to help them. People need to hear their voices.”

It sounds like he isn’t alone when I hear muffled voices from his end, but I can’t tell who it is.

“Bella, we’ll talk about this more later. I’ve got to go.”

“Okay. Thanks for the call and your help.”

“Sure thing, Bella. And think about what I said.”

“I will.” The line goes dead as I mull over his words.

Rose pops her head into the doorway of the office, giving me a brief smile. “The plane is ready and they’re waiting for us.”

My small smile grows almost instantly. “Let’s go home.”
We exit the plane and are greeted by various people I will never remember, but one standing near the back of the crowd gets my attention. Her expression is careful and controlled, but when she spies me getting closer, her smirk grows.

I’m thrilled to see her and look on when she hugs Rose first.

“Welcome home, Roze.”

“Thanks, Hilda. It’s great to be back.”

“Right this way, Miss Hale.” Another uniformed man encourages Rose to move farther ahead of me.

Hilda shifts, blocking my path. “Bella.”

I watch in confusion as Rose is guided away to a nearby car. “Aren’t we leaving together?”

“You’re coming with me. Ve thought this would be best.”

I panic momentarily at being separated from Rose, but quickly bury the blooming emotions inside of me and nod as Hilda takes my hand, guiding me toward her car I recognize immediately. I slide into the passenger seat, but flinch backwards when she moves suddenly to help me with the seat belt.

“Sorry.” My face flushes with embarrassment at not being more at ease with Hilda’s touch or movements as I was months ago.

“I understand, Bella.”

“No, it’s—fuck. I’m sorry. It’s my fault,” I apologize nervously, taking responsibility for my surprising reactions.

I didn’t expect this—to be on edge once I got here. I thought I would feel relief, but I’m jittery while fidgeting with everything in my reach.

With Hilda behind the wheel, we leave the military base with little fanfare, and I’m thrilled to see it fading in my side mirror as we escape into the evening traffic. It’s overwhelming being back in Berlin, but I’m at a loss for what to say, as everything familiar passes by my window in a blur until we pull into an underground garage I don’t recognize and my internal panic builds once more.
“Why aren’t we at the apartment?” I question nervously.

She shakes her head. “It’s being watched. I found a bug. There could be more.”

I sag into the leather seat at the information she shares. “Someone was—is listening.”

Hilda points toward a set of elevator doors ready to distract me from our new reality. “You’ll like this. I brought your things.”

I look around, not seeing any signs to show the name of the building. “Where are we?”

“A hotel.”

“Where’s Rosalie?”

“She will be here soon. Her own room. Let’s go upstairs.”

The elevator takes us up to our floor where Hilda produces a key and ushers me inside the room that is more than I can comprehend after going without during these past months. It’s a suite with a living room, dining area, and a door that probably leads to the bedroom.

The main door closes behind me, and involuntarily, I jump at its sound. I’m about to move farther into the room when Hilda stops me, grabbing my arm and moving in closer for a kiss.

I yank away my arm without thinking, then realize my mistake instantly. “Shit. I’m sorry. I did it again. I’m just—fuck. I don’t know… I’m sorry.”

Her face is a mix of hurt and confusion. “I can leave, if you want to be alone.”

“No! That’s not what I want. Not from you. I don’t want to be alone. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Please don’t leave. Will you try again? I promise, I won’t move away this time. Please.”

Hilda watches me carefully as her hands find my waist, drawing me closer gently, waiting for my reaction. At my nod, she leans in, this time successfully pecking my lips, pulling away to check my response. “Okay?”

I sigh in relief at the normalcy of such a small, intimate gesture. It feels right to be here with her as she welcomes me back into her arms. I return her hug, wrapping my arms around her shoulders. “Yes. Don’t stop.”

“Oh, Bella.” She whispers in my ear as her timid lips find mine once more and my fingers slide in her hair, wanting to encourage her movements and prevent any hesitation on her part.
My heart speeds up as our lips reunite over and over until I’m panting for breath. Hilda releases my mouth, exploring along my jaw and nibbling down my neck.

“Hilda.” I moan when I feel the suction of her mouth leaving a mark.

I guide her head until our lips come together again as our cautious hands reconnect with remembered curves. Areas full of need spark to life a level of desire, which lay dormant and hidden while we were apart.

Her desperate tongue pushes past my lips in a rush, tangling with mine, tasting and probing, until she pulls away and pecks my lips, slowing her assault.

“I’m sorry.” She gasps. “Bella, we have to stop.”

“No, I need you,” I plead, holding her tighter and anxious to pick back up where we left off.

“Mmm, later. “ Her forehead rests against mine as we catch our breath. “I mizzed you, but you aren’t ready for more. Ve need to talk. How about… how about a shower or bath? Or changing into your own clothes?”

“We took quick showers before we left, but I would love to soak in the tub for a while. My own clothes sound like a great idea. Thank you for bringing them.”

“Ja. You’re welcome. Zoaking is good. You need to eat. I’ll call room service.”

She opens the suitcase she brought with us, and I look over the contents, grabbing a pair of underwear and a T-shirt.

“I’m going to start the bath water.”

“Okay.” She smiles, picking up the phone receiver.

I walk into the bathroom, passing the glass-enclosed shower, but pause at the marble sink, taking in the woman’s reflection staring back at me. My fingers lightly touch the area of my neck as I catch sight of the new mark Hilda left and carefully trace the reddish area. While I’m fine with it, I know my clothes conceal old marks, which have yet to heal completely and I’m nervous about seeing what’s still there or Hilda seeing them too.

The woman in the mirror looks smaller than I remember, but it’s the yellowing on her right cheekbone that gets my attention. I recall Rosalie’s gasp when it happened, then her insistence it was barely noticeable when it was a nasty bluish green.
Grabbing the hem of the T-shirt I’m wearing, I pull it off in one swoop and stare at the wild long hair of the woman watching me closely. My finger touches the slight natural wave and I notice its dull color, which is a far cry from the shiny, bouncy hair I remember.

I turn around, looking over my shoulder, then my eyes drift lower where I see, for the first time, the dark purplish bruises and scabbed areas cut from the buckle of K’s belt. I release a shaky breath as my eyes fill with tears. I couldn’t lie down on my back for a week after that beating happened.

K claimed she saw me pass a note to a man at a local café where we stopped for a break, but it was actually the opposite—he was flirting from a distance until he pushed a piece of paper in my hand with his number. She only saw the part where I begged him to take it back and leave us alone.

A sob escapes my chest as gentle arms wrap me in a hug. “It’s okay, Bella. You’re zafe now.”

I can’t remember the last time I cried, but standing here in the bathroom it all comes pouring out in a rush. The hurt and anger. The struggles and resignation. Every emotion I’ve tried to suppress over the past months bubbles to the surface and I feel it all at once.

“Let it out,” Hilda whispers, stroking my back in gentle passes.

I’m positive she sees the marks reflected in the mirror, but she doesn’t say a word about them—only affirmations of love and comfort come from her lips.

“You’re strong and beautiful, Bella.”

“I’m sorry. I feel very weak and beat—not the woman you knew. I don’t know why I can’t keep it together now.”

“Pleaze stop apologizing.”

“There were days when I thought I was doing everything right, but—”

“I know. It didn’t matter.”

“Am I ever going to feel safe to do my job again? Will I always be looking over my shoulder? I feel like a failure. I had no control over anything.”

“You’re not. I’m zorry. I promised to keep you zafe that night and I failed.”

“You were shot. Oh God, Hilda. I remember. I didn’t at first. Where were you hurt?”
Hilda pulls away slightly. "I was shot in the leg, but it's better now. The bullet went in the muscle. Nein big deal. I have a scar."

"Not a big deal? You getting hurt is a very big deal to me."

"Stop worrying, Bella. I'm fine. I'll show you the scar after your bath."

I nod, brushing away my remaining tears, and focus on my original plan. "Right—a bath. I got sidetracked since I haven't had much access to a mirror, and when I did, I always avoided my reflection, scared of what I would see after a few times of making that mistake. I didn't want those images to haunt me too."

"Oh, Bella. I'm sorry." She leaves a kiss on my forehead, then turns to fill the tub, sprinkling items in the water from the glass containers on the nearby ledge full of salts and dried flowers.

I point toward my head. "I'm more than a little fucked up right now. I guess it will take time to process."

"It will, and we can talk more. Would you like a glass of wine?"

"Uh, I don't know. They—they drugged us at first, which was... difficult. When we were rescued, we met with a doctor on the base and he gave us some sleeping pills. I guess, I mean, I don't want to take them, but I'm not sure yet if I will need them or if I should mix them with alcohol—fuck. I don't know what to do about anything and a glass of wine should be an easy decision. It's been a long time since I've slept more than an hour or two without forced sedation. I know I'm going to drive you crazy."

"You won't. I'm happy to have you back. I think it's ready. Do you need help?" She waves toward my remaining clothes as I'm only wearing my bra, but fully dressed from the waist down.

"I'm okay. I can do it." I heave off my shoes, tug away my socks, then unbutton my pants, shoving them down my legs and stepping out as there is a loud knock on our door.

Hilda must see the panic in my eyes immediately and explains, "I'm sure it's room service. Go ahead and get in the tub. I'll take care of them."

She exits the bathroom, closing the door behind her, and I listen for voices. I hear Hilda and a man's voice, then after a couple of deep breaths, shed my bra and underwear. I ease into the warm water as the tub continues to fill. Groaning in relief, I readjust the knobs to pour less cold and as much hot water as I can stand. It feels heavenly.

With the tub almost full, I turn off the water and smile at the first moment I've had alone in a long time. I know Hilda is out in the main room, but it's nice to be alone without really being alone. I
adjust a towel behind my head and sink deeper into the water, then close my eyes as a peaceful feeling finally takes over and my brain follows my body, relaxing in the warm comfort.

-BCD-

“We woke up and, well, no, we didn’t wake up. I guess the drugs were wearing off, and I was disoriented. I thought we were home and in bed together.” I snuggle farther under the puffy covers of the king-sized bed as I recount details for Hilda.

“You and me?”

“Yes, and while I was feeling the effects of the hangover, I wanted to wake you up, but everything was all wrong. It was so dark, and things weren’t right. It was the little things. When I went to kiss you, I only reached your neck and when I... when I squeezed your breast, it was fuller—different and missing a bra.”

Hilda chuckles as if she knows what’s next.

“We were kissing, and it was taking longer than normal to rouse you. I kept going until you were finally responding to my lips and touch, but I realized something was off—your piercing was missing.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah. I’m two fingers deep, rubbing you with my thumb when I hear you moan, but it isn’t your voice. It’s Rose, and she’s into it, but I freeze.”

“Poor Rozalie. You are zuch a teaze.”

“Hilda!” I hit her playfully with my pillow. “She didn’t know it was me, and I doubt she wanted it to be me.”

“Still, you should have helped her out. You left her hanging. I taught you better than that.” She grins, teasing me.

“Trust me; it was a bucket of cold water on both of us when we figured everything out.”

There’s a knock on the door of our room, and Hilda, who is fully dressed and lying on top of the layers of bedding, volunteers to see who it is when I refuse to leave my nest of heaven. The sheets are so silky that after the bath, wine, and a few nibbles of food, I’m considering shedding my T-shirt and underwear to get the full effect against my skin. My cocoon of happiness is one I plan to enjoy for as long as possible.
Hilda returns with an unexpected guest, but to be honest, I’m not surprised in the least.

Rosalie’s red-rimmed eyes give her away instantly. “Hey. I’m not doing so good.”

I pull back the covers, offering her the spot next to me since I’m camped out in the middle of the bed. “Come on. You can stay here.”

“I’m sorry. I sent Siobhan and Maggie home, which was probably a mistake.”

“It’s okay. Get in here.” I wrap an arm around her shoulders as she settles into the spot, snuggling into my side. “Did you take a sleeping pill?”

“No. I flushed them.” She sighs.

I nod in understanding. We are both a little leery about drugs, but I’m hoping that feeling won’t last for long and we’re back to our normal selves. “How about a glass of wine? It has helped soften my edges.”

“Okay. I don’t think I can be alone. I’m sorry. Every bump or noise—”

“I know. You can stay here. We’ll move your stuff tomorrow.” I wave toward her legs. “Maybe you should lose the pants. You’ll be more comfortable.”

“Here.” Hilda sets a glass of wine on the table next to Rose then comes back around the bed, climbing in next to me.

“You should lose the pants too,” I suggest.

“Bella.”

“I’ve not only forgone my pants, but I’m also considering changing into my birthday suit.” I grin.

Rosalie lets out a small gasp at my comment, and Hilda’s smirk disappears as realization slowly infiltrates my brain.

“Fuck. Apparently, I’m an idiot who shouldn’t be joking about birthdays or anything to do with my birthday.”

We sit in awkward silence as Hilda and I stare at the ceiling while Rosalie sips on her glass of wine.
I can’t let it go as my rambling starts again. “It’s just unfortunate. I’ve had twenty-nine birthdays and not kidnapped on a single one. I mean they weren’t all wonderful, but when I hit thirty—bam! It all goes to shit. I didn’t see it coming at all.”

“Hilda, what happened after we were gone?” Rosalie wonders.

“George found me. I think he thought it was some kind of prank that Bella was trying to get away from him and you were helping her.”

“Oh, God. Poor guy. He’s got it bad for you, Bella.”

I roll my eyes and huff at his supposed crush, but I know Rose is probably right.

“But then he saw the blood and called for an ambulance. Halistair jumped into action and took over everything.”

I smile at a thought. “I bet George would like to see me in my birthday suit.”

“Bella.” Rose chuckles.

“I know. I just don’t want everyone thinking they can’t talk about that night or my birthday. I’m planning to celebrate more of them, and I don’t want this last one to taint the rest. Because some people can be weird like that and really, that’s not my brand of weird. Plus, someone promised me a birthday strap-on and it had better be over there in that suitcase. Don’t think I forgot!”

“That’s it!” Rose declares. “Hand me the wine bottle. I’m keeping it on my side of the bed.”

“Let’s change the subject.” Hilda chuckles, clearing her throat. “You are both here to relax. Nein schedule but the spa has a suite reserved for each afternoon you are here.”

“The spa?”

“Ja. Treatments like mazzage or facial. You can pick vatever you wish.”

“Is that a hint I need some grooming? Not a fan of the bush?”

“I’m always a fan of you, Bella—bush included.” Hilda pecks my lips lovingly.

“Oh, God. I need more wine and ear plugs, if you two plan to continue.” Rose refills her empty glass.

“I would like to get a haircut. My dad will be here tomorrow, but I don’t know when.”
“In the evening, we are meeting for dinner here at the hotel.”

A huge grin spreads across my face. “You will meet my dad and he’s going to love you.”

“He will not like me, Bella.”

An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach at her hesitancy. “That’s ridiculous. Why wouldn’t he?”

“Are you planning to return to United States?”

“No.”

“He will zee me as part of the reason.”

“Then I’ll set him straight.” Unless she doesn’t want me to set him straight.

“Ve will be in for a treat then—dinner and a show—plenty of fireworks.”

“My dad—he isn’t like that.”

“But I know you and I would bet you are most like him. You will butt heads over this.”

She has a valid point, and after my conversation with Harry, I know it will not be an easy discussion for either of us. But if I’m prepared, then I can hope he will leave here feeling better about my decision to stay.
Chapter 25: The Girlfriend

From the window of our hotel suite, I can see the Brandenburg Gate. Tourists roam the area taking selfies and marveling at the grand structure. It is one of the most recognizable symbols of Europe and Germany’s turbulent history, but the gate also represents the unity and peace found in the region today.

“Bella?”

I would love to calm my inner turmoil and tap into that peace as my emotions are all over the map. Despite feeling refreshed and more at ease after a haircut at the spa, reality is setting in and I’m worrying about everything imaginable. My mind has the attention span of a gnat, not settling on one thought for more than five minutes.

“Bella?”

“What?” I ask, pulling my attention away from the welcomed distraction beyond the window.

“Bella, I asked if you were ready?”

