



Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight

Written by CaraNo

Beta'd by HollettLA

Simply Edward

BPOV

1.

~I will talk to you, Coffee Girl. I don't think I can today, but tomorrow~

The last hour before Simply Coffee closes is my favorite hour. The coffee shop is completely empty, and the darkness outside only makes everything feel warmer and more beautiful in here. If it rains, which it tends to do here in Seattle, I sometimes light a few candles to make it even cozier. 'Cause that's what Simply Coffee is supposed to be – cozy. Not a single piece of furniture in this establishment matches, but it works. It's rustic and homey, warm and comfy. Dim lighting. Small. Fifteen customers would fill the place.

We're located very close to U-Dub, so it's safe to say that most customers are students. Some have asked why we don't expand. They suggested it especially when the restaurant next door closed. But we don't want to expand. This is exactly how it's supposed to be. It's exactly how it has been for the past thirty years. That's when my grandfather opened Simply Coffee.

Speaking of Pops...

"I'll head on home now, Bean."

"Be careful," I respond softly, not leaving my spot by the register. This is where I sit on a stool, reading, until we close every night. "And say hi to Grams for me."

"Always," he says, wrapping a scarf around his neck. "See you tomorrow, kiddo." With a kiss on my cheek, he walks out. The little bell above door clings subtly as it closes, leaving me alone.

Well, almost alone. For the past few days, there's been a guy outside the coffee shop. He just stands there with his back to the window. Hands in his pockets, the hood of his sweatshirt covering his head. And he only stands there for like twenty minutes or so, then he leaves again. Sometimes, it looks like he's talking to himself. But as long as I don't get a bad vibe from him, he can do whatever he wants.

I return to reading.

2.

~Handshake. Emmett told me to greet you with a handshake~

"That kid is back," Pops says gruffly as he gets ready to leave.

"He's never come in," I reply quietly, gazing out the window.

And seriously...*kid*? Judging by the *man's* body, I'd say he's just that: a man. My guess is that he's a student at the university, which would make him my age, possibly a couple of years older.

"Maybe I shouldn't let you close every night," he mutters.

"I'm perfectly safe, Pops," I sigh, smiling ruefully. Not only do I know self-defense, but there's a button by the register that goes straight to a security company. Plus, there are plenty of people outside. This is the time of day that many night classes start at U-Dub. "You know how eager Jacob is to 'save' me from bad guys," I add with an epic eye-roll. Jacob is one of the guys working at Black Safety down the street. He comes in too often, I swear.

"Well, you are a pretty one, Bean," Pops chuckles wryly. I shoot him a quick glare. "All right, all right. I'm off now."

"Say hi to Grams," I say as usual, and he kisses my cheek and says, "Always," before leaving.

Then it's just me and my book.

Until it's not.

The bell alerts me to a customer entering, and I look up to see...

Him.

3.

~I know your real name now, Coffee Girl~

"Hi, welcome to Simply Coffee," I greet politely, softly, quietly, a bit nervously.

He hesitates at the door. Eyes, his eyes are taking in the place, I think. The coffee shop separates us. Him by the door, and me across the room by the counter.

When he removes the hood, I see his face for the first time, and I wonder...*why the hell didn't he enter before now?*

He's both hot and cute, if that makes sense.

Tall. Surely a foot taller than my 5'3".

"Um, hello," he finally says, then clears his throat. He remains standing by the door. "My name is Edward." Suddenly, he walks forward, and when he reaches the counter, he sticks out his hand...as if wants to shake, uh, hands. "Edward Cullen."

Okay, this is...different.

But I'm polite, so I discreetly wipe my hand on my apron before returning the gesture. I greet him with a handshake.

Clammy.

"Bella," I say. "Uh, Bella Swan."

He smiles, like, really widely.

It makes me flush.

4.

~I can't wait to tell Emmett that I finally talked to you~

"Bella Swan," he whispers to himself as he looks down. "Bella, Bella Swan."

My eyebrows rise slowly.

When he meets my gaze again, he's still smiling. "You'll probably still be Coffee Girl in my head." He taps his temple, and when his smile widens, the corners of his eyes crinkle. "Your name is *very* pretty, but I've gotten so used to calling you Coffee Girl in my head, so..." He trails off, nodding slowly and, unless the world is rocking instead of spinning, I'm pretty sure he's, well, rocking back and forth on his feet. "I mean, I wouldn't call you Coffee Girl if we're in bed." My eyes bug out. I even choke on air. And this stranger...Edward, he keeps talking. "That would be weird, you know?" he chuckles. "No, you'll definitely be Bella if we make love, I promise." He finishes with a firm nod.

I'm completely frozen in place. Jaw dropped, eyes wide as saucers.

I don't even think I'm breathing.

"Uh, I will be back t-tomorrow, ok-kay?" he stammers, tilting his head a little. "I'm meeting my brother soon."

Um... "Okay," I manage to squeak.

It feels like my cheeks are on fire.

I'm just...dumbstruck.

And he literally runs out.

5.

~A friendly wave today. No handshake. Deep breaths. Yes. Okay~

When Pops has left, I don't open my book. Instead I'm fidgeting, unable to sit still. I chew on my thumbnail, eyes focused on the large window.

Will that weird guy really be back today?

Edward.

Edward, who said that I would definitely be "Bella" if we made *love*.

Oy.

I've never met someone like him, that's for sure. Maybe I should just close the coffee shop early and rush to my apartment upstairs. But I know I won't.

Since yesterday, I've replayed our encounter over and over in my head.

I've got nothing. Honestly, I haven't been able to come up with *anything* that could possibly summarize whatever that was last night. No words.

The sound of the bell makes my spine go rigid. I sit up straight, holding my breath, and...there he is. That odd man with smiling eyes.

"Hello, Coffee Girl," he says quietly, offering me a small wave as he approaches the counter. "I'm back. Is that okay?"

And there goes my ability to breathe.

Problem is, I don't know *why* he makes me so flustered.

"Hi, Edward," I croak. *Crap*. I clear my throat. "Um, that's fine."

His cheeks tint pink. "You remember my name. That's good."

Yes. How could I forget?

Silence.

He just stands there, smiling nervously, looking at me.

Offer him coffee!

"Right," I breathe out. "Can I get you anything?"

He furrows his brows.

"You know, uh...coffee or something?" I clarify, waving a hand at the menu behind me.

"Oh! Hmm..." He taps his chin. "I don't like Starbucks, it's very crowded, it's better here, so..."

Uh...huh?

"I like the quiet," he continues, lowering his voice. "It's peaceful and not so annoying."

Right. So, is that a no on the coffee, then?

"I like the quiet, too," I admit, smiling awkwardly.

His smile, on the other hand, is gorgeous.

I love his eyes. They smile, too.

He looks both extraordinarily manly and sweetly innocent. I don't know how he pulls it off, but he does. His voice is warm and rich, both smooth and husky. His smiles are genuine and friendly. His eyes...

Have mercy on me.

"Do you want to sit down?" he asks, gesturing at one of the tables. "We could talk, maybe?"

I swallow, feeling very confused. "Sure," I answer hesitantly. "Um, would you like something to drink?"

He shakes his head furiously. "No, thank you, but thank you for offering."

This is so weird.