I look down at the dress and heels I’m wearing, deciding this is as much of an effort as I’m willing to make when I feel emotionally and mentally drained before we’ve even left the room.

“Oh, yeah. Sure, I’m ready.”

“Good. Rozalie will meet us downstairs.”

“Ohkay.”

Hilda tilts her head, watching me more closely. “Are you?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I guess I’m feeling a variety of things—guilty at the moment.”

“Guilty?”

“For everything—let’s start here.” I spin around in place, holding out my arms. “Here I am in this five-star hotel suite with every luxury at my fingertips. I have clean drinking water, a flushing toilet, hot shower, king-sized bed with linens that probably cost thousands of dollars, and there’s a lock on the door for privacy. Most people don’t realize how much the simplest versions of these things are worth until you don’t have them. Hilda, we call a number and food arrives as
much as we can eat. It all feels like too much—wasteful when so many others are going without
night after night. And here I am dressed up for a dinner I don’t want to have with my father.”

“Ve vill be there with you. You’re worried.”

“It isn’t just him wanting to club me over the head and drag me back to D.C. like some
prehistoric caveman. Or my mother saying that none of this would have happened if I had only
listened—according to her, it’s my fault I was kidnapped. And, oh, why can’t I just marry one of
Phil’s associates, like Felix, and be a good little housewife? I know I’m paraphrasing, but her
words make me so angry. I’ll never marry that cheating son of a bitch or anyone like him. Do
they not even know me at all? After thirty fucking years! What if I never get married or have
kids? I think it would give her a heart attack or aneurysm if I mentioned that was my plan—not
that I have one. But not everyone fits into their little cookie cutter mold of what a woman should
be.”

Hilda smiles briefly. “Your cookie is one of my favorites.”

“Stop.” I chuckle, knowing she’s trying to distract me, but I share a brief glimpse of the dark
cloud that fills my thoughts with real dangers. “What about Z’s sisters or others in their
organization? Don’t you think they or somebody else will come after me for what I’ve said or
what I plan to expose? And what about what happened with Z? Retaliation and revenge directed
at me or Rose for Z’s death are very real possibilities, considering the entirety of the situation.
Her sisters won’t forget, especially K.”

“You’re safe here.”

“In this hotel. We both know I can’t stay here forever. We’re all vulnerable at some point. I’m
getting ready to repaint a bright red and white target on my back for everyone to see.”

“You should stay here and write your story. That reminds me. I have your computer and phone.”

“Ugh. I don’t want my phone yet. What if I lost it?”

“Bella.”

“Fine. I’ll power it up later. My text, email, and phone apps are probably bulging at the seams. I
wonder when I will get back the notebooks they took. I know I can write without them, but it
would be nice to have them before I begin.”

Hilda shrugs. “We are staying here for two weeks. I should find a new apartment by then.”

“We can’t return to ours? I thought maybe things would settle down soon and we could return.”
“Many people know where we live. It’s for the best.”

In light of my recent conversation with my mother, there’s something else that has been bothering me, and I’m worried about how she will react. “Hilda?”

“Ja?”

I watch as she slips on her shoes and refreshes her lipstick in a nearby mirror.

“I doubt my father knows about us other than we are roommates.”

“Zo? He will know zoon.”

“I want to be fair to you. There’s so much I don’t know. What about you? And us? Is there still an us?” I wonder, because something feels off between us and I don’t think it is only me.

Despite our initial reuniting, she’s been more elusive than normal.

I’m not surprised when her eyes avoid mine. “Ve are good.”

“What about what you want? Do you ever think about getting married or having kids someday?”

“Bella.”

“What if you meet someone who wants those things with you? I just told you I don’t see myself doing either, but that doesn’t mean you can’t… I mean, my God, Hilda. What if someone came after you or— or anyone I love because of my words? Let alone an innocent child? I just can’t…”

“I don’t know, Bella.” A wave of sadness sweeps across her beautiful features when our eyes meet, then she looks away. “Ve all understand the risks ve take with every story ve write.”

I shake my head. “I could be keeping you from meeting that perfect someone or pursuing your own wishes. Maybe we should let things cool off a bit before jumping back into anything.”

“You aren’t keeping me from anything. I live without regrets and you should too.”

“But if you—”

“You will be the first one I tell. But Bella, I’m very happy with what we have. Nein changes.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.” I watch her carefully.
“I’m sure. Let’s go meet your dad.” She gives me a small smile, but it is less than reassuring as doubts fill my thoughts.

-BCD-

“Bella—”

I’ve never seen my father cry, and this could be a first as his eyes fill with unshed tears after the host leads us to his table and he gets his first good look at me in months.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Oh, Bella.” He reaches out, wrapping me in the strongest hug imaginable. “Thank goodness you’re okay.” He pulls away, sniffing back any tears before I can see one fall. “You cut your hair.”

“Yeah, something new.” I’m still getting used to my new chin-length bob, which is much shorter than my normal look, and I haven’t stopped touching the soft, easy waves. “It feels lighter.”

“You look wonderful.”

“Thanks. You do too.” I smile, then step to the side. “Let me make some official introductions, but you probably already know. This is Rosalie Hale, my roommate.”

“Hello, Mr. Swan. Please call me Rose.” She holds out her hand in greeting.

I watch as he politely shakes her hand and nods. “Rose. We’re all glad to have you back too.”

“Thank you.”

“And this is my girlfriend, Hilda Schmidt.”

I know I don’t imagine it when she visibly shrinks at my introduction. Hilda’s forced smile isn’t like her at all, but she extends her hand to my father.

“Mister Swan. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

His eyes shift to me, then back to Hilda, finally shaking her hand. “I thought you were all roommates.”

I raise an eyebrow in challenge. “We are.”

He nods and points toward the empty chairs at the table. “I see. Well, please, let’s sit down.”
“Bella, vy don’t you zit next to your father?” She shuffles awkwardly around me and takes the seat opposite his while Rose sits in the remaining open spot.

“Sure.”

The next hour is one of the most awkward meals I’ve ever witnessed. It’s full of stunted small talk and half-eaten, five-star cuisine as everyone pushes forkfuls of pretentious food around their plates until Rose sets her napkin on the table and clears her throat.

“I want to apologize for cutting our evening short, but I’m not feeling well, and I think I’ll return to our room for the night. It was wonderful to meet you, Mr. Swan.”

“Thanks for joining us, Rose.”

“I agree. I think I’ll call it a night too.” Hilda reaches out and squeezes my hand gently. “Bella, pleaze stay. Enjoy zome time with your father. He has traveled a long way to zee you.”

As she stands, I tug on her hand and lean in until she meets me halfway, pecking my lips with a brief kiss.

I give her a reassuring smile and a promise. “Okay, I’ll be up a little later.”

“Good night, Mizter Svan. Thank you for dinner.”

“You’re welcome, Hilda. Good night.”

We watch as Rose and Hilda exit the restaurant together, then I wait for him to break our uncomfortable silence first.

“This is what he’s done to you?”

“I have no idea what or who you’re talking about.”

“The hell you don’t. You know exactly who I’m talking about—Edward Masen.”

“And what would Edward Masen have to do with me?”

“Bella, stop acting like you don’t know. I know everything.” With his slip of what he knows, he backpedals immediately. “I mean—”
“I know what you mean.” The anger in my voice rises. I’m not surprised at his admission, but I’m ready to call him out on sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong. “And how did you come about that information?”

He stumbles with his reply, but finally comes up with an answer I can’t believe. “He came to my office asking for information about you.”

“What?”

He lowers his voice, punctuating each of his words with his own displeasure. “I can’t believe you let him run you out of the country, and now you’re here putting your life in danger.”

“I didn’t let him do anything.”

“Are you with-with her?”

“Really, Dad? I can’t believe you need me to spell it out for you.”

“Oh God, Bella. What are you thinking? Do you know how this looks? Harry and Billy were right. I shouldn’t have let you move here.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You let me? Listen, Dad. What I do with anyone, including Hilda, is my business. I don’t give a fuck how it looks—”

“Watch your language.”

“And for the record, so there isn’t any confusion, this is exactly how it looks. I’m in a relationship with someone who isn’t keeping me on the side or as a dirty secret. No one is using me for my connections or their own political gain.”

“I don’t think—”

“Save it. This isn’t your call. Hilda has been there for me the entire time I’ve been in Germany. She’s not only my lover, but also my girlfriend. If you can’t accept that, then we’re done here. Thanks for coming to check on me. Please tell everyone I’m fine in your report.”

I move to stand, but he reaches out and grabs my arm, which causes me to recoil backwards.

“I’m sorry.” He puts his hands up in surrender. “Please don’t leave. I didn’t say I couldn’t accept it, but how will it work with you in D.C. and her here? He at least loves—”

“Don’t you dare say that,” I warn. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, and sometimes that’s not enough. I’m not going back to D.C. I’m staying here to do my job—that’s final.”
My notebooks and Rose’s camera bag were delivered to our new apartment recently. She’s been hiding out in her room working on processing her digital images from during our time away, while I’m busy writing about my experiences and sending them to Carlisle for his review.

We had a small welcome home dinner with our co-workers during our hotel stay, and I shared with Binyamin everything I learned about his mother and sister, giving him new hope in his search. I made him promise not to go anywhere without Rose or myself. Little good it did, because Alistair said he left the next day for Greece, hell-bent on finding answers.

One of the first people I spoke to after we returned to Berlin was Carlisle, followed by a quick call with Emmett. Demetri was next on my list in a conversation filled with heartbreaking tears and promises to text or talk daily. Angela said she had called in every favor possible to find out anything she could in order to ease their pain of the unknown, but the details of my disappearance were impossible to get from anyone including my father.

I’ve decided against issuing a statement, choosing to remain silent about what Rose and I went through. Jacob isn’t happy with my decision, but we want the first words and photos we share to be about those still held captive by the system.

It hasn’t been easy, but we’ve been slowly getting back into the swing of things. Rose and I have been staying out of the public eye in an effort to curtail interest in us, choosing to work from home for as long as necessary.

I’m in the middle of a sentence when Rose walks into the kitchen where I’m sitting and drops something on the table next to me.

I pause and look over to see what it is. “Is that...?”

“Yes.”

“Is it yours?”

“Really, Bella? No, it isn’t mine. Outside of you sliding into second base, I haven’t had sex in months.” She wiggles her fingers.

“Rose—”

“I’m only kidding,” she teases, then waits, quirking an eyebrow.
“Well, don’t look at me. It isn’t mine either, and I’ve been with you for the past few months without any baseball euphemisms.”

We stare at the pregnancy test until I break the silence.

“Where did you find it?” I whisper. A lump forms in my throat and my heart drops to my feet at the implications of such a test.

_Damn it._

“In the bathroom trash can.”

I release a stuttered breath. “Are you thinking...?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m thinking. Who else could it belong to?”

_Fuck. Fuck. Fuck._

I scrub my hands over my face at this new turn of events. “Hilda didn’t say anything.”

“What do you expect her to say?”

I shake my head and my voice shakes. “I-I don’t know. Maybe she’s going through something, if she thinks she’s pregnant.”

“Well, from the looks of it, I would say she is pregnant. Where is she?”

“I don’t know. She left early.” I sigh heavily.

“I wonder how far along she is.”

I shrug, but my heart breaks at the timing of this new development.

“Have you two...?”

I release a heavy sigh and stare at the test lying so nonchalantly on the table as the questions begin to mount. “Uh... not since I got back, but it isn’t like I can get her pregnant.”

“So, probably while we were gone?”

_Fuck, I can’t believe this._

“Yeah. Um... yes. That would be my best guess.”
Warning bells are ringing in my head, and it takes a great effort to say all the right things, because my heart is pounding in my chest and my brain is screaming that *Hilda’s a cheater* like Felix. We have an open relationship and have never made any promises to one another. The problem is that while I *know* this is true, it doesn’t make those old feelings creeping back any easier to continue this conversation.

“I wonder who?” Rose glances down at the test again, looking thoughtful.

I rub my temples, trying to ease the tension building, and keep my voice steady not wanting to lose it in front of Rose. “I have no idea. It may or may not be anyone we know. But if Hilda wants to have this baby, then we should be here to support her without conditions.”

“Does she want kids? I’ve never heard her talk about them.”

I raise my hands, letting them drop in resignation. “Fuck, Rose. I don’t know. We were talking the night my dad was here, and I couldn’t get a straight answer out of her after I shared how I didn’t want to marry or have kids.”

“Really? I’m surprised you aren’t a fan of marriage or children?”

“Yes, really. Why is that so difficult to believe? If those things are important to her, then I have no issues with her finding someone to share them with. I’ll always be her friend.” No matter how impossible that may feel at the moment as I agonize over the bittersweet realities.

“What about lover? Aren’t you even a little hurt she was with someone else while you were gone, your whereabouts and well-being unknown?” She watches me closely. “I understand, you are both open about your relationship, but clearly, she’s been with a man recently, if she’s pregnant.”

“God, Rose. I don’t know what—” My voice breaks as I sort through what I’m feeling. “Okay, I’ll admit that maybe I’m a little hurt, but there are a lot of things I don’t know about Hilda. She may not want to keep the baby. Maybe it was an accident or there’s some other explanation. I-I don’t know—just go put that back in the trash.”

“Why don’t you want to get married or have kids? And don’t freak out. I’m not trying to upset you; I’m only curious. Is it because of your parents?”

I release a deep breath. “My parents never married—thank goodness. It would have been the biggest mistake for both of them.”

“But your mother is married now.”
“Phil is a good man, but my mother and I have different ideas about marriage.” I run my fingers through my hair. “She’s happy to lose her identity by taking his last name and submerge herself into his life. She doesn’t work and didn’t raise me. I lived with my dad.”

“What does she do then?”

“Drinks and spends Phil’s money.”

“That can’t be all, Bella.”

I shrug. “Okay, she goes to the spa, sits by the pool, and gossips with her friends at all the appropriate charity events. She’s on a perpetual vacation, but I wouldn’t want her life for the world. It would drive me crazy. She drives me crazy.”

“The marriage must not be that bad if she’s stayed with Phil for all these years.”

“I suppose it’s what she needs, but I enjoy working and love my job. I’m happy being single. I love my independence. I have friends like you, and I get to travel anywhere in the world without a second thought. I don’t need to ask for permission when I want to go somewhere or buy something because I can support myself with my own money.

“I’m happy and fulfilled without marriage. Why rock the boat and become someone who is bitter and resentful of being coerced into a marriage I never wanted in the first place? Just because two people get married, it doesn’t mean they will stay together. There are no guarantees. You can be committed to someone without tying the knot. There are other options.”

Rose smiles. “You never dreamed about the fairy tale?”

“No. I was never someone waiting for a prince to arrive on a white horse and sweep me off my feet. I’m not that kind of girl. I was always ready to slay the dragon myself.”

“You could still have kids.”

My heart sinks with the thought, and I know there’s no way I would ever put a child in jeopardy because of my career. “I think I’m better with the title Aunt Bella than Mom.”

“I think you’re selling yourself short. You’d be a great mother.”

“What about you?”

“I can’t help it, Bella. I want the fairy tale and kids. I understand your way of thinking, but I want to be a wife and mother. There was never a time when I didn’t think it would happen for me. Did you know I was arranged to be married?”
“I had no idea.”

“I haven’t shared it with many people, but I was to be Mrs. Royce King, Jr. Do you know the Kings from New York?”

“No, I don’t. What happened?”

“Long story short—we met.”

I chuckle. “Sometimes, that will do it.”

“I took one look at him and knew I didn’t want to be married to a gay man the rest of my life. His parents thought I could ‘fix’ him. I never decided whether to take that as a compliment or an insult. But you can’t ‘fix’ someone’s sexuality—even though they had the confidence my beauty would do the trick.

“Our fathers began negotiating the marriage like any other deal or merger, arguing through the details of the prenuptial agreement, while outlining guidelines of expectations—a timeline of sorts. His father wanted Royce to have not only a single heir to their family fortune, but also additional grandchildren before he would turn over the company to him.

“I was excited for the possibility of a large family being an only child, and I was willing to co-parent with him. I thought we could have an open marriage and continue to go along with the planning. But Royce had his own stipulations and was insisting his partner be in not only the room during natural conception, but also a participant. I’m not a prude, Bella, but I wasn’t willing to participate in what they wanted.”

“Oh, God.”

Rose nods. “They suggested having a trial run to see how we would all get along, and I agreed to stay with them for a weekend, not understanding exactly what they had in mind. It was the first time I had ever been around a relationship like that—not gay, but dominant and submissive.

“Royce was…”

“The submissive, but his partner expected me to be as well, which completely goes against my nature. I had played the role of the perfect, doting daughter for years, so I can understand why they thought I would be a natural fit for their relationship.”

“Did they have a dungeon or playroom of some kind? If the Kings are rich, Royce can probably afford something like that easily.”
“Bella, you surprise me with your knowledge.”

I smirk. “Curious minds do exhaustive research every now and then.”

“I see. Well, we did some play, but I just couldn’t get into it. I safeworded constantly. At the end of our weekend, I knew that wasn’t the relationship for me if it was what Royce needed. So, we talked to our fathers, putting an end to the agreements and planning.”

“At least everyone accepted your wishes and didn’t make you go through with a marriage you didn’t want.”

“True.”

“It sounds like your family is more than financially stable. I’m wondering why are you working, Rose?”

“Because, like you, I love my work. I love traveling and photography. Both give me the opportunity to be a normal person or as normal as possible. Most people don’t know the Hale name outside of New York, and I’m able to live a different life from my parents. They were disappointed everything fell apart with Royce, but they are still trying to find the perfect man for me in order to continue their legacy. I hope I can beat them to the punch and find the right guy who isn’t hung up on business and money like all of their proposed candidates. For me, the name thing isn’t a problem. It isn’t that I’m not proud to be a Hale, but if I took on my husband’s name, it would add another layer to my anonymity, which I find appealing. The problem is the men they select tend not to like my having a career or the travel I do.”

“You should—”

I’m interrupted as the door of our apartment bangs open in a flourish and Hilda storms inside.

“Ich kann ihm nicht glauben!” She stomps through the entry to our bedroom door and slams it shut.

We can hear her shouting, but I can’t understand a single word.

“What is she saying?”

“Something about not believing somebody.” Rose lowers her voice and tucks the pregnancy test up her sleeve and out of view. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to go put this back in the bathroom trash can.”

I nod as she slips away then wonder what has upset Hilda.
“Blöd!” Hilda charges out of the bedroom toward where I’m sitting still shouting in German. “Wie kann er denken, dass ich zustimmen würde?”

“Hilda?”

“Bella… es tut mir leid.” She drops into the chair next to mine, covering her face in frustration.

I reach over and gently rub her back. “English, please.”

“I am zo zorry, Bella. I don’t know what to do. This is not how I wanted you to find out, and now he’s forcing my hand.”

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Ich bin schwanger.”

“What?”

“I’m pregnant.”

My stomach drops when she confirms Rose’s and my suspicions.

*Oh, God. It’s fucking true. Fuck.*

Why couldn’t Rose and I be wrong this time?

I’m doing everything I can to hold back my tears and lower my voice. “What… what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, Bella.” Tears fill her eyes as she stares into mine. “I’m zorry. He… he vants to marry me.”

“Who? Who is he, Hilda?”

She swipes away a tear trailing down her cheek and reaches over lacing our fingers together. “Halistair.”

**A/N:** Translations:

*Ich kann ihm nicht glauben!* = I cannot believe him!

*Blöd!* = Stupid!

*Wie kann er denken, dass ich zustimmen würde?* = How can he think that I would agree?

*Bella… es tut mir leid.* = Bella… I’m sorry.

*Ich bin schwanger.* = I’m pregnant.
Chapter 26: The Prize

We’re sitting at the kitchen table watching Rose make tea when my calm evaporates, and I can’t hold inside my unanswered questions any longer.

“So… you and Alistair?” I start because there’s no easy way around this, and I figure we should dive right into the nitty-gritty.

“It’s not vat you think.”

“You’re pregnant. How can it not be what I think?” I shake my head, releasing her hand. “I’m not stupid, Hilda.”

“Bella—”

I watch her carefully. “You were together.”

“Ve got clozer vile you vere… and it just happened. One time. Uh… maybe more. I…”

Fuck. Of course, it did.

“Please don’t explain.” I pause to collect myself, taking a shaky breath in before I continue. “I-I knew we were never exclusive, and I have no expectations for the future, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“But I am worried, and I don’t vant you to be upzet. You aren’t ready for this.”

“How do you know what I’m ready for and what I’m not?” I raise my voice, barely keeping control. “I’m not as fragile as you may think. So, stop treating me like I’m some fucking precious doll that’s going to break under pressure. I’m fine.”

“You aren’t fine, Bella. I can zee it. I know you’re hurt and disappointed. Things haven’t been the zame zince…”

There’s a sudden banging on the door to our apartment, causing all of us to jump.

“Hilda! Hilda!”

“Fuck! He’s here. Bella, I’m sorry.”
“Hilda!” Alistair continues.

She storms over to the door, opening it in a flourish and yells, “Vat? Halistair, I’m done talking to you! I’m trying to talk with Bella.”

“I’m not done talking to ye.” Alistair fires back, furious and panting as if he’s run a marathon, trying to catch up with her. From the look of their standoff, he’s not about to end whatever discussion they were having before she got to our apartment.

I close my laptop, knowing they need privacy, and scan the floor for my shoes. I am eager to escape and could use some fresh air after these revelations. “Rose, I just remembered I have an errand to run. Do you think you would be willing to go with me?”

Her head is nodding vigorously as she turns off the kettle, sliding on her shoes, and grabbing her purse. “No problem. I need to pick up uh… something at the market while we’re out.”

We grab our jackets and are out the door, leaving Hilda and Alistair to their standoff, then hurry down the stairs and step out onto the sidewalk.

I look back at the door, pointing at our building. “Holy shit. We were right and those two—”

“We’ll be lucky if they don’t level our apartment while we’re gone.” She chuckles, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know.”

We walk in silence, and I wipe away a few tears trailing down my cheeks.

“There’s something bothering me, though.”

“What?”

“Before I moved here, I mean, I know what Hilda said, but were they ever together?”

“No, and I’ve never heard either yell at each other or anyone else—ever. They are not easily ruffled.”

We link arms and walk in silence along the city block, browsing the windows and passing a local park. I’m lost in thought until my own insecurities creep to surface and I wonder what Rose’s take on the situation is. “Do you think Hilda was using me to make him jealous?”
“Bella, she… she was probably waiting for the right moment to tell you. Was everything good before we disappeared?”

“I thought so. I noticed nothing different the night of my birthday—actually, the opposite. We were better than ever, but since we’ve been back, something feels off between us. I tried to talk with her to see if she wanted to take a break.” I stare up at the sky, wondering where this leaves us with a baby on the way, but suspect major changes are in our future.

“Bella, everyone knows she cares for you.”

“And I care about her, but I will not stand in her way if she wants something else. No matter how difficult it may be to accept that it isn’t me. Her life is about to change, and Alistair doesn’t seem like the kind of man not to want to be involved with his child’s life.”

“True.”

“Do you think she loves him?”

Rose glances away. “I-I don’t know, Bella. Did she ever say it to you?”

I shrug as doubts fill my head over everything I thought I knew about Hilda. “Not in so many words. I just…”

“Hang on. Someone is texting me.” Rose reaches for her phone, pulling it from her pocket.

“Maybe it’s Hilda, giving us the all-clear to return.”

“Nope. George. He’s at a bar nearby. Do you want to go? We can have a drink and give Hilda and Alistair more time alone.”

I look down at my casual clothes. “I’m not dressed to go out.”

“Who cares? It’s one drink, and George will be happy to see you. The more the merrier, and when was the last time you went out? You can’t sit at your computer around the clock never leaving the apartment.”

“Rose, you know I’m trying to get this article done.”

“I do, but Bella, I need a break from processing photos. I know a break would do you good too. Let’s get your mind off Hilda or your article for a while. We’ll pop in and say hi, nothing big.”

“Okay. One drink. That’s it.”
“Edward!” I gasp as I spread my legs wider and lower myself until he’s filling me inch by delicious inch.

“Oh, Bella. You’re perfect.”

I tilt my hips as his hands cup my breasts, squeezing them in time with my movements.

“That’s it. Ride me, love.”

“Ummm, so good.” I brace my hands against the headboard. “You feel different.”

“It’s the condom.”

“Why do we need to use them again?”

“You quit getting the shot.” He chuckles as his hands move to my ass. “And you don’t want babies. Remember? You said it over and over.”

“Right, no babies. You promised I won’t end up like Hilda.”

“You’re definitely not like Hilda. Faster.” He pants, pushing and pulling me off his cock.

“How many condoms do we have?”

“It’s a new box. We bought it on our way home.” His mouth seeks my breast and his tongue toys with my pierced nipples, first one then the other.

“We did?” I moan. “God, that feels good.”

“Yes, love. We’ll use as many as you want.”

I sit up immediately, panicking when I don’t feel her next to me. “Rose?” My hands search the bed frantically, but she isn’t there, and fear blooms deep in my chest as my breathing increases. “Rose?”

Oh, God. I’m alone. She’s gone. They’ve taken her somewhere.

I look around carefully, wondering if Z is here watching me sleep, as she is never far from my side and can be deathly quiet when necessary. When I don’t see her in the room, I suspect I’m
alone, but know better than letting my guard down. I’m in a sparsely furnished bedroom, but I have no idea where we are.

A quick peek under the covers confirms my lack of clothing. I peer over the side of the bed, hoping to find my clothes in the low light, but don’t see them. I notice some little squares on the floor next to the bed. I reach down, pick one up, and hold it closer to my face.

It’s an empty condom wrapper.

Shit.

I examine a few more, but thankfully, they are unopened. Leaning back against the pillows, I pull the covers up to my chin, and blink slowly as my eyes adjust to the early morning light, filtering in the room from the small window.

There’s a noise, and I notice the door is open slightly. It sounds like someone is moving around, and I hold out one last hope. “Rose?”

If it isn’t Rose or Z, then I wonder who’s out there, but make no move to investigate as my eyes search the room, looking for any type of weapon. Maybe I can stun whoever it is and find a neighbor to help me get out of here and figure out how to get back to Berlin.

Before I can make a move, the door opens wider, and a figure appears in the doorway.

“Hey, love. You’re awake.”

I know that voice as my eyes focus on a man wearing only boxers. “George?”

“Did you want some coffee?” He holds up a mug. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how you like it. We can share.”

“George?” I eye him skeptically, wondering if he is working with Z or where she is.

He moves closer to the bed, and I panic sitting up, scooting backward until I’m pressed against the headboard, still clutching the covers tightly.

“Stay right there. Don’t come any closer,” I warn.

“Bella? What’s wrong?”

“Where’s Z? Or-or Rose?”

“At your flat.”
“But you know Z. Were you two working together all this time?”

“Bella, I have no idea who you are talking about. I’m not working with anyone.”

I look around the room, trying to piece together my situation. “Where are we?”

“At my flat.”

“In Berlin?”

“Yes.”

“We came here…”

“Last night, or I guess early this morning. It was your idea. I was walking you and Rose home from the pub, but when we got there, Hilda and Alistair were—”

The flash of Alistair’s naked ass comes to mind when we walked through the door.

*Oh, God.*

I hold up my hand, stopping his explanation as I recall seeing the two of them nakedly entwined on the couch. “They were still there. Together. I remember.”

“Rose went to her room, but you said you couldn’t stay there and begged me to bring you here.”

“Did we—never mind from the looks of the floor, I have my answer.”

He walks around the bed, then sits on the edge next to me, turning on a lamp and setting the mug on the nightstand. “You have regrets.”

As my eyes adjust to the brighter light, I can see the disappointment settling on George’s features.

“I didn’t say that. I can only remember bits and pieces.” I lie, but with what I’m remembering, I thought I was dreaming again, and George was someone else. *Edward*. But I can’t tell him that because it will crush him.

*What have I done?*

“Bella, love, I have no regrets, and I don’t care what brought you here. I’m only happy you’re here. You are welcome to stay as long as you like.”
“George, I have no idea what... I thought... I thought I was b-back with Rose—or that you were connected to Z... and why can't my brain accept I'm not there anymore and she's dead? Fuck, I'm a mess.”

“Bella, love. Let me help you.” He opens his arms, but I'm hesitant to accept his comfort, and when I don't move closer, George drops his arms in resignation.

“Trust me, with relationships, you should think twice. You're better off without me. Hilda is—”

“With Alistair. I know.”

I shake my head. “Everyone knows but me.”

“He helped get her back on her feet after she was shot and you were gone. She feels guilty you were ever taken.” George reaches over and holds my hands in his. “Bella, I'll be whatever you need—friend... confidant... roommate... lover...”

I clear my throat. “Maybe I should be alone for a while, you know? Focus on completing my article. Carlisle keeps pushing me to finish. Rose has her photos almost ready for publishing, and I'm so far behind.”

“I can help—whatever you need. You can work from here,” he offers.

“Thank you, but I need to do this on my own.”

“Last night, you said you needed me.” He sighs deeply with frustration as his shoulders sag. “Why is it you only want me after a visit to the pub?”

“That's not true.”

“Isn't it?” His eyes are full of hurt. “I can be so much more than a shag, Bella.”

I reach up and cup his jaw, rubbing my hand over his scruff. “You know I care about you. We're good friends.”

“Bella,” he whispers. “I want you to want me.” He takes my hand, kissing inside the wrist and looking back into my eyes with a hopeful determination.

“George.” I squeeze his hand, trying to find the right words, but for once words fail me as I break his heart. “I'm sorry. I can't.”

He leans in, leaving a kiss on my forehead. “I know. Unfortunately, I know.”
My four-part article about the refugee crisis has drawn a huge response, as Carlisle suspected it would. The Post featured it on their website at the end of December, creating a nonstop buzz throughout January. I’m thrilled to be acknowledged by my peers and credited by the public for creating front-page news, but also excited I met the end of the year deadline to be considered for a Pulitzer.

While I’ve been focusing on other stories around Germany for the past couple of months, the buzz over my refugee article never seems to die. I’m planning two more stories, following up with those I met in the camps, if I can locate them again. I also have plans to interview anyone willing to talk while I’m there.

All of these plans require a return trip to Greece, which is something that leaves me nervous and unsettled. I am hesitant to go alone and have been struggling with working through my issues about returning to the area.

Carlisle wants me to write about my experience of being kidnapped. He says it would be a way to gain control over the situation by acknowledging what happened even if I never share it with anyone. While I know he’s probably right, I don’t think I’m ready to dig into those feelings just yet. I know I’m stronger mentally, but some days my emotions are all over the map.

I have other worries too, like the physical risks to my safety, especially now that I’m on everyone’s radar with my own words. After sharing many of my fears with Rose, she’s volunteered to accompany me on the return trip.

I don’t know what I would do without her support over these past few months. She’s been by my side every step of the way, including the day Hilda moved out of our apartment, which was tough for me. But I know it’s for the best, since she and Alistair are now engaged to be married with plans to build a life together. When I asked Rose what she thought of their engagement, I could tell she had her doubts but didn’t want to voice them. I feel the same, but know it’s time for me to move on.

Binyamin is in Greece and I’m hopeful he can join us for part of our trip too. It’s late April, and I am positively jubilant over his latest news as I listen to his excited voice.

“Bella, can you believe it? It’s finally happened after years of not knowing anything. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“This is an incredible day, Binyamin. Where are they?”
“They are in Athens, as we thought. I saw them briefly.” He sighs heavily into the phone. “They are both thin, but in fair health.”

I beam with pride at the reuniting of Binyamin with his mother and sister.

“I plan to stay here for another week.”

My phone vibrates with a text from Rose, and I skim the message while I have Binyamin on speaker.

**Bella, do you have a new email? Check your inbox. Now.**

“Hey, I hate to cut this short, but I’ve got to go. Rose is texting me about something.”