In silence, I follow Edward to the table by the window where we sit down across from each other in two plush chairs. At least he picked a comfy spot.

The silence continues for a moment, and since he's looking down at his lap, I take the opportunity to watch him.

His body language scares me.

6.

~Emmett told me it's okay to be honest with you, Coffee Girl~

One second, he seems very uncomfortable and nervous. The next second, his smile is there to render me breathless.

"Is it okay if...if we're quiet for a while?" he mumbles softly, only chancing a quick glance at me before looking out the window.

I lick my lips, studying him. I wonder if there's...if there's something...*wrong?* with him. I don't know. I don't know what it could be. Maybe he's just shy. Shy and apprehensive.

"Sure?" It comes out as a question, but I'm suddenly the opposite of sure.

I'm not afraid or on edge, but nervous and uncomfortable. However, as soon as my word has left me, Edward relaxes. I literally see the change in him as he goes from rigid to mellow. His head tilts back against the chair, his eyes close, and his hands aren't balled into fists anymore.

Maybe he needs to gather his thoughts?

I have *no* idea.

"Thank you," he breathes out. "I just..."

He doesn't continue.

And I'm so confused and out of my comfort zone that it's beginning to hurt.

Still, I can't bring myself to ask him to leave or anything.

Something in his behavior makes me want to be careful.

7.

~This is right~

As the time goes by, so does the silence.

I've retrieved my book from the counter.

It's oddly peaceful right now.

I'm still clueless as to who Edward is and what he's doing here, but I leave him be. He's not asleep, I know that, but he stays quiet. Eyes still closed. His breathing is even. His chin almost touches his chest, but he looks comfortable.

There are tiny movements that tell me he's awake. Fingers tracing invisible patterns on the armrest of his chair. Light tapping with his left foot. The tip of his tongue peeking out every now and then to wet his lips.

He's incredibly beautiful.

And I have forgotten about the book in my lap, I realize.

"Are..." I clear my throat, and he stiffens slightly. That's not my intention. I rather enjoyed seeing him so relaxed. But I need to know... "Are you okay, Edward?" I ask quietly.

He relaxes again. Eyes remaining closed, he smiles softly. "Yes," he whispers. "This is right."

This is...?

"Okay," I respond slowly.

But then he sits up abruptly, startling me, startling the atmosphere. Eyes wide. "What t-time is it?"

I frown and check the clock on the wall behind the counter. "Almost eight."

"Goodness!" he breathes out and stands up. "I-I need to go, Coffee Girl." Which he looks regretful about. It's oddly a feeling I share. "Um, c-can I come back tomorrow?"

This time, I answer without hesitation. "Yes."

8.

~I will talk today. A little~

He looks flushed when he enters the coffee shop.

"Hi, Coffee Girl."

I chuckle and shake my head in amusement. "Hey, Edward."

This is the second week he's been coming in for the last hour of my day. We greet each other, a smile here and there, a beat of silence, he asks if I want to sit with him, I do, he relaxes and closes his eyes, I *don't* read.

"What's your favorite color, your favorite song, favorite hobby, do you wanna sit down?"

I blink.

"I'm sorry," he sighs, squeezing his eyes shut, and I don't like the quiet mumblings that follow. "Stupid, stupid moron."

"Hey," I murmur, walking around the counter. I stop in front of him, a bit apprehensive about touching him. Aside from the handshake that first day, we haven't touched. But I don't want him berating himself. "Don't call yourself stupid," I tell him, quietly but firmly. He opens his eyes, and I tilt my head up. "That's not allowed." I wink.

"Okay," he says quickly. "Wanna sit down with me?"

I really do. "Of course. Would you like something to drink?"

He always says no.

Today is different, evidently. "Yes, please." He nods. "I'd like a chai tea, if that's okay."

I'm momentarily stunned, but I think I recover somewhat quickly, and then I'm in motion. It's my favorite hot beverage. My very favorite, so I make one for myself, too. One with extra cream, extra ginger. I make Edward's the same way.

"It's my favorite," I say, smiling, looking up at him.

His smile is suddenly shy. "I know," he confesses in a hushed tone.

How could he possibly know?

9.

~I want to kiss you so badly. I will ask Emmett about it~

"My brother buys coffee here everyday," he says, almost whispering...like it's a secret. "He told me you're a nice girl."

Oh.

I feel my cheeks heat up. "Who's your brother?" I ask, also almost whispering. I don't know, but this quiet thing works for me. I like it.

"Emmett," he responds matter-of-factly, but *still*...quietly. "Emmett Cullen. He says you chitchat."

And I can't help but giggle.

Emmett, that big oaf. Yeah, he comes in every day. Chitchat is probably an accurate word. We're on first-name basis. Small talk about the weather, coffee, the Mariners, current events...stuff while I make his cappuccino with extra foam and cinnamon.

"He's your brother?" I ask, grinning as I finish our beverages.

Edward's smiling at my mouth. "Yes, he is my big brother. I live with him two blocks from here."

Interesting.

"He's very nice," I chuckle. "Come on, let's sit down." He nods and follows me over to our spot- *Our spot*. I like the sound of that. "Here's your tea," I say, sliding it across the coffee table.

My lips are touching the rim of my glass, but I don't drink. Instead, I watch Edward as he takes his first sip. Tentatively.

Then his eyes light up. "Tastes like, like, like..." It's like he can't find the word, and it looks like it frustrates him. "Gingerbread!"

I giggle again. "Do you like it?"

"I do," he says solemnly. "And when I lick my lips, they taste like Christmas."

And my eyes find his lips.

I try to will my blush away, but it's hard.

"Edward?" I chew on my lip. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-four, and my brother told me you are twenty-one; he found you on Facebook," he replies, tipping back his glass. He really likes my chai tea. And apparently, Emmett is a gossip...and a stalker. After a big sip, he wipes his mouth. "I still don't know your favorites. Just the drink. Not the song, the hobby, the color."

Right. I blow out a breath.

It's kinda hard to keep up with Edward, I notice. He's usually silent as soon as we're past the greeting.

"Um, my favorite hobby..." I think about that for a moment before I answer. "I think...reading and listening to music. Mundane, I know." I smile wryly.

Edward shakes his head. "Nothing about you is mundane, Coffee Bella."

Cof... I laugh quietly. "Coffee Bella?"

"I changed it," he says simply. "But I'm holding my promise. If we make love, you'll be just Bella." I cough and splutter. "Oh, let me get you a napkin."

Good God!

10.

~I need to focus. I need quiet, please. A moment~

"Thanks," I croak, accepting the napkin from him. *Sweet Jesus.*

He returns to sipping his drink, but all I can think about are the thoughts running through Edward's head. Does he think about making love to me? It doesn't make sense. Not one bit. How can he be shy and awkward one second, only to blurt out about what he'll call me in bed the next? I mean,

we barely know each other. This...this...whatever it is...I can't even call it a friendship, can I?

Okay, maybe I can, but it's a strange one.

"Do you...think about that a lot?" Oh, God...I can't believe I just asked that!

"About what?"

My cheeks flame red. "Making..." I cringe. "Making love."

Edward doesn't blush now. He didn't the last time this came up, either.

"I do when I touch myself," he tells me, and I want the floor to swallow me whole. "It's normal." He nods. "I've never made love before, and I want to, but until then, I make up fantasies about it...you and me...like every day, Coffee Bella."