“All right, Bella, but I couldn’t wait to share the good news with you and Rose. You’ll tell her for me?”

Another text box appears.

**I’m not kidding. Stop everything and read your damn email.**

“Absolutely, keep me updated, and stay as long as you need. I’m positive Alistair will understand.”

“I’ll call him next,” Binyamin says. “I’m excited to tell him, as well.”

**Bella!**

“Congratulations, Binyamin. I can’t wait to meet them.”

“Thanks again, Bella. I’ve told them all about you and Rose.”

“We will be back in Greece next month. If you’re still there, then we can make plans to visit or meet with them on our own. I want to hear their stories and have them share their experiences.”

“Okay. I’ll let them know.”

“I’ll talk to you soon. Take care.”

I end my call and open my mail app, seeing two new emails in the inbox. I click on the forwarded one from Rose, reading rapidly and staring in disbelief.

*Holy shit.*
My phone vibrates with an incoming call as Rose’s picture fills the screen. “Holy shit!”

“Did you read it?” Rose asks, breathless with excitement.

“Yes, I read it. Congratulations, Rose.”

“Did you get one too?”

“Me? I don’t know. I saw your forwarded email, but there’s something else. Hang on.”

I put her call on hold and go back to my mail app, then click on the other new email in my inbox. I can barely comprehend what I see as I’m reading, and focus on three words over and over: Pulitzer Prize Winner.

I skip the details about the luncheon ceremony and arrangements. When I make it to the end, I go back to Rose. “Rose—”

“You got one too, didn’t you?”

“Yes!” I gasp as a warm flush of euphoria fills me from head to toe.

“Woohoo! I knew it. Bella, this is incredible. We need to celebrate and I’m not taking no for an answer. We did it!”

“I can’t believe this, Rose.”

“I need to call my parents.”

“Oh, God—Carlisle. He probably already knows, but I still need to call him.”

“I can’t wait to meet him, Bella… in New York. We need to reschedule our trip to Greece because we’re headed back home for a visit. I’ll make all the arrangements. I want you to meet my parents, and we can stay at my family home out on Long Island while we’re there. You’ll love it.”

“Oh, Rose. This is incredible. Thank you. I can’t wait to meet your parents. I should call Emmett too. I’m sure he won’t mind flying from D.C. to help us celebrate.”

“Hilda won’t be able to go, since she’s in her last trimester. Alistair will barely let her out of his sight, but the ten-hour flight would be more than she should attempt. We can have a dinner or something and include everyone here. I’m on my way home. I’ll see you when I get there.”
“Okay, see you soon.”

Once I end my call with Rose, I go back to my email to reread it again, hoping the reality will finally sink in of what we’ve accomplished. I’m excited, but still shocked at the surreal news that we are both winners.

New York.

I’m going back to New York.

Over a year ago, I spent one of my worst and best days there. I cringe, thinking about my meeting with Alec and the swirling shitstorm of a day I had. I was completely unprofessional and failed to remain unbiased during our meeting. My personal opinions clouded my judgment when I was questioning him about the tax cuts spearheaded by Senator Volturi, which got me nowhere. Carlisle let me have it when I shared how it went later. But remaining objective about issues is a struggle for any journalist, and I’m no different.

I also remember the overwhelming relief I felt when I opened my hotel door and found a snow covered Edward holding a bouquet of Valentine’s Day roses on the other side.

It’s tough to know I’ll be geographically close to him again, as two hundred miles between D.C. and New York is a lot closer than over four thousand from D.C. to Berlin. We’ve been apart for almost a year, and I wonder how the past months have been for him. Part of me wishes I could pick up the phone and say, “Hey, can you believe this? I finally did it. I had this really shitty thing happen, but look what I did with it.”

Another part of me just misses the hell out of him—his cocky smile and that hearty laugh.

I’m not sure if I can be friends with him like Angela always suggests, but I’m confident that if I ever see him again, I won’t turn tail and run, which for me feels like progress.
Chapter 27: The Reunion Part 1

I’m overwhelmed with a world of possibilities as my brain tries to focus and process the spectacle of our table in the Low Library Rotunda at Columbia University. It’s been a whirlwind ever since Rose and I landed in New York City. But nothing surprises me more than the man sitting next to me, intent on holding my hand whenever it’s available.

It’s an ambush of sorts, and I’m having a difficult time believing Emmett would take part in something like this. I never mentioned my relationship with Edward, which means Edward must have told him. Emmett also knows I can never stay mad at him, which is probably why he’s the only one who could get away with this stunt.

My father’s gruff mood is back in full force, as I would guess he didn’t know about Edward’s attendance either. It seems Emmett and Edward have some sort of friendship. I wonder how long that’s been going on and why Emmett has failed to say anything in our conversations since I’ve been living in Berlin.

I’m not only surprised by Edward’s presence, but also his attentiveness. He didn’t waste any time. The first words out of his mouth when we came face to face were that he loves me—not past tense, but very present tense. It’s a sentiment I can return easily, because I do love him and probably always will. He said so many things earlier about starting over and second chances that it’s a lot to comprehend in such a short time.

The reality, though, of Edward professing his love publicly and wanting some version of living together leaves me stunned. I can’t decide if he’s joking or not, but I suspect he’s serious about moving my stuff out of storage. It seems like he’s ready to right all wrongs between us in a matter of a few hours. Unfortunately, I know firsthand that it’s nearly impossible to pick up where a relationship left off after time apart.

I’m curious to understand how he’s come to these conclusions over the past year, because the last time we spoke, I broke up with him. We went for months with radio silence between us. I never returned any of his calls, texts, or emails because I was trying to move on, doing what I thought best for me. Now, I wish I had at least read them before deleting.

At the ceremony’s conclusion, we move to an informal reception for the winners and their guests hosted by Columbia University’s Alumni Club. It’s a solid two hours of informal congratulations, introductions, and networking while rubbing elbows with some of the most renowned journalists in the world. Carlisle is in his element and ready to pull me into most conversations when I’m
standing nearby. I'm exhausted and ready to change out of my heels once Rose and I spend an acceptable amount of time mingling with everyone, which can't end soon enough for me.

“Bella.” Rose waves me over, getting my attention.

“Hey.”

She lowers her voice. “Emmett and I are heading back to the hotel so I can change clothes.”

We're staying at the Library Hotel, and I love everything about it as there are books tucked into shelved areas throughout the entire building. I never have enough time to read for pleasure these days and her mention of our hotel makes me want to abandon this reception, opting to hide away in my room with a good book for the rest of the night.

I perk up at the idea. “Oh, yeah?”

“I don’t know what we will do, but this is New York. I’m positive we will find something—an art gallery or show, because I’m not ready to end my time with him. The conversation between us is great and I can't believe you’ve failed to mention him to me in any capacity other than your former boss. Even if we only went to a coffee shop and talked, I would be happy.”

“You and Emmett?” A slow smile threatens to take over my face at the match.

I would have never put them together. Rosalie comes from a well-to-do New York family while Emmett doesn't necessarily come from humble beginnings, but hasn’t lived the life of privilege Rose has. He’s carried the legacy of service for his family, making sacrifices in the process and working hard to get where he is today.

“Yes, but he’s flying back to D.C. in the morning, and we’re heading out to my parents’ home in the afternoon after your lunch with Carlisle.”

“Okay. Thanks for giving me the heads-up. I should say my goodbyes and leave soon too.”

“Do you have any plans?”

“Soak in the tub and order room service? Maybe do a little reading. My feet are killing me. These heels were a bad idea.”

“No, I'm talking about with Edward.”

“Edward?” I glance in his direction and see him whispering with Emmett.
Rose guides me away to a more private spot. “Bella, he came all this way and told you he loves you. He obviously wants to spend more time together because he’s still here, ready to be at your beck and call. I’m sure if you asked, he would be game for anything.”

“I don’t know. It isn’t as if I knew he would be here. He’s my ex and wasn’t part of my plans for this celebration.”

“Maybe he should be.” She raises a challenging eyebrow. “This could be your opportunity to clear the air and get to the bottom of his attendance today—maybe there’s a chance for reconciliation in your future. He hasn’t shied away from a single photo opportunity with you, and I would bet anything the two of you will be plastered across websites and gossip pages over the next twenty-four hours.”

“Oh, God. You’re probably right, and a conversation is definitely overdue, at least something more than the words we’ve exchanged here today. Where could we go? My hotel room will give him the wrong idea, and I’m nervous about being alone together. We haven’t seen each other in a year, and I’m not up for repeating any mistakes with him by falling into a physical relationship again. I know myself and I will have a hard time resisting when he turns on the charm.”

“Then pick some place where you won’t be alone.”

“But I don’t want anyone to overhear our conversation then have to read some skewed version tomorrow. If I’ve learned one thing over the past two years, it’s that there are eyes and ears everywhere.”

“I hate to say this, but it sounds like your hotel room may be the only place for privacy. You should put down some ground rules and maintain a safe distance. Don’t sit on the bed together—that will only lead to trouble. Good luck. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I exchange hugs with Rose and Emmett, watching them leave as Edward moves to my side.

“Hey.” My eyes meet his, giving him a brief smile.

“Hey.”

“I think I’m going to head back to my hotel. My feet are killing me.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Did you have any plans this evening?” I ask.

“No. I was waiting to see what you were doing. Did you want to grab a drink somewhere? We could have dinner and see a show, if you are interested,” he offers.
“Hmmm, that may be more than what I had planned.”

“Oh.”

“I’m tired and still on Berlin time, plus I haven’t recovered from the flight.”

“Maybe I could go with you?”

“Back to my hotel?”

“Yes.” He holds his hands up in surrender. “I have no expectations, Bella, but I would like the chance to talk and catch up.”

“I don’t know if we should be—”

“Alone?”

“Yeah.”

“Bella, I promise you. I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“I was thinking about soaking in the tub and ordering room service.”

“I’m willing to wait until you’re through, then I would love to share room service with you.”

I eye him carefully, thinking over his words. “Okay, let’s go.”

-BCD-

There’s a knock on the bathroom door.

“Yes?”

I can hear Edward’s muffled voice. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Yes please.”

“Would it be okay if I opened the door?”

“Sure.” I chuckle, wondering how else he would get the glass through the door, if I said “hell no.”
“Here you go.” He sets a filled wine glass on the edge of the tub but continues to look everywhere except in my direction. “Can I get you anything else?”

Rose was right about the whole beck and call thing. Maybe we should get started with the catching up he wants to do.

“Why don’t you have a seat and we can talk?”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” His eyes glance toward the mounds of bubbles, floating in the tub. “Maybe I should wait out in the room or downstairs at the bar.”

“It’s only talking, Edward.”

“I don’t want to anger you.”

“Why do you think I will be angry?”

“I have no clue how our conversation will go now that we’re finally alone. The last time we spoke in-person, it ended with you breaking up with me and leaving the country for a year. I’m not interested in repeating that part of our past.” He waves his hand toward the tub. “This is supposed to help you relax and unwind.”

I watch as he runs his hand through his hair nervously.

“I think we should talk now. I may fall asleep once I eat, and it seems like a waste of time for you to be out in the room or downstairs waiting when we could be talking.”

“As you wish.” He gives in, sitting stiffly on the tiled ledge at the far end of the tub. “Why don’t you go first? Where would you like to begin?”

So many things come to mind, but I start with something that should be easy.

“Okay. You and Emmett are friends?” I ask.

“Yes.” Edward looks away from my narrowing eyes.

I wait for more, but he doesn’t elaborate.

“That’s it? That’s all I get? I never told him about us, and he didn’t mention a word about you.”

“What would you like for me to say?” He rubs the palms of his hands against his pants.
“The truth. If we can’t be honest at this point, then I have to wonder what are we even doing here?”

“I went to him for help after your father suggested taking out a restraining order against me.”

“My father did what? Oh, never mind.” Shaking my head, but not really surprised he would threaten something like that, I prompt for Edward to continue. “So you’ve been friends…”

“Since a couple of months after you broke up with me. I made some uh… errors in judgment when you left. Emmett got me back on the right track, giving me hope that someday I could have a second chance with you, and I needed to be ready for that day.”

Errors in judgment?

I’m not sure I want to know about those, but I have a more pressing question.

“Are you still being represented by Shelly Cope?”

“Yes, why wouldn’t I be?”

He still has no clue about her.

“You want us to try again?”

“Yes.”

“Edward, I can’t do what we had before—”

He cuts me off before I have a chance to finish. “I agree completely. I can’t either. I want everything out in the open. Dating—the works. I don’t care who knows. Your baggage is my baggage. I can handle it.”

“But it’s not just my baggage, Edward. I live in Berlin now. How would that work with you in D.C.? We couldn’t keep a relationship going while in the same city; we’re doomed with four thousand miles between us.”

“I’ll move.”

I’m shocked at his impulsive declaration. “You’ll move? Just like that?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you have a contract with This Week?”
“I won’t renew when it expires.”

“And when does it expire?”

“In three years, but there are clauses that if the ratings go down, the network can take the option to break the agreement and hire a new host.”

“You’re going to tank your own show and your career?”

He shrugs. “It’s one of the easiest ways out. I can rebuild my career somewhere else.”

“And all of this because you want to date?” I raise my eyebrows skeptically.

“I want more than to date, Bella, but if you’re willing, then it seems like a good starting point.”

“Shelly won’t be happy with that plan.”

“Then she will be unhappy.”

“She—” I’m not sure how much to reveal of her initial involvement in our relationship, but I guess at this point it doesn’t matter.

“She, what?”

“Shelly warned me against dating you. No, warned probably isn’t the right word. Maybe, threatened? She said I would be the reason for you not being successful and I would harm your career. It looks like she’s still right, if you’re looking for ways to dump your show after this brief visit by me.”

“When? When did you talk with her?”

“The first time was at the White House for the Women’s Luncheon. She somehow knew we met and were talking.”

“Two years ago? And she said we shouldn’t date?”

“Correct.”

“But we dated anyway.”

“Edward, it wasn’t really dating. We were secretly carrying on an affair for almost a year. Outside of sex, there wasn’t much to our relationship. I’m sorry, but I can’t consider anything
with you, if she’s in the picture. Shelly hates me, and I’m through with letting her have the upper hand.”

“Then she’s out.”

Edward surprises me once again. “Just like that?”

“Yes.”

“You know you can’t do that. I’m sure she has a contract.”

“The hell I can’t. I’ll make the necessary calls and end our professional relationship once I’m back in D.C. Bella, do you understand how serious I am? This isn’t some knee-jerk reaction. That morning… the morning of you doing my show?”

“Yes?”

He stands, leans against the countertop of the sink, and takes extra time in choosing his next words. “I was thinking of ways to ask you to marry me. I want you to be my wife.”

Holy smokes.

His wife.

We have such horrible timing, and I had absolutely no clue what he was thinking.

“But you never said a thing, or that you loved me in the entire year we were together or-or even stopped me from leaving the studio that day.”

“And if I had, would you have still left? Moved to Berlin?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would it have been fair to you or your career to ask you to stay?”

When I fail to reply, Edward kneels next to the tub, staring into my eyes.

“The truth, Bella.”

“I would have left. I needed more and not only from you.”
“You know I was only following your lead, and looking back on our time together, I should have done so many things differently—especially when I knew my feelings were changing into something more.”

“Angela warned me when I confided in her that I was being foolish to let past insecurities about my failed relationships sabotage whatever feelings I had that were growing for you.”

“Angela knows about us?”

“Yes, and Demetri. And my co-workers in Berlin.”

“I don’t feel so bad about Emmett now. Jasper figured it out too.” He sighs, shaking his head. “I tried to show you how much I cared by taking you away for your birthday, the week at the cabin in the mountains, and surprising you here on Valentine’s Day. Even if my words of love weren’t ready then, how could you doubt my actions when we were together?”

Looking back, I know I shouldn’t have let any doubts cloud my judgment about him, but hindsight is twenty-twenty.

“Angela… Angela thinks when I realized you weren’t trying to use me for my connections that I started looking for reasons to doubt what we had. She said it’s a pattern with me, and in order to prevent myself from becoming more emotionally attached, I waited until I found enough reasons to bail completely.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think she may be right.”

“Do you pay her by the hour or have a standing appointment? Because I’m thinking I need to call and schedule some time with her.” Edward teases me with a small smile. “When did your feelings start changing?”

“After our trip to the cabin.”

He reaches out and takes my soapy hand in his. “You have no idea how much willpower it’s taken for me not to show up in Berlin at your doorstep. This past year has been a lesson in patience for me at every turn with Emmett advising me not to push. I’m sorry, Bella. I should have told you about my feelings long before today. I called, texted, and emailed, but you never responded. Why?”

“I didn’t know what to say. I’m not the same person you knew,” I explain, pulling my hand away. “I’m really struggling right now with a lot of things. My emotions are all over the map. Some days
are better than others, but you may conclude I’m not who you want or even close to the woman you remember.”

It’s time for me to share some truth of my own. “I know we never spoke of these kinds of things, but I think you should know that I don’t want to get married or have kids.”

I wait for any type of reaction to my bombshells, but he only blinks while listening to what I say. So I continue.

“Those are big issues and deal breakers for some people.”

When he fails to respond, I take that as my cue, knowing those may be too big of obstacles for a second chance at anything between us.

“I’m sorry, Edward.”

My apology finally snaps him from his daze and he focuses on my last words.

“What?”

I wave my hand toward what few clumps of bubbles are floating on the surface and shiver at the cooling water. “I’m sorry. I should finish my bath and get dressed.”

He stands, preparing to depart, not looking at me. “Oh, right. I-I’ll wait outside for you to finish.”
Chapter 28: The Reunion Part 2

Edward leaves the bathroom, closing the door behind him. I take my time, enjoying the comfort of the plush towels, spreading lotion over every inch of my skin, and sliding on my favorite pajamas. The growling of my stomach reminds me I need to call room service and eat before I pass out. I didn’t eat much at the luncheon today as my stomach was in knots over the ceremony, and the unexpected arrival of Edward didn’t help my appetite either.

Opening the bathroom door, I move toward the desk, searching for the room service menu, only to find Edward sitting in a chair next to the bed balancing it on his knee.

“Can I borrow that?”

“Sure.” He hands me the leather-bound menu, watching me as I sit on the edge of the bed. I flip open the menu, scanning the selections.

“Are you still joining me for dinner?”

“I already ordered for both of us.” He clears his throat. “I thought it would be a good idea to get some food on the way. You didn’t eat much earlier.”

I’m a little defensive at him making choices for me, which isn’t a good start toward a new friendship together, if that’s what he’s thinking. “How did you know what I wanted?”

“I’m sorry. I should have waited.” He stands from his chair, and within seconds, has the phone receiver in hand ready to make the call. “What would you like? I’ll call and change the order.”

“I don’t know. I can’t decide between the roast chicken or the burger.”

There’s a knock on the door of my room and Edward hangs up the phone then moves to answer it. “Sit tight. I’ll get the door.”

I hear a male voice from the hallway and notice he has a cart.

“Good evening, sir.”

“That was fast.”

Edward accepts the leather holder with the bill and signs quickly.
“The kitchen isn’t busy yet. Would you like for me to—?”

“No, thanks. I’ve got it. Have a good night.”

“You too, sir.”

Edward pushes the room service cart to the end of the bed where I’m sitting.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes. What did you order?”

He unveils the domes from each place setting. “One of your choices: the burger and fries. And when you thought it couldn’t get any better—the roast chicken with fingerling potatoes. Which one do you want or we can split them and share? It doesn’t matter to me, but make sure you save room for…” Edward removes the plastic wrap from another plate and sets it in the center of the cart. “…a slice of blackout cake.”

“Edward—” Not only did he pick exactly what I would order, but he remembered my love for all things chocolate.

“Better than squid ink, right?” He smirks, giving me a glimpse at the man I once knew and adding some levity to both of our moods.

“Yes. This looks delicious and a million times better than squid ink.” I can’t wait. Grabbing a fork, I take the first bite, moaning as the rich ganache melts on my tongue. “What’s happened to the cocky TV host I used to know? You’ve gone soft.”

The playful look on his face fades and he pauses, choosing his words with great care. “He’s been chewing on the same bite of humble pie for the past year.”

“I’m sorry that was… I don’t…”

His shoulders slump, and he shakes his head. “Bella, when we found out you were kidnapped… and they released the still from the video… I… We didn’t know so many things for a long time, and what the White House shared was… I would guess minimizing the gravity of the situation.”

I lower my voice, trying to will away the tears, which are threatening as my throat tightens. “It’s been a tough year.”

He nods. “For both of us.”
“Maybe that conversation can wait. I think we have other things to talk about, if you would like to continue?” I suggest.

“Okay. I want to go back and talk about your position on the whole marriage and children issue, but first, let’s eat. Would you like another glass of wine or would you prefer some ice water?”

“The wine would be great, but I’ll take a glass of water too.”

Edward busies himself with getting my drinks. “Tell me about your co-workers. That’s probably a safe subject, right?”

Oh, God.

This conversation is nothing but a minefield as we go from one subject to the next.

Finishing my bite, I start with one of the easiest. “You met Rose. We’re roommates, and you’ve seen her photos, if you’ve read my articles. She’s incredibly talented.”

“Yes, she is.” Edward moves the desk chair opposite of where I’m sitting and raises the sides of the cart, locking them into position and creating a small round table.

“Everything smells great. I’ll take the burger, if that’s okay?” I say.

“Sure. So, is Rose your only roommate?”

“No. We used to have another. Her name is Hilda, but she moved out last month and in with her fiancé, Alistair, who also is the head of the Post’s Berlin office."

“Your boss,” he concludes. “Is she a journalist too?”

“Yes to both. He’s Scottish and Hilda is German.” I shrug, trying to play it cool about their relationship. “It’s an interesting match and they… they are expecting a baby in two months.”

Edward observes me closely. “Marriage and a child.”

I nod, ready to move on to someone else. “Binyamin is Syrian. He’s been looking for his mother and sister who were lost for years when they fled Syria. We got the good news that he found them recently based on some information Rose and I had from… uh… this never gets easier… from our time away.”

“I’m sorry, Bella. It all seems to be interrelated. I had no idea. We can talk about something else, if you would prefer.”
“No, it’s fine. There’s also Siobhan and her daughter, Maggie, who are Irish. I’ve met Siobhan’s husband William a few times. And finally, George who is from England.” I skip elaborating about George, as there is no reason to revisit that situation either. “It’s a small group, but an interesting blend of nationalities. Everyone was welcoming when I arrived, and I’ve formed great friendships as we lean on one another to collaborate for our articles.”

“Maybe I can meet them one day.”

“I don’t know. Maybe…”

“Do you like Berlin?”

“I do. It’s a city with a rich history and understated beauty. I haven’t had a chance to do any of the touristic things. There are a lot of castles throughout German countryside, which I’ve only seen from a distance, but they look like something straight out of a fairy tale.”

“How long do you plan to stay?” Edward asks between bites of chicken and potatoes.

“I have two years left on my residence permit. I, uh, I have an interview with The Times next week while we’re here in New York.”

“You do?”

I chuckle, sneaking another large bite of cake. “Yeah, win one Pulitzer and they suddenly would like to talk.”

“I’m not sure what more they could offer you than what The Post isn’t already doing.”

“I don’t either. Carlisle says I should keep an open mind, but when it comes to The Times he’s biased.” I watch Edward, wanting to clarify a few points in our past and hoping he will be truthful with my change of subject. “I want to ask about when we were seeing each other.”

“Okay.”

“I thought we agreed on exclusivity, but after doing your show, were you and Tanya involved behind my back? Because that morning in the green room, she was busy staking a claim on you as she said—”

“No. No, we weren’t.”

He’s quick to cut off my explanation, which makes me more suspicious that he’s not sharing the whole story, but I finish my thought.
“In the studio, she was very... aggressive before our segment and during the break.”

“She’s always been persistent about getting what she wants.”

“And she wanted you, as did every woman in the building. It was an eye-opening experience.”

“I’m sorry if you were hurt by everything you heard, Bella. I never cheated. You know how I feel about my father and his treatment of my mother. I would never do that to you. But I made mistakes with Tanya after you left and stupidly got pulled into her divorce.”

*Please don’t go into any details about you and Tanya,* I silently beg. I know I can’t handle hearing about the two of them together, even though I’m well aware I wasn’t abstaining from any relationships with other people. At least he doesn’t know them, which is the reason for my hesitancy at the idea of introducing him to my co-workers.

I’m eager to let him off the hook and explain myself further. “We broke up and there were absolutely no signs of reconciliation in our future after I left. I ended it because I couldn’t keep the secrets or continue telling the lies any longer. We needed to trust each other to make our relationship work, and I was at my breaking point. The women were everywhere buzzing about you, and Shelly was leaking stories to the *Daily Chatter.* You were so good at not letting any of it bother you, and I was like a dam finally bursting under the pressure.”

“Shelly was leaking stories?”

“I don’t know who else it could have been, but I was the fool who was reading about other women spending their time with you on outings I knew we made together. Who else would have known? Like I said, Shelly hates me and was determined to drive a wedge between us. And it worked. I broke first. I know we said we would always be honest with one another when something was bothering us, and I’m sorry I failed to keep that promise. The *Daily Chatter’s* gossip was wearing me down to where I didn’t know what to believe, and I didn’t want to point out my growing insecurities.”

“And I want to eliminate those for both of us by getting married.”

“Do you really believe a piece of paper would do that? There are no guarantees, Edward. Relationships end all the time for various reasons with or without the binding of a marriage license. Look at Tanya.”

“But it’s you and me. I had faith in us. I still do. Look at us. We’re here sharing dinner and clearing the air after a year apart.”
I shake my head. "I don’t see myself ever getting married. I love my life and my job with no plans to give those up for anyone, especially for a child. I’ve worked too hard for years to get where I am now, and I know that probably sounds selfish—"

He interrupts. "I’m not proposing you do that, but I would like to have a better understanding of what you need in order for us to move forward."

“And I’m trying to explain. In my opinion, not every woman should be a mother. I believe I’m one of those, and I’m okay with my decision. But if having children is a deal breaker for you, then maybe you shouldn’t waste your time with me and find someone who can give you what you’re missing.”

We’re both quiet contemplating the implications of my words as we finish our meals and I take my last bites of chocolate cake.

“Are you finished?” Edward points toward my half-eaten burger.

“Yes, I think that’s all I can eat. I hope you don’t mind my lying down? After a bath, two glasses of wine, and a full belly, I’m not sure how much longer I can stay awake."

“Okay. I should go soon. Let me push the cart back out in the hallway. Go ahead and crawl under the covers.”

Edward makes quick work of removing the remains of our meals, then returns to the chair next to the bed; thankfully, maintaining a distance between us.

When he doesn’t restart our conversation, I decide to let him off the hook. “I understand if you’re having second thoughts, Edward. It’s okay. It’s a lot to digest.”

“Bella, I’m not having second thoughts, but it seems I need to rethink how to establish a partnership with you, if marriage isn’t an option. I just want to verify, you’re not opposed to dating?”

I shrug. “Dating is fine.”

He gives me a sly smile. "Would you like to meet for a breakfast date in the morning? Don’t worry; I haven’t forgotten my promised date from earlier today to take you to a hockey game. We’ll do that whenever you’re in D.C. again and have time."

“Okay, breakfast tomorrow sounds great.” I grin.

“I promise, there will be many more dates on the not-so-distant horizon. Can I ask you something else?"
“Sure.”

“What about living together?” he asks. “I mentioned it earlier and you didn’t shoot it down immediately. So, is that a possibility?”

“Maybe at some point in the future.”

“What if we worked together? Would you be opposed to something like that?”

“You want to leave television?” I ask through a yawn.

“I know I want you, and if I need a different job, then I’ll get one.”

“Oh, Edward. You don’t know what you’re saying. Privately, I’m a mess. Sometimes I wake up and don’t know where I am. The lack of control freaks me out. There are nightmares too. Publicly, I have a target on my back and I’m always looking over my shoulder for what lurks around every corner and who I may offend with the most innocent of statements.”

“And I still want you—the year apart solidified that for me.” He smiles softly. “I love everything about you, Bella, especially your messes. We all have fears, and I know, while I can’t truly understand what you’ve been through, I want to be there for you in every way. Let’s both sleep on everything we’ve discussed and pick this up in the morning. You need your rest, and I’ll bring breakfast.”

He stands from the chair, then walks around the bed and leans over, brushing his lips across my forehead, leaving a gentle kiss.

“I’ll see you in the morning. Is eight o’clock too early?”

“No, it’s fine. Good night, Edward.”

“Good night, Bella. Sweet dreams.” He smiles, but hesitates for a moment.

It’s barely a faint whisper, but I hear it. Then he moves toward the door, giving me one last wave, leaving my room for the night.

At the sound of the door closing, I turn off the light near the bed and whisper into the darkness. “I love you too.”
Chapter 29: The Plans

You’re welcome.

What?

You can thank me later.

For what?
Rose?

You’ll see.

You’re so frustrating sometimes.

And yet, you love me. X

I’m still in my pajamas. I don’t know what to wear.

Stick with your pjs. You’ll look sleepy sexy. Perfect for a breakfast date.

Maybe I need a robe. Is it too late for shopping?
Does this hotel have a concierge or personal shopper on staff for a last-minute crisis?
This is New York. Everything is open all the time, right?

It’s too late. You don’t need a robe.

What about lost and found? Do they have one of those here?
I’m not picky. Any robe will do. I can call down to the front desk.

This isn’t the Playboy Mansion, Heff.
Leave the concierge alone.
No robe. Let him see what he’s missing.
Maybe unbutton a few buttons and stop rambling.

I’m nervous and don’t know what to do.

Leave your hair down—a little wild and brush your teeth.
I already slayed my dragon breath. ;)

Good girl.

Let’s remember, I’m not trying to seduce him.
It’s only breakfast. I’m keeping my expectations low.
He may have changed his mind.

Don’t count on it.

A sharp knock on my door at the exact time of 8:00 a.m. brings an immediate smile to my face.
He’s always so precise.

I gotta go—he’s here!

Good luck! I’ll see you later this afternoon.

I toss my phone to the side and climb off my bed, realizing a little too late that I probably should have made it. Shaking off those thoughts, I understand we’re way past first impressions and walk toward the door.

Looking through the peephole, my grin widens when I only see a room service cart.

“Who is it?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

“Room service.”

I’m excited to see him again and anxious to hear what he’s thinking after having a night to process our previous conversation. I hope he wants to continue the discussion, but if he has doubts, then this will be another step toward a friendship, which wouldn’t be bad for either of us to have. I can return to Berlin happy we’ve cleared the air between us after a year.

I know I need to tread lightly, because I’m as attracted to him today as I was two years ago when we met unexpectedly at the hockey game. My subconscious is all-in as I remember dreaming about him last night, leaving me a little needy and on edge this morning. I know it would be so easy to fall back into something physical, but if we’re actually going to give our relationship another shot, then we need to pace ourselves and figure out a new right way of moving forward. This is all great in theory, but the reality usually turns out to have a much different result.

After unbolting the door, I open it wide, standing back, so he can easily get the cart in the room.

“I don’t remember calling for room service.”
“Then it’s lucky for you I happen to be walking by your door with breakfast. Good morning, Bella.”

He looks good, better than yesterday. I’m always a sucker for him in a suit, but when he goes relaxed-casual, I’m putty in his hands. He’s wearing a long-sleeved gray T-shirt that stretches tightly over his muscles and a pair of jeans aged in all the right spots. It would be so easy to reach up and peck his lips with a kiss as he pauses pushing the cart into the room. I want to, but while I’m busy weighing the pros and cons of a kiss, he surprises me, planting a sweet one on my cheek.

“You look beautiful. One of my favorite looks on you.” He winks.

It’s over too quickly, and he’s rolling the cart to the end of the bed as I follow closely behind. “Hey, good morning.”