I'm beyond mortified, looking down at my lap.

The two of us.

Every day?

Holy fuck.

My body's reacting against my will.

Slutty fucking nipples of mine.

"Can we be quiet for a while?" he whispers.

I don't look up as I reply. "Of course."

11.

~Leaving does not feel good. I don't like it. Don't like it~

Remembering that Edward meets Emmett every night at eight...somewhere...I break the silence ten minutes to eight.

"Edward?" I say quietly. I'm still so freaking embarrassed, but I swallow it down. "It's almost closing time."

"Right, of course," he breathes out as he sits up straighter in his chair. He wrings his hands awkwardly in his lap. "I should go, then."

I bite down on my lip, feeling conflicted. A part of me wants more time with him, but another part is screaming for a little space. Not a lot of space, just enough to gather my thoughts for a while. 'Cause it's so clear that I'm developing a little crush on Edward, and there's so much I don't know about him. Actually, I barely know anything.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he mumbles, bringing something...ah, his wallet...out of his pocket. "I haven't paid for the delicious beverage."

"I don't want you to!" I rush out the words. Because it's the truth. Paying would make him a customer. He's not. "It's on me, okay?" I take a deep breath. "In fact, there's another for you tomorrow...if you want."

His eyes, they smile. "You want me to come back tomorrow?"

"I do."

More than I'm willing to admit.

12.

~Only five hours left. Five hours. Four hours and fifty-nine minutes~

"Hey, Bella," Emmett says, grinning sheepishly.

I glare daggers at him, all while blushing like a little school girl.

Judging by his guilty expression, it's very clear that Edward's told him about *everything*.

"You could've fucking warned me," I hiss quietly, busying myself by making his cappuccino. "I've met your brother now every day for two weeks without knowing he's...*your brother!*"

Last night after Edward had left, I spent a ridiculous amount of time on Google, trying to figure out more about Edward's behavior. What I found out wasn't heartbreaking or anything, but a warning would've been nice. It would have prepared me!

"I'm sorry, Bella," he says sincerely. "But I wanted to give him a chance, and I had a gut feeling about you."

I huff, angry about the fact that my anger is, well, dissipating. What is it about the Cullen boys?

"He told you about last night?" I mutter, this time ignoring my heating cheeks.

"He tells me everything," he responds softly, quietly, somberly. "He really likes you."

Yeah, well...it's mutual.

But...

I sigh, hesitating, worrying, wondering, needing. "Emmett..."

I think he knows where I'm going with this. His eyes soften at the same time as he grows serious.

The hits on Google offered a lot. Disorders, syndromes, symptoms, difficult names. Many fit the bill.

Autism?

I doubt it. From what I read, autistic people don't really speak. Well, that's not correct, 'cause it's so incredibly individual. I read about some...spectrum or whatever it's called, and severities...

"Aspergers," he sighs quietly, and I nod with a dip of my chin.

It was one of the disorders that popped up on Google.

"Is he okay?" I whisper. *I want him to be okay.*

I can feel emotions building up inside of me, and I'm desperate for the short line behind Emmett to just disappear, but I know they won't.

I finish his cappuccino and put a lid on his to-go cup.

"How about I join you two tonight?" he suggests, handing me a ten-dollar bill. I want to decline. I don't want his money, but I take it and give him back the change. I will just have to make him something tonight, something extra. "We could talk."

I nod and release a breath. "I'd like that."

Why do I suddenly feel like bawling my eyes out?

13.

~So right. This is right. My two favorite people. It clicks, fits, suits~

The urge to cry lingers for the rest of the day.

Pops notices but isn't a hoverer. I just tell him that I'm having a bad day before he leaves.

Things will be better tomorrow.

Right?

When the bell rings, I'm off my chair.

Two chai tea, heavy on the whipped cream and ginger... One cappuccino with extra foam and cinnamon... A candle is lit, three plush chairs, one coffee table.

"Hey, Bella," Emmett says, letting Edward enter first.

In Edward, I see anticipation and eagerness. "Hello, Coffee Girl."

I'm back to Coffee Girl? Huh.

"What happened to Coffee Bella?" I ask, teasing him.

And he furrows his brows, looking a bit worried. "Did something happen? Are you not well?"

My eyes find Emmett, and he just smiles a smile that says, "I'll explain."

I nod once, then turn to Edward again. "I'm fine, promise. How are you?"

I want to reach out, maybe touch his hand...

But I'm not sure it would be welcome.

"I'm good, we're both here tonight, is it okay if I sit next to you?"

I can't help but smile. It's all wide and stuff. "It's very okay. I prepared some beverages for us."

"Thanks, Bella," Emmett says with a grin. We all take our seats around the small table, Emmett and I across from each other, and Edward in between. "Fucking love your coffee, I gotta say."

"I do, too," Edward says, reaching for his tall glass. "You should try this one sometime. It's really delicious, Em."

"Dude, I've been trying to get you to try coffee forever," Emmett huffs, and I find myself watching them intently. "But it didn't work until you found out that Bella liked it."

Edward just shrugs and sips on his hot drink, which reminds me...

"It's not coffee," I point out with a smirk. "It's black tea."

Emmett grins. "Touché."

"It's not black, though," Edward mutters, shaking his head. "It's creamy brown. Light brown. Beige? Your eyes are coffee brown, Bella."

He called me Bella.

Like he would do if we made lo...

Shit. Blushing.

"My grandfather calls me Bean." I smile nervously. "Like...coffee bean...uh, because of my eyes."

Shut up.

Shutting up.

"That's a little funny." Edward snickers. "Bean. Bella Bean. Coffee Girl."

And I realize that Emmett's now watching me and Edward, like I was watching the two of them before.

He, Emmett, looks at ease for some reason.

"Hey, little brother?" he murmurs, and Edward looks up at him.

"Remember what we talked about at home?"

"Yes," Edward replies quickly. "We're going to tell Bella about me. It's fine, really. I don't mind. I want her to know."

Emmett smiles crookedly, a smile I've seen on Edward before. "And you want me to talk?"

"I think that's best. I'll add if there's something I...I want to add."

"All right," Emmett says, nodding firmly before facing me.

14.

~I want you to know me, Coffee Girl. And I'm not a kid. I can fend well~

"Do you mind just telling me what it is you already know?" Emmett asks me.

I lean back in my chair, folding my legs under me.

What I know isn't much at all. "That he's twenty-four years old, um..."

The rest is hard to explain. I feel so stupid all of a sudden, but I actually can't explain the rest with words. It's all about his body language, how he sits and how he phrases his words. How he sometimes stumbles over his words, how he seems to grow agitated when he can't find the *right* word. How he becomes frustrated and needs quiet for a while. There's just so much about him, and I constantly find myself trying to read him, understand him, *get* him.

"Don't worry," Emmett suddenly says. "It's hard to pinpoint it all, yeah?" I nod, relieved that he understands. "I guess I'll start." He chuckles a little under his breath. "Where to begin?" he sighs, and it's rhetorical.

Yet, Edward answers. "Chicago is probably a good place."

"You're right." Emmett nods. "Edward and I grew up in Chicago. We lived there until it was time for me to begin my Masters." He pauses, averting his eyes for a moment. "Uh, it wasn't easy growing up in our family, that's for sure."