“I hope you’re hungry. I’ve been busy in the kitchen.” Edward smirks as his eyes linger over my casual just-out-of-bed state.

An awkward laugh bursts from my chest at his playfulness, and I can’t resist teasing him, playing along. “You’ve probably dirtied every pot and pan in the building.”

“You see it’s already working out between us. I’ll cook and you can clean.” He waves me toward the bed and returns the desk chair to the other side of the cart exactly like our set up from last night. “Please, take a seat.”

“We never agreed on a distribution of chores. Let’s leave the cooking and cleaning to the hotel staff.”

“As you wish.”

“You look refreshed and rested. Which hotel are you staying at? I hope it wasn’t too far from here.”

He shrugs. “I was only two floors away.”

“You’re staying here?” I’m surprised I missed that detail. “How did I not know?”

“You told Emmett where you were staying and he booked our rooms here.”

Edward tries to play it off as if it isn’t a big deal, but this is more of Emmett’s handiwork. I need to have a talk with him soon about his meddling.
“Anyway, let’s get to the main event. This morning, we have…” He removes both silver metal domes from the plates in a flourish. “…braised short rib hash if you’re interested in something savory, and French toast with fresh berries if you prefer something sweet.”

I grab a strawberry from the French toast plate and pop it into my mouth. “Mmmm, tough choice, but I’ll take the sweet.”

“Coffee?” Edward turns over our cups and has the carafe in hand already filling a cup before I can answer.

“Yes, please. Have you been up long?”

Edward hesitates, giving me an immediate answer while filling the other cup. “This isn’t my first or even second cup of coffee.”

“Did you get any sleep?” I chuckle.

He grins. “An hour or two. Dig in.”

I’m hungry and everything looks delicious. “When are you flying out today?”

“Emmett and I are flying back together, taking flights later this afternoon.”

“I thought he was leaving this morning.”

“I think his plans have changed.”

I pause, wondering about the reasons for his delay, but conclude it must be a way for him to spend more time with Rose, which brings me to focus on Edward’s plans.

“Have yours changed?” I ask, pouring syrup over my French toast.

Edward pushes the potatoes around on his plate while thinking over his answer. “Change is too small of a word for what’s happening with my plans, Bella.”

“Oh, God. You aren’t overreacting, are you? Maybe you should go easy on the coffee.”

“After our conversation, I am clearing the drawing board and figuring out a new way of doing everything.”

“Please don’t tell me you’ve been emailing people all night.”
“Bella, I do the same job week in and week out—sitting behind a desk, tossing around current issues with assholes pushing their own agendas, and I’m merely the means to do so. Anybody can do this job. I don’t know what I was thinking. It’s not a career; it’s settling.”

“Edward, you love your job. You’re a lawyer who’s trained to argue every side of an issue. You love good banter and your interviews are some of the best.”

“Maybe I loved the show when I was a new host, but two years in and I’m ready to jump ship. If I wanted to stick with it, I wouldn’t be thinking that way. I signed on for five years, with three still to go, and I’ve been going through the motions for a while now. But regardless of my feelings about the show, I’m always here waiting for—”

I gasp, then hold my breath, hoping the next word he says will be “you.”

“Waiting for what?” I prompt.

“Your next article.”

“My next article?”

“And the one after that. To know what you’re writing and what has caught your interest. You have no idea how many times a day I check The Post’s website hoping to find your words.”

My shoulders sag a little when I realize he’s only a fan of my work.

“And if I’m wanting to know this, I’m sure there are others out there who feel the same way. I’ve got an idea, Bella. For a news magazine show.”

“The world doesn’t need another one of those.” I snort, stuffing a large strawberry into my mouth.

“Hear me out. What if it was a platform for human rights issues only? We would be the only true, non-partisan voice.”

I’m already shaking my head. “That sounds ambitious and impossible. Politics have a way of weaving into everything. It’s something I struggle with constantly.”

“Bella, we could co-host… chase stories together all over the globe. There aren’t enough of these stories getting out there, and when they do, they are confined to a two-minute segment on the nightly news, jockeying for position with the other current events of the day. What if we gave a full hour to these issues weekly on a major network?”
“We can make a real difference by putting them front and center. I know I’m not an educated and credentialed journalist like you, but being a lawyer and my television experience is bound to come in handy if we find ourselves in tricky situations. I realize my column with The Journal isn’t hard-hitting investigative journalism, but between the two of us, we have an amazing network of connections. What if… what if I negotiated my departure from This Week with the option of a new show? Then I wouldn’t be leaving television behind completely and the network wouldn’t be losing me. We can pull my current viewership from morning to evening and expand to a wider prime-time audience, bringing you into the fold. You’re a Pulitzer Prize winner now, which would give us unbiased journalistic credibility. You were great on my show. Jasper couldn’t stop singing your praises, and you know I think your work is amazing.”

“You want us to start our own show?”

“Yes, it’s an idea. I think it’s my best idea, but I want to know what you think? Oh! I also have a name for the show: Behind Closed Doors with Edward Masen and Isabella Swan. I thought it was appropriate, because we would be sharing and revealing what is happening away from everyone’s mainstream view, where decisions are made, and those who are carefully concealed from the public eye by people like world leaders and lawmakers.”

“So much for my ‘unbiased journalistic credibility’ getting me top billing,” I tease.

“Actually, I think it’s too wordy with both of our names. We may need to shorten it to only Behind Closed Doors, but I think it’s a great start.”

“It sounds like you’ve spent a lot of time on this... which is incredible.” I look into his hopeful eyes and consider whom we could ask to join us. “Um, Carlisle may be someone to consider for direction or advice. He’s proved to be invaluable to me for years and he’s a well-known leader for human rights.”

“Maybe, but the show would be us—you and me. We would anchor it together as partners—equals. We can negotiate creative control and whom else we bring on board. I want Jasper behind the scenes, but if you have recommendations for additional journalists, I would be open to those.

“Bella, I think I’ve figured out a way for us to work together. I understand there will be plenty of travel and times when we’re apart, but we’ll always have each other at the end of the day, and that’s all that matters.”

“Edward, what about marriage and children? I get that you’re extremely career-focused this morning, but what about what we talked about last night?”

“Would I like to be married? Yes. Do I need to be married? No, not if it means we’re together. Did I look up alternatives? Of course I did, but cohabitation agreements aren’t really any better
than pre-nups. All of them are focused on what happens in the event of the relationship ending, and that isn’t something I want to worry about when it comes to us. If something happens, and we split up, you can have everything you want—take it all, I won’t fight you. I promise. I’m more than happy to sign any legal document to protect you.

“Would I like for us to wear some symbol of a commitment we may make to one another in the future? Yes, but wedding rings don’t seem like the right answer. So, I haven’t figured that one out yet, but when I do, I’ll run it by you. I doubt you would be interested in tattooing my name in bold letters across your chest. So, I’ll keep thinking of new possibilities.”

I chuckled. “Thank you for eliminating that idea.”

“Would I like to have children? Yes, but I understand and heard your concerns. If I decide one day that I need to be a father, then I’ll find another way to do it. I can look into adoption on my own. You wouldn’t need to be involved at all, if that’s what you want.”

“Oh, Edward.” I’m stunned at his thoughtfulness on everything, but especially this issue. He gets it. No. He gets me. “I think that’s the best thing you’ve ever said to me.”

He grins. “Bella, I know it’s a stretch, but the show will be a version of our own baby. Something we will need to invest all of our time and energy into for it to be a success. But I believe it’s a great first step toward us building a life together. What do you think?”

“I think you’ve been awake all night. Did you put together a PowerPoint presentation too?” I taunt, but I suspect his laptop contains a variety of documents full of bullet points and flow charts detailing, “if Bella says this, then I’ll say this.”

“I was hoping I wouldn’t need it, but I can forward it to you. And I can sleep on the plane or when I get back to D.C.”

“I have to tell you, this is all a little overwhelming. I need time to think about everything you’ve said and process your ideas. My first concern is I’m not sure how easy you will be able to sell a television news magazine with me as a co-host. I’m nobody in the television world. Plus, are you forgetting I’ll be in Berlin?”

“Minor details, Bella. We can figure something out, but if I don’t have you on board with this one, then I’ll work on another idea that plays to both of our strengths.”

“Wow.”

“And with your blessing, if anyone asks, my answer about a relationship between us will be, ‘Yes, we’re dating,’ or ‘Yes, we’re together.’ I will not elaborate allowing anyone the opportunity
pick our relationship apart, but I won’t deny us by saying ‘no comment.’ We will be exclusive with zero doubts to anyone who asks.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say, you’ll seriously think about making a commitment to moving forward together, not only personally but also professionally.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it. You must hate someone at The Times to make this kind of offer prior to my interview there.”

“You need to know all your options.”

I chuckle. “You’ve set the bar high for all future breakfast dates: a perfect job offer with a side of breakfast and plenty of coffee. How can you top this?”

“I don’t know, but I’m willing to try.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

My phone vibrates with the notification of a text.

“Sorry, I should check that. Leah is due any day and I’m hoping to hear from Jacob while I’m here.” I reach behind me to find a message from Rose. I remove my phone from my charging cord and click on the link she’s sent. It takes me to D.C.’s Daily Chatter, and I scan the post, shaking my head. “This is what she meant.”

“Who?”

“Rose. Here, let me read the latest post for the gossip site Emmett reads religiously.”

“Emmett follows gossip sites?”

“Yes. You said you were friends. So, this shouldn’t surprise you, but everyone isn’t always open about their reading selections. After all, how did you find out about Seth and me? Shelly, right?”

Edward thinks for a moment and shrugs. “I think that info did come from her.” He shoves a large fork full of eggs in his mouth.

“That’s what I thought. Here we go—

‘NEW COUPLE ALERT: It isn’t summer yet, but it’s getting hot in the city. We aren’t talking D.C., but New York. Anyone in attendance at yesterday’s Pulitzer Prize winners’ luncheon ceremony at Columbia University will also agree, Edward Masen is off the market indefinitely. It was a Who’s Who of journalism and many were surprised by his attendance at the event until Isabella
Swan arrived. Even though Edward pens a regular column for the Wall Street Journal, guests say he was seated next to Isabella at The Post’s table for lunch. Attendees noticed his close proximity to her during the entire day and no one missed the two leaving together for the evening. According to sources close to the new couple, they are old acquaintances, as Isabella appeared on This Week before moving to Berlin. We can’t wait to see where this one goes, but the pictures below show a very smitten Edward Masen. We don’t need to reach out to Edward or Isabella to know what they’re thinking. The photos say it all.”

“They’re right.” Edward’s grin widens. “And so are the sources. Even though I suspect we know who those are.”

“I can’t believe him. Emmett knows I hate being the center of news or gossip. Do you want to see the photos?”

“Sure.”

I hand over my phone and watch as Edward scans the pictures of the two of us. “We look great. I want to send these to my phone. Do you still have my number? I don’t see it under ‘A’ for asshole or ‘C’ for cocky, which is a win in my book.”

I raise a challenging eyebrow. “I can change it.”

His grin widens, shaking his head while tapping on the screen of my phone. “It sounds like we are officially on everyone’s radar or will be soon. Are you okay with that?”

“I think so. It feels different this time, doesn’t it?”

“It feels great. Let’s hope I’m not followed at the airport this afternoon.”

“You’ll have Emmett with you. He can intimidate, if necessary.”

“Are you finished eating?”

“Yes.”

“Let me roll this back out into the hallway. I’ll do the dishes this time.” He winks. “Be right back.”

As I watch him go, I’m rushed with an onslaught of emotions and realize how my life is evolving again. I’m teetering on the precipice of an unknown future with Edward, and as I listen to my head and heart battle for dominance in the ways to move forward together, it’s my gut telling me to hold onto him with everything I’ve got.
Chapter 30: The Doubts

Mistakes. I’ve made my fair share, and I have no doubt I will make more in the future. I know I’m not always going to please everyone with my choices in life, but they’re mine to make no matter what anyone thinks, especially my father. I’m not being purposely defiant of his wishes, but there is a part of me that has completely enjoyed the freedoms I’ve found in Berlin, away from the watchful eyes of D.C.

I’ve been second-guessing myself a lot lately. When I think back on the timeline of my relationship with Hilda, I probably jumped into her bed too soon after arriving in Germany. There was an immediate attraction, and even though I was the inexperienced of the two of us, it was easy and fun, and openly freeing. Some things I hadn’t felt in a long time.

The mistakes I made with George were my fault not his. I warned myself over and over not to go there with him, but I did it anyway, knowing I would hurt him in the process no matter what he said. I know George still wants me, but the only problem with that is I don’t want him. He deserves someone who returns that desire, and I’m just not that person.

After all this time apart, I’m amazed to learn Edward’s ready to start again and plan a future together. With or without Shelly’s involvement, I should have been more open and honest with him rather than waiting for it to all blow up in my face. I’m hopeful that I can do better this time.

I’m filled with a nervous energy at his pending departure, not knowing when will be the next time we’ll see each other again. And now, here we are in my hotel room, I’m trying not to repeat my past mistakes, but I know I want to make the most of this reunion. I can’t hold back any longer when he returns inside the room, leaping into his arms.

“Oof.” He grunts as he catches me.

My arms wrap around his shoulders while he easily lifts me, holding me against him as my legs encircle his waist.

“Bell—”

My lips cut off his protest and soon his are following my lead as a chorus of moans fills my room.

“I missed you.” I groan as his stubbled cheek scrapes deliciously along my neck while his lips trail kisses everywhere they can reach.
“Bella, I missed you so fucking much.” He pushes his tongue past my lips as our mouths make up for lost time over languid kisses, building a growing need into something much more demanding until he pulls away panting. “But—"

My chest heaves as I catch my breath. “But, what?”

“We should take our time. I know we’ve talked about a lot of things over the past twenty-four plus hours, as I was trying to understand what you’re looking for in a relationship, especially one with me. I’ve been patient for over a year, I can wait until we’re sure that we’re both ready.”

“We aren’t ready? You feel ready.” I rub against the growing bulge of his jeans.

“You know what I mean, and I can’t control my body’s reaction to yours. You are entirely too tempting. This part has always been easy for us, but this time I want it all or at least everything you’re willing to give.”

I’m a little taken aback by his caution at moving too quickly. So, I concede, trying not to let any disappointment or hurt at his words dampen our reconnection. “You’re right. I know you’re right. We should do this differently, but you can’t blame me when you’re leaving for D.C. and I’m going back to Berlin with no idea of when we will see each other again.”

I unlock my legs and slide down his body as his hands remain on my waist. When I fail to make eye contact, his finger gently tilts my chin, holding it in place until my eyes lock with his.

“Hey, don’t think for even a minute that I don’t want to be with you. I do, but you said we both deserved better, and I haven’t forgotten. I want to be clear and make sure we have no misunderstandings. Have we agreed to date exclusively?”

“My vote is yes.”

“Then it’s unanimous, and to celebrate, I have something for you.” He pulls a Tiffany blue box with a white bow from his jeans pocket, holding it out for me to take.

“Edward.”

“Just open it.”

I loosen the bow and open the hinged lid. I must stare at it for too long, because there’s a nervousness from Edward that I don’t remember, which bubbles to the surface.

“It’s a necklace,” he explains hesitantly.
“With a key?” I wonder at the pendant.

“Let me help you put it on.”

“Sure.” I hand him the box and gather my hair in one hand, giving him easy access to my neck.

“Keys are good luck charms. They represent new opportunities or the opening of new doors.”

“Like a new beginning?” I watch his reflection as he struggles with the clasp.

“Yes, exactly.” He smiles when he gets it. “Some say, if you wear it to bed, it can ward off nightmares, giving you a good night’s sleep.”

I let my hair fall and gently touch the key while my eyes find his in the mirror. “Considering all things, that sounds perfect for me.”

“Others believe the gift of a key means you’ll be lucky in love.” He smirks, turning me around to face him.

“I think my luck may be changing.”

“Mine too.” He leans down, kissing my lips softly.

“You know, this key doesn’t look very ordinary with the intricate design or diamonds along the edges. It actually looks like it could be the key to someone’s heart.”

He chuckles, pulling me against him for a hug. “You’re too smart.”

“Am I?” I wrap my arms around his waist, not wanting to let go.

“And beautiful. It’s a dangerous combination.”

He ends our hug, laces our hands together, and tugs me toward the bed as he sits on the edge while I stand between his legs.

“Bella, I know dating will be challenging for us while we’re living in distant countries, but I’m committed to doing things differently this time. I may need a guidebook for navigating this new relationship with you or at the very least advice from Emmett, since he hasn’t been wrong yet.”

I snicker. “There’s a scary thought.”

His hands trace along the back of my thighs, causing goose bumps on my arms and legs at his delicate touch.
“The bottom line is you have my trust and respect, but most of all my love and support. We have all the time in the world to build something great, and no matter what storms we face, we’ll have each other.”

What an incredible second chance at friendship, but most of all, love. God, I’ve missed having him in my life.

“This is surreal. I didn’t think we would ever be in this spot again—talking and friendship. Let alone dating with the possibility of more. I thought you would be the love that I never got over. There were so many times when I would daydream while I was…” My voice shakes as I fight off the emotions always lurking just below the surface when I try to talk about those days. “I thought about you and wondered if I ever crossed your mind. If you were part of those searching for us or if you had moved on with—”

“Every day, Bella. I thought about you every day. Ask Emmett. It drove me mad not knowing where you were and if you were safe. I would badger him constantly, and we had no news for what felt like forever. I know we weren’t together technically, but I never stopped loving you.”

“Edward.” I gasp, cupping his face as my eyes search his. “Are we really doing this?”

“Yes. I’m not holding back anything this time. I should have told you so many things when I had the chance. I’ve learned from my mistakes and have no intention of repeating those.”

I nod, crashing my lips to his with an overwhelming confidence I’ve never felt before. My heart soars as I realize I’m finally free to love him without secrets or lies as we take the steps necessary to leave those behind us.

Edward pulls away first, catching his breath, but plants a few more pecks on my lips, then guides me backward as he stands with his hands resting at my hips.

“I should go.”

“I wish you would stay.”

I reach higher, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and clinging to him as he squeezes me tightly, lifting me in a hug that leaves my feet dangling.

He sways us back and forth. “You’re making my departure extremely difficult.”

“Good.” My hands weave through his hair, tilting his lips toward my insistent kisses, as I can’t get enough of him.
“Bella,” he warns, breaking away from my lips and setting me back on the floor.

“Will you stay, please?” I plead. “Who knows when we will see each other again and I don’t want to wait. I thought you didn’t want to hold back this time. Let’s seize this opportunity. We may not get another one for months.”

“Fuck.” He leans his forehead against mine as his ragged breathing spreads across my face. “I want us to wait until I can take you out on a date—not breakfast in your room—a real date.”

“I know, I know. You’re right. I should be listening to my brain rather than my heart or other areas that need you.”

“Bella, I love every part of you, especially those other areas. This is as difficult for me as it is for you. Any chance you can travel to D.C. before you return to Berlin?”

“I’m spending the next week with Rose at her family’s home somewhere on Long Island.”

“Well, the invitation is open, if you change your mind.”

If he’s putting the brakes on a physical relationship, then maybe we should be more hesitant about the other areas of our lives he’s hoping to merge together, like our careers. “Do you think we’re moving too fast? I know we don’t want to repeat our past mistakes, but sometimes that’s not as easy as you think. I’m scared I’ll mess this up at some point in the future.” And I know I’m not great at balancing my professional and private lives. I can never figure out how to be in a good spot with both of them at the same time.

“No. Us being back together is a year overdue, in my opinion, and we’ll do this however we think is right. Fuck everyone else.”

“But here we are hiding away in my hotel room.”

He grins linking our hands together. “There’s nothing wrong with protecting our privacy. We’ve had a wonderful reconnection with a conversation full of new possibilities not meant for public eyes or ears.”

“I know, but—”

“Do you want to go with me to the airport? I’ll buy you a ticket and we can wait at the gate for my flight together. I’ll be as public as you want me to be. Trust me. If I had a T-shirt that said ‘I’m dating Isabella Swan,’ I would fucking wear it. How do you feel about skywriting?”

“Edward.”
“Bella, it will be different this time. I promise you.”

“I hope so. I’m going to hold you to that promise.”

“You better, and I expect the same from you. We need to be open with our feelings. No letting anything fester and feed our insecurities.”

“You know that’s a tall order for me, but I’ll try to be more forthcoming in that department.”

“And I want to be abundantly clear that more than anything—especially the gossip that will undoubtedly circle us or any other people in either of our lives—the only two opinions that matter are yours and mine on how we proceed.”

“Oh, God, how I love you.” I release his hands, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist and resting my head on his chest. “I’ve missed you so much. You have no idea.”

One of his hands slides lower along my back while the other gently rests at the back of my head. Edward pulls away from our embrace slightly and presses a kiss to my forehead. “I love you too. We’re going to be okay, but more importantly—together. It’s all that matters.”

-BCD-

It’s a short walk to the Grand Central Terminal where I’m meeting Carlisle for lunch at one of his favorite restaurants, Agern. He knows the owner, so despite the full dining room, he has little trouble getting a table whenever he’s in town.

Carlisle loves Scandinavian cuisine, but especially aquavit. He claims it keeps him young and wards off disease, but I think he’s channeling his inner Viking with an excuse to drink it at all hours. The host leads me to his table where he already has a glass in hand of his favorite “medication.”

“Bella.” He stands smiling when he notices my arrival.

“Hello, Carlisle.” I lean into his warm embrace.

“Here, allow me.” He guides me to the chair opposite of his.

“Thank you.”

He takes his seat and waves toward the table as a server approaches. “Can I have them get you a glass?”

“Uh…”
“You’re not going to leave me drinking alone, are you?”

“It’s barely past noon.” I grin, fiddling with the edge of my menu.

“But evening in Berlin,” he counters, tilting his head in question. “And what else are you doing today?”

“Good points.” I flip to the correct page and scan the massive list of wines and other libations before settling on a cocktail, which is probably strong enough to remove paint. “I’ll have the Hudson Harvest.”

“Very good.” The server nods, leaving to retrieve my drink.

“It’s been too long since we’ve been able to sit down, just the two of us, but I can’t think of a better reason to celebrate. Congratulations, I had no doubt that you would get here. It was only a matter of when.”

“Thank you. I suppose with time, I will find it easier to believe I’m part of your exclusive Pulitzer club,” I tease.

He chuckles. “What’s next on your agenda?”

I know I need to bring up Edward’s television show idea, but I’m hesitant as to how Carlisle will react, so I share my plans prior to our visit to New York. “Returning to Greece.”

“With Rosalie?”

“Yes, but I’m worried about… anything and everything. It’s almost paralyzing.”

“That’s absolutely understandable after all the two of you went through.”

We’re interrupted by the arrival of my drink, but Carlisle lifts his glass ready to toast.

“To Pulitzer Prize winners. Skoal.” He smiles, clinking his glass with mine.

“Skoal.” A careful sip has me relieved that I picked wisely with a combination of whiskey, schnapps, and ginger. There’s also a bit of sweetness that’s probably coming from the honeynut squash I remember seeing listed in the description.

I’m interested in returning our conversation to some of my other concerns, now that we’re face to face and know he’ll understand. “Carlisle, what if… what if it happens again?”
He takes another drink from his glass before resting his elbows on the table and leaning closer.
“I’m not going to give you any false hope here, Bella, because it’s always a possibility with every issue or conflict we tackle. After your experience, you are now more attuned to the dark realities that lie beyond the protection of our Constitution. We know as journalists that the risks are out there. There’s a price for our freedoms, whether it be speech or the press, and you’ve witnessed it firsthand.”

Lowering my voice, I try to keep it steady. “There were times when I thought there could be only one end in sight. It scared the shit out of me—thinking we were going to die.”

“But you continued and kept your focus. Perseverance will always be rewarded, and you did the absolute best thing possible in your situation—passive cooperation. It bought you time, which increased your chances to be rescued or released alive.”

Our server returns, and we place our orders for lunch, selecting two courses from the menu before I share another more pressing worry.

“The trial will be in less than three weeks. I’m nervous about the possibility of facing them again. We don’t have to attend, but Rose wants to be there and show they didn’t break us. She thinks that watching them be held accountable for their actions will help us heal and move on.”

He nods. “I’m familiar with R2P and other groups like theirs. No matter how noble they claim their cause to be, they made mistakes by detaining the two of you and your treatment. They used you and Rosalie with no care or remorse. I’m sure it didn’t end how they expected, and it cost them their own freedom as well as the life of their sister.”

“But Carlisle, no matter what the court decides or any prison time they may serve, how do I move past this? How do I not live in fear every day? I’m so angry that it happened in the first place, but absolutely helpless of what I can do differently. Is this my new normal? There are days when I want to withdraw from everything—family, friends... my job.”

“Oh, Bella. You know what I’m going to say. What I’ve been saying ever since you returned to Berlin.”

An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach as my thumb rubs against the tiny beads of condensation forming on the outside of my glass. When I don’t reply, he continues.

“You haven’t taken any time off since you were rescued, continuing with work and pushing forward with no regard for your mental health. You know I believe that’s a mistake. You can’t keep pushing yourself like this, and I don’t know how to get through to you.”

My eyes shift to his. “Traveling to New York for the ceremony is sort of a break. Rose and I have plans to sit around her pool this afternoon. That should count.”
He releases a heavy sigh, and I can feel his disappointment infecting me from across the table.

“It’s not enough, and had you not been on the receiving end of an award, you would have never made the trip. You would be in Greece right now fighting against triggers and demons around every corner.”

He’s right. I know he’s right, and I’m hesitant to share more.

I take a deep breath and no longer hold eye contact, focusing on my fingers as I fiddle with my glass. “I think you’re going to be upset with me, because I have something else to share.”

“Oh, Bella,” he mutters, tips back the remains of his glass, and waves for the server to bring another. “You can always talk to me about anything. Anything. Don’t ever forget that.”

I nod, but I’m no longer filled with the confidence I felt earlier in my hotel room.

“Let’s hear what you’ve got.”

“I sort of agreed to the exploratory idea of being a part of a news magazine show—a co-anchor.”

“Sort of agreed?” His brow furrows in confusion.

“Maybe I should say considering rather than agreed.”

“Which one?”

“It would be new—human rights focused...” I have a difficult time swallowing around the lump forming in my throat, but I need to get this out on the table. “With Edward Masen. Do you know him?”

He leans back against his seat while watching me closely. “Yes, we’ve met.”

I shift in my seat. “We spoke about the opportunity recently, and I suggested that you could possibly lend your support or even participate.”

“Me? Why didn’t he speak with me himself?” Carlisle shakes his head, but accepts a new drink from our server. “Is that why he was here for the awards?”

Tension fills my shoulders as I reach up rubbing at the muscles in my neck. “Not entirely.”

“You invited him?”
“No. He’s friends with Emmett.”

Our first courses arrive, and I wonder if I’m going to be able to get my fish down while Carlisle’s bitter salad seems to reflect his change in mood.

“Is this somehow related to you doing his show?” he questions, waving his fork in my direction. “Is he leaving This Week?”

I expel a deep breath. “Edward said he’s interested in making a change and starting a new show.”

Carlisle pauses eating. “Why? Why would he do that?”

I lower my voice to almost a whisper. “Um… because of me.”

“You?”

He shakes his head and returns his attention to his salad while I have yet to take a single bite. I know I need to acknowledge that I haven’t been exactly truthful with him in the past.

“Yeah. We have a bit of history between us, not only professional.”

His eyebrow arches at those words. “I don’t remember you ever mentioning dating him.”

“It was… complicated.”

Carlisle gives me a skeptical look.

“I messed it up.”

“Oh, Bella… and you think that combining your personal life with your career is the right move?” He raises his voice slightly, getting the attention of the other patrons near us. “Dear Lord, have I taught you nothing?”

I shrink back in my seat. “I know, I know. When you say it like that, it sounds like the worst idea in the world. I understand it’s a risk, but it’s in the early stages. The show may never make it past the drawing board. I warned Edward that could be the case, especially with me involved, but he’s determined to find a project or something for… us.”

We’re interrupted by the server who removes Carlisle’s empty plate and grows concerned mine is untouched. “You didn’t care for the tilefish, Miss? I can bring you something else, if you would prefer.”
“I’m sorry. I haven’t had a chance to try it.”

“Okay. I’ll return after a bit. Your next course shouldn’t be much longer.”

I take a few small bites, struggling to swallow with each forkful as an uncomfortable silence settles between us. Carlisle sips his aquavit, appearing to choose his next words carefully.

He rubs his forehead, then runs his hand through his short hair. “Any news magazine show would be lucky to have you involved, but an on-camera position decreases your chance at anonymity moving forward. You’ll be recognizable from every corner on Earth. You thought you were targeted previously? You’ll have zero chance at finding refuge anywhere. Anywhere. And here I was going to suggest you start writing under a pseudonym, but good heavens, Bella… this… this just leaves me completely at a loss on how to help you move forward.”

I brush away the tears before they have a chance to trail down my cheeks as I stare at my plate.

Carlisle reaches across the table and his hand closes over mine. “I’m sorry, I’m sure this is a wonderful opportunity, but how does this help you heal from what you went through not long ago? This is another example of you burying yourself in your work and not addressing any real issues. Did you ever use the information I sent you and contact the trauma therapist in Berlin?”

I sniff back the tears threatening to escape once more and shake my head. “No.”

“Until you do, I would advise against starting another new project or getting involved with anyone else. Maybe you should consider canceling your interview with The Times too.”

It’s those stinging words from one of the most respected men—not only in my life, but also in the world—that has me reconsidering everything. My confidence takes another hit and my next steps are put solidly in doubt.
Chapter 31: The Hope

The ride to Long Island should be an easy one, but after my lunch with Carlisle, I'm teetering on the edge of a bad mental place. I know it. I can feel it. I'm helpless to stop the odd tingle as it spreads across my body from head to toe. The sound of the tires against the road is grating on my nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard. The way Rose and I are sitting is eerily familiar, and I shift in my seat, hoping to ease the tension filling my muscles.

I'm restless as my mind obsesses with one narrowly focused plan: open the door and jump. My brain shouts *Escape!* repeatedly, but I'm frozen in place, trying to think of anything else to stop this impending derailment and failing. I had no idea we would be on the road for almost three hours, and something about riding in the back seat has triggered me, pushing me over the edge. Rose must see it immediately, because when I realize what's happening, we're no longer moving, but pulled to the side of the road.

She's holding my hand as her words start to register. “Bella, breathe. Listen to my voice. We're going to take a deep breath together.”

We're in the back of a luxury car and her family driver watches the two of us from the front seat while speaking to someone on his phone. I can't understand what he's saying as my heart feels like it's about to beat out of my chest while I can't seem to catch my breath.

“Bella?”

My eyes find Rose again as she squeezes my hand, reaching for the other to stop it from shaking.

“You've got this,” she encourages, as I nod quickly. “Let's breathe in together.”

I close my eyes and feel tears streaming down my cheeks, but focus on taking a deep breath.

“Good, now let it out slowly. Again.”

In and out. In and out. Over and over I breathe until it becomes easier and my body starts to relax.

“You're doing great, Bella. Keep going.” Her reassuring smile and gentle voice feel like a lifesaver as my thoughts calm.
“You’re in control here. Do you want the window down? Some fresh air may help.”

A bottle of water is passed from the front seat to the back, and she relays it to me. I press it against my forehead, as the coolness feels incredible, but fail at getting the lid off with my shaking hands, needing her assistance once more. I guzzle nearly half the bottle, but have difficulty clearing my throat.

When I’m able to speak, I make a request. “I... can I just step outside for a minute or two?”

“Sure thing, Miss Swan. I’ll be right there to assist you.” The locks on the back door open instantly, and I watch the driver exit the vehicle.

“You’re okay,” Rose reassures, releasing my hand. “We’re in no hurry. Take your time.”