"Mom and Alice were wrong," Edward mumbles. "So wrong."

"Absolutely," Emmett agrees strongly. He gives me a small smile, a sad one. "Alice is our sister, the middle child, two years older than Edward." I nod to show I'm listening, and I can't stop myself from asking how old Emmett is. He's older, of course, but by how much? "I'm thirty." Another nod from me. "Anyway...the shitty times in our family started when Edward was about four years old."

"I don't like to talk very much," Edward supplies into his glass. "Only with people I'm comfortable around."

There's a warmth spreading inside of me. Hope. Am I one of those people?

I wonder why.

"Our mom took action pretty quickly," Emmett continues. "Years of diagnosing and medicating. One diagnosis wasn't enough, simply because Mom didn't like the answer."

Glancing over at Edward, I notice that he's struggling to remain calm. He balls his hands into tight fists, only to relax them and then repeat.

"By the time Edward was fifteen, he'd already been through so much crap that *I* was beginning to lose *my* mind." It's easy to see the bitterness in Emmett's features. "I always got into fights with Mom and our sister, 'cause they just made shit worse. For instance, when Edward had an anxiety attack, Mom wanted to find the best drugs for him instead of trying to figure out *why* he suffered from anxiety attacks, and..." He huffs

and shakes his head. "I saw it so fucking clearly, and I told my parents, as well as Alice, but they kept on going. 'Cause the thing is, Edward hates crowds. He doesn't like noise and distractions, ya know?" I nod, remembering reading an article about people with Aspergers or autism rarely enjoying crowds. "Well, is it so weird then that he clams up when he's surrounded by so-called experts?" Of course not. God, I can't even imagine. Literally, I know way too little. "They forced him into different kinds of therapy...speech therapy, which was fucking unnecessary, 'cause he can speak just fine." Edward nods at that. "Physical therapy, also stupid in Edward's case... Stress management, social skill classes... The list goes on, really." He releases a breath. "But had they only stopped for one goddamn second, they would've noticed what was wrong. He just wants peace and quiet; is that so wrong?"

"No," Edward whispers.

I blink back tears.

"I'm not going to deny that Edward has Aspergers," Emmett says imploringly. "That's just a fact, regardless of what some people say, because he's been diagnosed many times. Edward *is* different; he thinks differently, acts differently, and tends to see things in black and white. But when it comes to these types of diseases - same goes for autism - you need to look at the individual. One treatment may not fit more than just that one person." He pauses. "So, I pretty much put my life on hold until Edward turned eighteen. And then I offered him an out."

Christ. "You brought him with you," I conclude quietly. "When you returned to school, you brought Edward along."

The bond between the two brothers is so strong, and I'm filled with gratitude. Emmett's love for his little brother has probably saved Edward.

He nods once. "I grew up with him. We were always close." He shrugs. "I could read him well, and he never had any problems opening up to me. But maybe that's because I was there to actually listen, you know?" In a purely platonic way, I think I just fell in love with Emmett Cullen. "I remember when Mom put Edward on Zoloft - medication for his anxiety disorder - and sure, for some it really works, but it didn't in Edward's case. Our family thought it worked because his attacks didn't come as often, but what *I* noticed was how it wore my brother down. He suffered from insomnia, he became emotionless, always exhausted...he was empty." He sighs heavily. "Things like that. So, yeah, I took him away as soon as he turned eighteen."

It breaks my damn heart just to hear about this. To actually live through it...

"I don't have many anxiety attacks anymore, though," Edward says quietly.

"That's true." Emmett grins. "And that's probably because I let you live the life you want." He addresses me again, and Edward smiles at his brother. "Edward needs support, not a fucking leash. I don't force him to do shit that makes him uncomfortable. But most of all, I don't treat him like a kid who doesn't know anything."

"Here," Edward whispers, handing me a napkin, and when I blink, I realize that tears are falling. *Shit*. I feel dumb. "Don't cry, please."

I snuffle and chuckle at the same time. "I'm sorry." Wiping my eyes and cheeks, I nod for Emmett to continue.

He gives me another crooked smile, looking so much like Edward in that moment. Though, that's probably the only trait or feature they share, I reflect. "The only thing left I wanna add is that Edward is an adult. He needs a good support system, but he can manage on his own perfectly

fine. I mean, we live together because it's convenient, but other than that..." He shrugs again. "He has his own car, he works, he pays rent, he can manage his own finances..."

"You help me sometimes, but I *can* do it on my own," Edward says. "I just lose my patience every now and then."

"Well, that's a Cullen trait, bro," Emmett laughs quietly. "We're an impatient bunch. Stubborn, hotheaded."

The tension lifts. Breathing becomes easier.

"I speak my mind," Edward mutters, watching me warily. "I can't help it, and, um...sometimes I get really worried and anxious... I'm sorry if I've upset you with an-anything I've said, Cof- B-*Bella*." His breathing hitches, and this time I react before I think. Reaching over, I cover his hand with mine.

He goes completely rigid, and I'm about to remove my hand and blurt out an apology, but Edward doesn't let me. In a quick movement, he keeps my hand on his, which renders me speechless for a moment.

His hand is warm and soft.

I shiver.

15.

~I love holding your hand. It feels so right. I'm getting hard~

For the rest of the evening, which lasts for a couple more hours, we talk comfortably and without awkwardness or heavy tension. The only thing that has changed, really, is that Edward and I are now holding hands. He won't let me go, and I don't want him to.

He's mostly quiet, leaving the talking to Emmett and me, and that's fine. Instead, he sits relaxed in his chair, using his free hand to trace his fingers over my hand. But then, when Edward has stifled about five yawns, Emmett says that it's probably best to leave.

"I can come back tomorrow, right?" Edward asks me, looking a bit anxious.

"Of course," I tell him, smiling. "I want you to."

"Okay," he breathes out in obvious relief. "Good. Good."

The three of us move toward the door together, my fingers still threaded with Edward's, and I give him a little squeeze just because I need it.

Edward gives me a shy sideways smile and squeezes back.

"So, thank you for having us, Bella." Emmett smiles. "And I'll see you tomorrow when I get off work."

Work. Right. I've learned that Emmett is an animator, which I think is pretty fucking cool. I've also learned that he takes a night class in sign language for Edward's sake. Sometimes, Edward refuses to talk, and Emmett is getting a bit sick of hand gestures he doesn't understand. So, they take the class together, but Edward takes it online. Just another thing I'm in awe of.

I have so many questions, but I know we have time. Edward and Emmett are here to stay.

"I'll have your cappuccino ready," I chuckle.

"Nice." He smirks. "But I was actually hoping I could steal a moment or two tomorrow. Do you think you could take a break?"

"Of course. Pops is still here at that time, so..."

I have a feeling that he wants to talk to me about Edward, and this time without Edward being present.

"Great, see ya tomorrow." And then he leaves me alone to say goodbye to Edward.

Who is still holding my hand.

"There's a list, did you know?" Edward asks, looking down at me. I tilt my head. "First comes handshake, then hand-holding and/or hugs, then kissing, then intimate touch-"

"I think I've heard of it," I choke out. *Holy mother of...* I don't need him to tell me about intimate *touching*. Deep breath. I need to calm my fucking tits. Quite literally.

Edward is wicked without even knowing it.

"Oh, good." He grins. "So, what comes now? Kissing or hugging? Kissing...?"

This man, I swear...

"Well..." I laugh under my breath and gather my damn thoughts. "How about this..." I trail off and stand on my tiptoes to wrap my arms around his neck. A hug. He returns the gesture right away, squeezing me a little. I like it. A lot. "And..." I moist my lips then press a soft kiss to his cheek.

The man smells amazing.

And he kisses my cheek, too.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Edward," I murmur, barely recognizing my voice.

16.

~Time should go faster. It should go faster, a lot faster~

"Pops, I'm taking my break," I say, wiping my hands on my apron.

"To talk to that boy?" he asks, jerking his chin at the man who just walked in. "He comes in every day. He flirtin' with you, Bean?"

I flush, 'cause *stupid* Pops doesn't seem to care that two customers can hear him.

"He's a friend," I grit out. "Nothing else."

With that said, I take the cappuccino I just prepared and stroll over to Emmett.

"Hi, Emmett," I greet, smiling, smiling, smiling, I feel happier all of a sudden. "How's Edward?"

He chuckles as we sit down at our table by the window. "How's Edward? He's fine. How am *I*? Also fine, thank you very much."

Oh, with the blushing. "Fuck, I'm sorry," I say, ducking my head.

At which Emmett just laughs. "Seriously, Bella. Don't be sorry." I look up at him again. He's smiling warmly. "You have no idea how relieved I am, actually."

Huh? "How so?"

He takes a sip from his coffee before answering. "I'm relieved because my gut feeling about you proved to be right." I think I look like a question mark. "This whole thing started one day when I brought Edward with me here," he explains. "But he froze in the doorway when he saw *you*." Oh, my... "So, I took the next few weeks to learn more about you."

I shoot him a playful glare. "Gee, thanks. So, you only befriended me to see if I was nice enough for your brother?"

"Ah, you know what I mean, Bella," he chuckles, and he's right. I do know what he means. He's just being a good brother. "And before you ask, the reason I didn't simply approach you was because I wanted to see for myself. I hope you can understand."

I smile. "I understand, really."

"Good." He looks relieved. "Now, for the real reason I'm here today..."

17.

*~I should ask Emmett if it's appropriate to kiss you on the lips today,
Coffee Bella~*

"I'm just gonna lay it all out there, okay?" he asks, and I nod. "All right. Edward likes you. I think that's obvious. But I'm curious about you in that respect. The last thing I want is for my brother's heart to be broken, so if you're just looking for friendship, I need to know."

I could just kiss the ever loving shit out of Emmett.

Not kidding.

There should be a Brother's Day, just sayin'.

"I like him, too," I admit quietly. "If you're asking if his disorder's standing in the way, then the answer is no. But...I need to know more." He nods in understanding, smiling that Cullen smile. "I mean, I don't know what to expect or anything. I don't know how...normal...we can be together." Hell, I don't even know if that word – normal – offends them.

I'm simply too unaware, and I'm pretty sure knowledge is power in this case.

"Well, that's what I'm here for," he tells me, rubbing his hands together. I laugh at his antics. "First of all, skip Google." Um, okay? "There's good

information online, but it's all general, you know? The best way to figure Edward out is to spend time with *him* and, of course, what I tell you."

Sounds obvious, now that I think of it.

"Go on," I urge.

"Okay, given our location and limited time, I'm just going to tell you a few things you need to know about where Edward's thoughts are right now." He pauses to take a sip from his beverage. "From what he's told you, I'm sure you know he's...far ahead." He grins knowingly when I flush. "Exactly. I can tell you right now that Edward is an instinctual man – a sexual being. He's never had a girlfriend before, and I know he hasn't even kissed a girl. But he's fucking curious." Whereas Emmett chuckles, I gulp. "He listens to his body, Bella, and...well, he...*it* wants you."

Good lord. No, I don't think Simply Coffee is the right place for this conversation. Luckily, there aren't many customers around, and...thank goodness Pops can't hear us.

"I've had my fair share of embarrassing talks with my brother," he says, cringing a little. "But someone's gotta tell him. Sure, I could send him to more group sessions and social skill classes, but he's already gone through all that, and he hates that shit. That's what causes him anxiety. He *knows* what's right or wrong, he just doesn't understand *why* sometimes. And emphasis on *sometimes*. This..." He waves a hand at me. "...relationship thing is extremely new to him, and he has questions. But more than that, he's impatient. He doesn't understand why he can't...well, to be blunt...just jump into bed with you and explore everything. He doesn't know what's appropriate and inappropriate."

"Holy shit," I breathe out.

"Sorry," he says apologetically. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

"It's okay." And it is. Yeah, it's uncomfortable, but I want to know. "Go on. I'm listening."

He nods slowly and looks down for a while. "In all honesty, Bella," he sighs. "You're the first one, apart from me, who he wants to be close to. He's extremely withdrawn, and trust doesn't come easy for him. And since he hasn't felt like this before, he hasn't had the...urges...before, either...if you know what I mean." I nod quickly, wanting him to move the fuck on. Believe me, I know all about Edward's urges, 'cause he has no problem telling me about them. "Right. Well, it just means that with this...attraction, so to speak...everything comes rushing to him now, and he has no patience. He wants it all at once."

So...he needs boundaries? Someone to tell him...?

"What would this mean for Edward and me?" I ask quietly.

"Well, I don't want you to shelter him, because he doesn't need that, but you have to set the pace."

Um, okay. But what happens if my slutty body takes control? 'Cause there are times I'm ready to devour him, and I've never felt that way before. In many ways, this is new to me, too.

"Before I leave, there are two more things I need to tell you about Edward."

I give him a wave for "go ahead".

"Edward gets offended easily," he tells me quietly, seriously, like the words hurt him. And I think they do hurt. "Rejection, for instance, could very well cause an anxiety attack, so..." And this hurts me, too. I don't want Edward to be in pain. "Bella, if you feel that he's coming on too strong, you need to be careful when you ask him to back off."

"How do I do that?" I ask in a small voice. "I don't want to hurt him."

But I can't just go at Edward's pace, either.

"Reassure him," he answers softly. "Tell him that you still like him, that everything is fine, just...that you need a little more space. And that's another thing. For example, if he, uh, moves too fast...don't let him go when you turn him down. He told me yesterday that he can't wait to hold your hand again, and I think that your touch is very important to him now. You've let him in, and now he wants more. So...if you feel the need to take a step back, I believe that holding his hand would make him feel better."

Okay. Okay. I can do that.

"Just...whatever you do, don't do things only for his sake," he adds seriously. "Partly because I don't want you to feel pressured into things you're not ready for, and partly because Edward's very perceptive. He always notices if something's wrong, and if you then tell him that things are fine when they aren't, he's going to start doubting not just himself, but you, too."

"I'll be honest but careful," I promise.

I will have to learn how to balance all that.

"Good. But don't beat yourself up *when* you make a mistake. We're human; we all make mistakes. This is no exception. I've made countless mistakes, but that's just how it is." He smiles ruefully. "Now, the last thing before I go..."

18.