The relief I feel when the door swings open and I slip from the vehicle is all-consuming. I grasp onto the side of the car to keep from falling to my knees. It’s the exact same feeling I had when I realized Rose and I were rescued on a dark, dirt road in the middle of nowhere, an ocean away.

As I look around, the two locations couldn’t be more different. It’s day and not night. We aren’t alone as traffic whizzes past us on the side of the road. I can see life everywhere. The area is thriving with it—homes, families, children, businesses, workers. My body relaxes further at the normalcy all around.

“This is good.” I bob my head up and down in recognition. “We’re in New York.”

“We are, Miss Swan. Another hour and we should be arriving at the Hales’ residence.”

“What’s your name?” I ask the older man who looks ready to spring to my aid at a moment’s notice.

“Everyone calls me, Mr. Jenks, ma’am.”

“Jenks,” I repeat, nodding my head. “You’re our driver.”

“Yes, ma’am. I drive for Mr. Hale.”

“Your first name doesn’t start with a K, does it?”

“No, ma’am. It’s Jason.”

“Okay. That’s good.” I take another deep breath and blow it out easily. “I’m okay.”
“Bella, would it be better if you sit in the front seat with Mr. Jenks?” Rose asks, as she’s perched on the edge of the black leather seat next to the open door.

“I don’t know.” I consider my options, knowing I can’t flee the back seat if I ever want to face the demons that haunt me. “I feel like lying down. I’m exhausted.”

“Whenever you’re ready, you can stretch out on the seat. There’s plenty of room.”

It’s a compromise I hope I can handle. “Okay. I think that would be good.”

“Do you want me to ride in the front or stay with you in the back?”

“Stay.”

“Okay.” She smiles, reaching out to hold my hand. “We have a plan.”

“Plans are good,” I agree, ready to continue with our journey, but anxious to reach our destination.

-BCD-

Rosalie’s family home is actually located in the Hamptons. It is larger and more luxurious than any home I’ve ever experienced, and compared to my mother and Phil’s home in Miami that’s saying something. From the moment we walk through the grand entry doors, I’m in awe at every turn. Rosalie gives me a quick tour of the important areas. We find her father working in his home office, while her mother says a quick hello upon our arrival, but leaves to play tennis with friends. When we arrive at my guest room, I’m eager for some time alone to rest and pull myself together after my earlier panic attack.

I’m feeling much better when I find Rosalie in the kitchen hours later, and we decide to spend some time by the pool. The Hales’ have a staff ready to attend to our every need, but there isn’t a soul in sight once we settle into our loungers.

“This is beautiful, Rose. Your home is incredible. It’s so private here too.”

“Thanks. Are you feeling better after your nap?”

“Yes. The shower felt wonderful too.”

“I’m glad. If you need anything, Bella, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thanks.” I reach out, bringing a stemless wine glass to my lips and nearly drain the entire glass in one gulp. “Dear goodness, what’s in this? It’s delicious. I can’t taste a bit of alcohol.”
“Pink lemonade.” She chuckles, refilling my glass from the nearby pitcher. “No alcohol after your attack. Doctor’s orders.”

“Whose doctor?”

“Mr. Jenks called our family doctor. He advised us on how to care for you during and after your attack.”

“I’m so embarrassed.”

“Don’t be, Bella. I’m glad we were able to help you. Have you been experiencing those a lot recently?”

“No, not exactly.” I’m less than forthcoming with the truth, but I suspect she already knows.

Rose nods, but when I don’t expand any further, not wanting to worry her, she changes the subject.

“Are you hungry? I think the chef is fixing us a tray of snacks, if that’s okay?”

“Sure. It would probably be good for me to eat something. I barely touched my lunch.”

“I meant to ask earlier, how did your time with Carlisle go?”

I sag against the loungier at her question. “I think he’s lost all faith in me, and he gave me a verbal lashing again about not seeking professional help. He found a therapist for me after we returned, but I haven’t taken the next step.”

“He wants what’s best for you. It tells me he cares. Carlisle has always been your mentor, but now, he’s being your friend. Under his guidance, you had something happen to you that every journalist fears.”

“Oh, Rose. I didn’t listen. He told me to be careful… warned me multiple times not to do what we were doing. I am so damn naïve. When am I ever going to learn? It took everything I had not to leave the restaurant sobbing out of control when we parted. He doesn’t think I’m good enough for The Times or probably even The Post at this point.”

“You know that’s not true. I disagree with him and think there’s nothing wrong with keeping your interview at The Times. But he has a point about seeking out treatment for helping you cope with what we went through. When we return to Berlin, I’ll go with you to the therapist he suggested or a different one of your choosing. I’m sure Hilda would too, if you asked her.”
I wave a hand in her direction. “How are we not experiencing the same things? You’re breezing through life, while I feel like the world is going to close around me.”

“You know that recovery is different for everyone. I sought out a therapist not long after we returned, because I knew the benefit, since I had been to one in the past. So, I’m only slightly ahead of you in the process. My therapist has been using a combination of treatments to find the right solution for me. I think acupuncture has been the most successful of all his techniques, because I refused medications.”

I release a sigh of resignation. “I’m…”

“…scared? Worried about triggers, flashbacks, or nightmares?”

“Yes to all of the above and more. I’ve been busy trying to ignore and bury those memories.”

“I had the same concerns, but I don’t think you have anything to lose. You only need to make the commitment and invest the time in yourself.”

I nod, knowing she’s right, but I’ve resisted therapy or medication up until now. “Carlisle didn’t like the idea of the television show or my becoming involved with Edward again.”

“Because he doesn’t believe you are ready for either. Bella, I know this is a long shot, but is there any chance that Carlisle could be jealous of Edward? No, I’m not saying this right. Do you think that Carlisle’s reaction to Edward could be because he has a personal interest in you for himself?”

“Carlisle? Interested in me?”

“Yes.”

“He’s my mentor and old enough to be my father. We tease and flirt all the time, but it’s never gone any further than that.”

“Older men date younger women all the time. It isn’t a far-fetched idea. I just think he could be jealous, which would explain his negative reaction about you and Edward or you with anyone. I’m guessing you confided in him about whoever you were dating in the past, but you didn’t share anything about Edward.”

“I don’t know, but maybe you’re right. I didn’t tell him about my involvement with Edward.” I run my hand through my hair nervously as I consider her other concern. “I just don’t see Carlisle that way. We have a lot in common, but it’s a professional relationship.”

“And it’s Edward you want.”
“I do.”

“This is why I think a second chance with him is a good idea. He could be a wonderful form of support as you move forward, but I have some reservations.”

“Reservations? Like what?”

“I suspect Edward and I have similar traditional backgrounds. So, I have a good idea of how he was raised and the expectations placed upon him. His family isn't going to be as accommodating about going against their expected norms.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I wouldn't be surprised if his parents didn't already have someone picked out for him. So, if he's making any kind of commitment to you, then you need to be prepared for the backlash.”

I think back over our previous conversations. “A long time ago, he said his father expected him to join his law firm in Chicago, but Edward pushed back and moved to D.C. It isn't like he hasn't stood his ground for what he wanted.”

“And he won't treat your relationship any differently. He's here fighting for you, but are you willing to fight for him? I'm your friend Bella, but from what you told me about your previous relationship, Edward was the only one making an effort. You need to really ask yourself how it's going to be different this time.”

“We discussed how there was no chance we would be keeping our relationship a secret or hiding it this time.” I recall our earlier discussion. “And doing better with communicating. The distance won't be easy, but he's firing his agent.”

“I'm not convinced that she was really the problem. But how did he react to you telling him you didn't want to get married or have kids?”

I look away from her unwavering gaze. “He's ready to figure out a new way of doing things.”

“So, he's bending to you—trying to please you, again. What are you doing for him?”

I focus on fiddling with a thread of the seat cushion, and it takes little time to conclude I've got nothing to share.

Rose takes another drink from her glass. “That's what I thought. You want to be equals, but you have no plan how to be what he needs.”
She swings her legs over the side of her lounge chair facing mine and holds out her hands, palms up and at equal height. “We’re going to do a little exercise in the effort invested in your relationship with Edward. Now tell me, what’s the first thing you did for him when you started seeing one another?”

“It was probably his birthday. I made him a cake and gave him a new tie.”

“Okay.” Her left hand lowers slightly. “And what did he do for your birthday?”

“We flew to a resort in Arizona for a long weekend.”

Her left hand rises while her right hand lowers considerably. “Who made the next move?”

“Edward rented a cabin for a week in the mountains after Christmas.”

“Really, Bella?” She lowers her right hand again, and it’s quickly becoming obvious the imbalance. “Okay, after two vacations, what did you do?”

“Uh… I was here in New York for work, and he flew in for Valentine’s Day to surprise me.”

“This isn’t even close.” She shakes her head and drops both hands. “I hope you came up with something magnificent between Valentine’s Day and when you moved to Berlin.”

“I…”

“You didn’t, did you?”

“Um…”

“Bella, I love you, but you were a shitty girlfriend and he deserves more than what you gave him. This isn’t about the money spent, because you have enough to treat him to any of those things he planned for the two of you. It’s the thought and planning, plus the emotional investment in the relationship.”

“The sex was incredible and… and I would make us dinner from time to time. There were also sleepovers here and there at his place, because we couldn’t be at mine,” I defend, scrambling to come up with anything that could improve her opinion.

“I stand by my conclusion, but let’s talk about your current situation. After your time alone over the past day and a half, has he asked you for anything?”

“To co-anchor the new show.”
“Because he is figuring out a way for the two of you to be together, despite living thousands of miles apart. What else?”

“He wants me to move in with him.”

“And what do you think about that request?”

“It makes me nervous.”

“Why?”

“What if…”

“The next words out of your mouth better not be, ‘it doesn’t work out.’”

“Uh…”

“Damn it, Bella. You’ve got to stop thinking so negatively. This—this is one of the many reasons you should be going to therapy regularly. How do you feel when you’re with Edward?”


“And that’s why I think he will be good for you—the confidence. It’s something that has dwindled since you arrived in Berlin and after we were taken, but it’s returning. You’re getting your spark back,” she offers encouragingly.

I let my head fall back against the lounger and stare up at the sky, longing for easier days. This one has been an emotional rollercoaster from the start. She’s right, though. I have been missing that spark, the one that drives me to do my job, finding and sharing the truth. I think briefly this morning, I felt it with Edward and the possibility of working together. Maybe he’s the key to all of this—finding my way after everything. I chuckle, lift the pendant of my necklace, and stare at its intricate design. And he’s the one who gave me a key. If only I had the courage to use it and unlock my fears of the unknown.

Rose clears her throat, interrupting my thoughts and getting my attention. “I understand you didn’t ask for my opinion, but Bella, I think as your friend, I need to say something about your relationship with Hilda. I didn’t believe you were really in a headspace to listen to me before or even consider my advice, but you…”

“Yeah?”

“You…” she hesitates, choosing her next words carefully.
“Just say it.”

“It was difficult to watch, but you deferred to her for everything, right from the start. I just showed you the imbalance with Edward, but the one with Hilda was even larger because you let her take the reins. I understand doing so made it easy for you to blend in with the rest of us, but Bella, it’s like you’re her puppet and she’s manipulating your every movement. I warned you that first day at the office to be careful or she would get you in trouble. Hilda doesn’t do anything unless it’s to her benefit. I know you care about her despite all the changes in your relationship, and she’s our friend, but I don’t think what you had with her was healthy.” She pauses, taking another drink from her glass.

I turn my head watching her profile as she glances briefly my way.

“You probably won’t like this either, but I’m going to say it anyway.” She shifts her eyes back to mine. “Her getting pregnant while we were gone was probably the best thing to happen to you or your relationship. It allowed you to see who she is. Yes, she cares for you in whatever way she can, but everything was always on her terms—her apartment, her car, her connections—I could go on and on, and you just went along. I think you put her on some kind of pedestal from the start, and it fed her ego.”

Rose’s words feel like a punch to the gut.

I brush away a tear threatening to fall. “I didn’t realize you think so little of me.”

“Hey.” Her voice softens. “Bella, I’m only being honest with you. I am your friend.”

“If I’m being honest with myself, it’s felt like quicksand with her ever since we returned. One wrong move and I’m in over my head. I shouldn’t ever have tried to label anything between us or introduce her to my dad as my girlfriend. That was incredibly stupid on my part.”

“You and I both know whatever happened while we were gone had nothing to do with you and everything to do with her.”

“Maybe.”

She nods, settling back against her lounger. “From everything you’ve told me, I suspect Edward was good to you when you were together, even though you made some mistakes, and he will be again. I’m only pointing out that you stopped making your own decisions when you moved to Berlin, so you wouldn’t have to worry about making any mistakes.”

“Rose, what does he see in me, if our relationship was so one-sided? And it sounds like I’ve become someone I don’t recognize—a former shell of who I was while I was living in D.C.” I sniff
back a few tears. “Oh, God. What am I doing? Why does he still love me? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Love doesn’t always make sense.” Rose chuckles. “You spent most of your relationship waiting to push him away. Did he ever stand a chance or were you ready to walk because you were waiting for him to prove that you couldn’t trust him?”

She’s right, but it’s difficult to admit my mistakes. “I need to trust him. I know.”

“And you. You need to trust yourself. You are strong and resilient. He knows you, like I know you. I have a suspicion that the two of you are better together than apart. You feed off of each other’s strengths and help minimize your weaknesses.”

There’s something else that’s been bugging me and I wonder if Rose knows anything about it. “What about… did Emmett say anything about Edward being with anyone else when we weren’t together?”

“No.”

“Edward mentioned someone to me, but I didn’t want him to expand on the conversation because I don’t think I can handle hearing about it.”

“Bella, I want you to think about this next line of questioning very carefully before answering.”

“Okay.”

“If you found out that Edward was fucking everyone he wanted in D.C. right up until he got on the plane a few days ago to fly to New York, would you still want him? Would it matter? Do you truly love him and want to move forward with him, despite whatever mistakes either of you made in the past after you left him?”

The uneasy feeling in my stomach at the thought of Edward with anyone else returns with her words. “He’s not like that,” I defend.

“Exactly. Because you do know him. So why do you continue torturing yourself with these same ideas you had during your relationship as well as after it ended? Who gives a fuck who he was with or who you were with? You are both here at the beginning of a second chance and with the opportunity not to keep living in the past. You need to ask yourself, does it really matter?

“Are you finally ready to leave your baggage behind you? Because if you’re going to keep holding the past against each other, you don’t stand a chance at a future together. Doing that will only give those in either of your pasts the power to divide you.
“He’s made his case with his actions and words by traveling to New York, standing in front of you and saying, ‘I love you. I choose you.’ It’s time to make your move, because I don’t think he can be any clearer. Now, what are you going to do?”

This is what Rose does. She makes everything so simple and obvious. She gives it to me straight and helps me to think through my next steps, calling me on my bullshit whenever necessary. Her insight, clarity, and opinions about Hilda aren’t easy to hear, but probably exactly what I need. I love that she is fearless in offering her opinion, even when that differs from the majority or someone like Carlisle.

My mind is filled with numerous possibilities, as I stare out in the distance, listening to the waves crashing along the shore intermixed with a seagull’s squawk every now and then. She’s silent while I process and sort through what I should do. As happy as Edward makes me, I want to make him happy, give him hope for our future, and let him know I choose him too.

The sun is setting when I turn my head in her direction, a smile threatens at the corners of her lips. Rose can tell instantly I’ve made a decision.

“What’s the plan?”

“I’m going to D.C. and spend as much time with him as I can.”

“After your interview with The Times?”

“Yes. I think I’ll keep it a surprise and not alert him to my plan. Do you want to tag along? I suspect there’s someone who wouldn’t mind additional time with you either before we return to Berlin.”

Her smile widens at the thought. “Absolutely, but first let’s soak up all the downtime and pampering we can. Grab your lemonade.”

She lifts the pitcher and refills both of our glasses then raises hers, offering a toast. “To new beginnings.”

“And friendship,” I add, clinking my glass with hers.

She smiles. “And love. May it always guide us home.”