~Focus on work, Edward. Fucking focus. What time is it?~

"There is one thing that I've noticed in Edward since he saw you that first time," he says, and I flush on fucking cue, it seems. "It's about his feelings.

"He's always been a sensitive guy, and he...feels a lot, I suppose you could say. But he can't always pinpoint his emotions. He's not very good at labeling them."

"All right," I reply slowly, not really understanding.

"When he was little, he asked why his stomach would growl at him," he says pointedly, and a little wistfully, as if he's lost in a memory. But he shakes it off. "That's how it's always been, and he's always come to *me* with his questions. So, what I'm saying is that either he will start coming to you, which I would totally understand, or..." He releases a breath. "The day will come and he will ask me why his pulse is quickening as soon as he lays eyes on you. Know what I mean?"

Oh...

Oh!

"I think so?" I ask rather than state, but I'd love some confirmation here. Funny, my own pulse is quickening now. "You mean if he starts having real feelings about me?"

"Love," he says bluntly. "He's already very capable of it. I mean, the guy has feelings like anybody else has, but it's finding a word for it that he has trouble with. And so far, he's only familiar with the love he shares with me, and things he loves to do, so to speak. Being *in* love is something very different. Just want you to be prepared. He might come to you, he might come to me. Though, whatever happens, he *will* be straightforward about it. There's no timeline for him. But when it comes to you, he has already crossed the line where it goes from platonic to more. I'm not

going into it, but let's just say that he knows all about 'being in lust' now." We both chuckle at that. "Yeah, awkward day for me, but..." He shrugs.

I breathe out. "Aren't we getting ahead of ourselves here, though?"

As far as I know, it would be effortless to fall for Edward. He's so very sweet and handsome and special in the best ways, but his heart isn't the only one at stake. It's my heart, too, and I'm careful with it.

"I don't think you know how much you already matter to my brother, Bella," he murmurs. "The simple fact that you didn't push him out the door when he started stumbling over his words, or...or the time when he asked if you could be quiet for a while... That acceptance means so much to him, not to mention me. For chrissakes, you spent the past two weeks being quiet around each other, didn't you?" he laughs, and the tension lifts. Emmett has the ability to just change the atmosphere. I laugh, too, 'cause it's true. Two weeks of pretty much greeting each other and sitting down in silence. "Not many would do that without pushing him away, you know? But you indulged him or whatever, and now he's comfortable around you. He can feel that you won't pressure him."

"I wouldn't," I assure quickly. "I *won't*."

19.

~I didn't like it when Emmett told me not to kiss you on the lips today. I hate slow. Slow is stupid~

Five minutes after Pops has left, Edward comes in.

That little bell above the door sends shivers of anticipation through me.

I'm giddy.

Warm inside.

"Hey, Coffee Girl." He smiles widely as he approaches, and I round the counter. "I'm back today."

"Hi, Edward," I laugh softly, and then I'm engulfed in a warm hug.

Shiver, shiver, goose bumps, he breathes me in, I breathe him in, too.

He's like my personal sun.

"I missed you," he whispers and kisses my cheek.

My knees nearly buckle. He has no idea what he's doing to me.

"I missed you, too," I admit.

"Good! Wanna sit down with me?"

Tonight, he ushers us to a new table. One where there's a loveseat.

We drink our chai teas.

Fingers threaded together, legs touching.

When he swipes a piece of hair away from my face, his fingers brush against my cheek, and he sets me on fire. He has no idea, of course.

At times, we're just quiet.

He watches me a lot.

At other times, we talk comfortably, aimlessly, quietly, closely.

He tells me a little about working part time at the aquarium here in Seattle. He likes it, and his boss always gives him tasks where he won't have to run into kids who are there on a field trip. He tells me that he loves the rain, tinkering with his car, and photography. And that he collects stamps from other countries.

Tomorrow he's going to bring his favorites.

My favorite is when his eyes smile.

"Do you want to be quiet for a while?" I whisper, noticing that he's having trouble finding his words.

He breathes out and tilts his head to rest it on my shoulder. "Yes, please."

And then we're quiet.

In an automatic action, one that feels so natural, I kiss the top of his head.

He makes me giggle when he lifts his head to return the gesture.

20.

~A date is the next step. Next step. Now~

"I like Christmas stamps," he mumbles softly, flipping a page in his impressive album. "I want to find Christmas stamps from every country in Europe."

I laugh through my nose and point at a Christmas themed stamp from Sweden. It's a damn pig with an apple stuck in its mouth. "That's funny, don't you think? Can you imagine receiving a postcard with a dead pig and fruit stuck in its mouth?"

He chews on his lip. Brows furrowing. Eyes intent on the stamp.

"Dead pig," he whispers. "With fruit." Then he grins and looks up at me. "That *is* funny." He snickers and turns to his album again. "Very morbid."

I sigh contentedly and rest my cheek on his shoulder.

He kisses me on the forehead.

Falling takes no strength at all.

"Are there many countries in Europe you don't have Christmas stamps from?" I ask softly.

"Oh, yes," he says, flipping to the first page. "Here are my lists." He pulls out sheets of paper from a pocket in the album and unfolds them. "They are stamps I want to find."

Good to know.

"Hey, when's your birthday?" I ask, lifting my head from his shoulder.

"June 20th, and yours is September 13th; Emmett told me he saw that on your Facebook - which you never visit, by the way - and can I take you on a date, please?"

21.

*~How can you both give me breath and take it away from me, Coffee
Bella?~*

I blink, still processing.

"I really want t-to take y-you out," he stammers, the words tumbling out fast. "But I d-don't like crowds, *hate crowds*, so I wonder if-if we can be here? And I could bring-"

He starts breathing heavily, so I cut him off with two fingers on his lips.

"Relax," I whisper softly, brushing my thumb over the crease on his forehead. He whimpers quietly and closes his eyes when I cup his cheek. "Can you relax for me, Edward?"

"But...but...I need..." He clenches his jaw.

"What do you need?"

Should I call Emmett? Is there something I should say? Does he need medication? Is he having an anxiety attack? The questions rush through me quickly as my worry grows.

"I need...an-ans..." He gulps. "Answer..."

Answer?

"Will you?" he grits out in a strained moan. I back away, afraid that I will hurt him, but he quickly pulls me back. "The date," he whimpers.

The date...

The date!

"Of course!" I exhale in a rush. "I want to date you, Edward. I really do."

He lets out a small, very quiet, strangled noise. Then he buries his face in the crook of my neck. He inhales deeply and holds me tightly, and I can feel that he's trying to calm down. I hug him back, worrying, comforting, wanting, falling, blinking back tears.

"Thank you, thank you," he mumbles against my neck. "Thank you, Coffee Bella."

And he's so taking up permanent residency in my heart.

22.

~You're so fucking beautiful that it hurts inside of me~

Tonight, Edward arrives after I've closed the coffee shop. He smiles nervously and kisses my cheek, and then he stumbles a little over his words, trying to ask if I like pizza at the same time as he wants to know if I wanna sit down with him. I notice that he often repeats himself. Every day is the same when it comes to our greeting. I always want to sit with

him, yet he never stops asking. It's something I file away for my now daily coffee break with Emmett.

"I love pizza." I smile and touch his arm. "And I'd love to sit with you."

He relaxes.

"You look..." He pauses and squints his eyes for a moment. I never rush him. A sweet smile. "You look very lovely."

"Thank you," I respond quietly, annoyingly breathily, as I smooth down my skirt and sit down. It's the only one I own. Black, simple, ending above my knees. I'm a jeans kind of girl. Skinny jeans and long-sleeved t-shirts. Edward's the same, I've realized, though he often wears a sweatshirt over his t-shirts. But tonight he's wearing grey dress pants and a black Henley. He looks to die for. "You look very handsome," I tell him. And I can't help but grin at our matching footwear. Despite nicer clothes, we still wear black Converse. "I like your shoes." I wink.

"I like yours, too," he says automatically, even before he looks down at mine. "Oh." He grins. "They're the same."

I say nothing. Instead, I kiss his cheek again. That always makes him smile.

And I may enjoy the kiss he always returns, too.

A lot.

"Hungry?" he whispers, tracing his thumb over my cheek. Just ghosting, just brushing, just setting me on fire.

He watches the movement. I shiver. I nod. I remind myself to breathe. It's vital.

"Yes," I breathe out. *But not for pizza.*

23.

~Your voice is soothing. Soft, warm, welcoming, safe~

"Um, I have questions for you," he tells me, handing me a slice of pizza. I smile in thanks and get comfortable on the loveseat that we share. "May I ask them?"

"Of course. Go ahead."

He doesn't waste time. "Where do you live?"

I grin and point a finger at the ceiling. "I have an apartment right upstairs. Pops and Grams used to live there, too, but Grams can't use the stairs anymore, so they moved to a small house not so far from here. That was when I was eighteen, so they gave the apartment to me."

He looks up for a moment then back at me. "Okay, next question. Where are your parents?"

My smile falters. "Mom died giving birth to me, and Dad died of cancer when I was thirteen."

"I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I didn't mean to upset you. I can see that you're upset. I'm s-sorry-"

"Edward," I interrupt softly, lacing our fingers together. "It's honestly okay. Your question caught me off guard, but I'm all right. I promise."

I can see now what Emmett meant about Edward being perceptive. It feels like he can literally see through me, *into* me. But I know he won't find anything but truth behind my words.

"Okay," he mutters, seemingly satisfied with his studying. "Um, what's your favorite color?"

And my smile is back. "Sienna and auburn."

"Why?" He tilts his head.

I shrug. "Warm colors. I love warmth." Auburn also happens to be the color of Edward's hair. "Your turn. What's *your* favorite color?"

"Coffee Bella brown," he says matter-of-factly, making me flush. "What's your favorite song?"

He's on a roll, isn't he?

"It changes from day to day," I chuckle. He's so fucking sweet and cute. "I think today's song is 'Vanilla Twilight' by Owl City."

"Hmm." He brings out his phone. "Haven't heard of it. Can you repeat the title and the band, please?" And I do. And he types it down. And he tells me, "I will listen to it." And, and, and, and his smile makes me fall harder. "You really have a new favorite song every day?"

"Almost," I say, pausing to take a bite of my pizza. "I usually spend an hour or two every morning listening to music."

His eyes show curiosity. "Can you tell me about your day? All I know is that you work here at Simply Coffee. And I really, really like to hear you talk."

Yeah, he's one of a kind. What other man would really say *that*?

"My life is not very exciting. Well, apart from one thing."

"What's the one thing?"

Honesty. "Seeing you every day."

His eyes grow wide at that. "Really? You think so?"

I duck my head. "I do."

Then his lips are on my temple, shooting sparks of radiating warmth through me.

"This is right, Coffee Bella," he whispers. "I can feel it."

So can I.

"But I still want to hear the rest," he adds quietly. "Can you tell me?"

There really isn't a lot to tell, but for some reason he wants to know. So, I tell him the little there is. I tell him that I use my mornings for listening to music, running in the park nearby, and sometimes I go to lunch with my friend Angela. Then I start my shift at one, when Jasper gets off his morning shift, and I'm here until eight, which is closing time. Pops also works here, but he comes and goes as he chooses. When he is here, I sometimes go to the bookstore or the library with Jasper's boyfriend, who is my reading buddy. Peter and I have our own little book club. So, yeah, my life isn't very exciting, but Edward listens like I have the most interesting life one could have.

"I think your life is good," he tells me when I'm done rambling. "You smile when you talk. You have close friends who you care for and who share your hobbies. Um, your life is warm."

Huh? I tilt my head. "What do you mean?"

And he thinks about it while chewing on his lip. "It..." He sighs impatiently and scrunches his face together. "It's hard to explain...but...I feel warm and full when you talk...uh, about your life. And I think you are warm and full, too. *Fulfilled*. That's it." He nods to himself, and I feel something shifting inside of me. "You're happy and that makes me happy."

There. Done.

That's how I fell in love with Edward Cullen.

Five weeks. That's all it took.

"I've changed my mind about my favorite song!" I blurt out.

Shit.

"Yeah? Hmm, which one is it, then?" he asks curiously, taking out his phone again.

I feel like I'm going to burst. Emotions, urges, butterflies, words, my fingers twitch.

"It's 'Kiss Me Slowly' by Parachute."

24.

*~Thoughts abandon me in ripples, explosions, surges, waves, yes, yes,
yes~*

He doesn't take the subtle hint, which I should've understood.

While he writes down the song title and band name, I muster up the courage to ask him to kiss me.

"I will listen to it," he says, pocketing his phone again.

Releasing a breath, I scoot closer to him. Thighs touching, arms brushing against each other.

"Edward?" I ask quietly, biting down on my lip. He cocks his head, eyes telling me that I have his attention, and this is it. "Um..." I lick my lips, a movement he catches. "Can I kiss you?"

"Oh," he breathes out. "On the lips?"

I swallow. "Yes."

"God, yes." He nods furiously, eyes now focused solely on my mouth. "I want it badly."

I can't even begin to describe the onslaught of emotions that rush around inside of me as our heads slowly tilt together. My breathing stutters, my skin prickles, my body heats up, my pulse quickens, my ears ring...

And when his lips touch mine, my entire being is buzzing.

We both exhale and let out a noise.

It's soft, moist, warm, so warm, testing the waters. Tentative. Not enough. More pressure. His fingers slide up my exposed neck. I cup his scruffy jaw. Even more pressure. Still soft and pliant. But drier. That's not good, so I wet my lips, which makes my tongue accidentally brush against his lips. It makes him moan, and his moan sends a wave of arousal through me.

After that, we're both goners.

"Oh, Bella," he moans, deepening the kiss. Our tongues meet hesitantly, just the tips. Then more, and it's awkward, amazing, beautiful, and so very new. I've kissed a few boys before, and I'm not a virgin, but...this is still so new. This is glorious because my feelings are so strong. This isn't senior prom in the back of a car where I give anything up because I'm sick of the nagging. This isn't a moment where I jump off a bridge just because everyone else is jumping. And apart from a few five-minute fumbblings with my high school boyfriend, I'm as new at this as Edward is.

"Edward," I whimper, knotting my fingers in his hair. Leaning back in his seat, he brings me with him, and I can't help but hitch my leg over him. He likes that, and our kiss becomes hungry and so passionate. His hand, his left one, it moves up my calf, my knee, my thigh. I whimper again.

He starts panting. Our mouths keep moving. Cheeks, necks, throats, jaw lines, and I'm suddenly straddling him.

"Yes," he groans, finding my mouth again. I'm losing my resolve. Slipping, slipping, especially when he fucking thrusts. "I'm so hard...I need..."

He's not the only one in need, but this is quickly getting out of hand. He's rock hard under me, hitting the perfect spot when he pushes me down on him.

"Edward," I gasp, breaking our kiss. He whimpers and I swallow convulsively. Control, control, control. "Edward, listen to me." I place both hands on his cheeks. "We need to stop."

Not the time, not the place. We're still in the coffee shop, and there's a huge ass window...

"No," he complains and squeezes his eyes shut. "I want you, Bella. Please, I want..."

"I want you, too," I tell him, still trying to catch my breath. "But it's too soon."

He huffs and goes limp under me, well, apart from his cock. He even pouts, which is fucking cute.

"Is this about what's appropriate?" he asks, opening just one eye.

I smile and laugh breathlessly. "Yeah, you could say that."

"I knew it," he mutters, scrubbing his hands over his face. "Emmett told me."

I'm glad.

"We just need to go a bit slower, okay?" I murmur softly. I move away from him, but only enough for him not to be, uh, uncomfortable. Pretty sure he's uncomfortable as it is, but sitting on his erection is just mean. Fuck, even for me. He has no idea how hard it was for me to stop.

"But you like me, right?" he asks anxiously, and I smile and kiss both his cheeks, his forehead, his eyelids.

"I like you very much," I whisper. "I'm not saying no. Just...not yet."

"Okay, so you're my girlfriend now, yes?"

I flush, feeling warm all over. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," he says, nodding. "I want you to be my girlfriend, and I want to be your boyfriend. And that means we kiss only each other. Just you and me. And holding hands, and touch-"

"I get it," I cough. Damn, he's dangerous. "I want that, too."

He smiles widely. "Perfect. I will do my utmost to be a good boyfriend for you. You're...you're...*precious*."

I feel lightheaded.

"You're precious, too," I say quietly, caressing his cheek.

"Thank you. Can we be quiet for a while now, please?"

"Of course," I assure softly. "Do you want me to make us some chai tea?"

He just shakes his head and pulls me close to him. Chests touching, he buries his face in my hair and breathes me in. It's extremely intimate, but not sexually. I adore it. I adore *him*. My boyfriend.

"Coffee Bella?" he whispers. I hum. "Can you touch my hair, please?"

Abso-fucking-lutely.

25.

~When I look at you, Bella, it feels like I'm being hugged~

"That's what he said!" I laugh, nudging Edward who just grins.

Emmett snickers and grabs another piece of carrot cake. "Well, my brother's fuckin' smart. It *doesn't* make sense to have carrots in cake."

"Still, you both like it," I point out smugly.

"It's the best," Edward agrees seriously, also taking a second piece.

We don't sit by the window anymore. Our new spot is near a corner where there's one loveseat and one chair. The chair is for Emmett, of course. 'Cause now, Edward refuses to sit far away from me. Boyfriends and girlfriends are supposed to sit together, holding hands and kissing. Safe to say, I'm very okay with this development.

"It's the frosting that does it, though," Emmett adds thoughtfully. "The cake wouldn't be delicious without it."

Pfft. What a load of crock. Okay, maybe not, 'cause the frosting *is* important. But it would still be good without it, because I know how to make a good fuckin' carrot cake.

A flash brings me back to the present, and I give Edward a playful glare as he tucks away his camera. That's his new thing. He always brings his camera with him nowadays, and he loves taking pictures of me when I'm not prepared.

"Emmett, I need to buy new photo paper tomorrow," Edward tells his brother. "And before three o'clock."

"Got it," Em says firmly.

I scowl at them, 'cause they're being secretive. For the past week, they've been talking about something happening tomorrow night. I mean, I'm very aware of the significance of tomorrow's date, 'cause it's our two month anniversary. Two months since our first pizza date. But I'm nervous because I have plans, too.

"You're just pretending to be upset now, right?" Edward asks, looking at me nervously.

And I feel like shit. "Yes, only pretending," I promise him. "I'm just curious about what you have planned for tomorrow."

He smiles, relieved. "You will find out tomorrow at six o'clock. You took the night off, yes?"

"Yep," I say.

"Good. Okay. Good."

26.

~You are so naughty, teasing me like that!~

And our night continues. Emmett and I are, as usual, the ones handling the talking, but that's fine. It's easy to see how relaxed and at ease Edward is with just watching. He looks so serene and happy, and I find myself falling in love with him every day. With every quirk, every pizza date, every kiss, there's just something that makes it possible to fall even deeper. I'm learning so much about him.

Now, I'm not going to pretend that everything is...normal...because it isn't. Ever since Edward and I became official, so to speak, I've seen so much more. There have been nights when he fidgets and can't find his words.

Sometimes he's agitated and broody. And a few times, he has purposely riled me up, just to see how far he can push it. But I have Emmett's support. I know this is Edward's way of making sure that I won't walk out just because we have a fight or something. He needs reassurance often, and he wants solidness and constancy. And, with the coffee break I share with Emmett several times a week, I feel more confident and able. I won't back down. When Edward says that nothing is wrong when it obviously is, I stay put until he's done moping.

Luckily, this doesn't happen often. He's mostly very happy and so very affectionate. Oh, yeah. Affectionate. Our pizza dates always lead to passionate make-out sessions, and nowadays I usually invite him to my place upstairs. He likes it there, especially when he gets to explore my body. He's very thorough, and I've discovered that Edward is a breast man.

I remember the first time I brought him upstairs and we shed all our clothes. We haven't made love yet, and I'm afraid I'm going to combust when we finally do it. The things he can make me feel with just his honest words and eager hands...

I whimper and moan as he covers my body with his on my bed. He breathes heavily against my skin, leaving a trail of open-mouthed kisses along my neck and collarbones. Hot whispers of need, some broken and incomplete, but I understand him anyway. His fingers tremble and flex as he cups my breasts, and the moan that follows sets me on fire.

"I want, I want," he pants. Straddling my thighs, he looks down at me and continues touching my breasts. "Oh, God...Bella..." His cock stands hard and thick. My eyes are pretty much glued to it, and I want to touch him. Slowly, my hands slide up his thighs. "Look, Coffee Bella," he whimpers. "I'm so...and you're precious and sexy...please..."

I shake my head to clear it. Now is definitely not the place to think about *that*.

Edward notices, of course. "What's the matter?" he whispers.

And I can't lie to him, 'cause he never lets go. "Inappropriate thought," I whisper back.

That's another thing we've discussed. Sex and intimacy are only talked about in private.

Pops and Grams already know about Edward, but they haven't met him yet, though Grams is trying to rectify that. I want them all to meet, too, but when I broached the subject with Edward and Emmett a couple of weeks ago, Edward asked for some time since he wants to prepare himself mentally. And Emmett advised me to talk to Edward about a few things we can speak about somewhat openly, but aren't deemed appropriate in the presence of others...such as my grandparents. Sex and intimacy being some of these things. Yeah, I don't really want my sweet boyfriend to tell Pops how much he likes my bed.

"Oh," he mumbles...and then it dawns on him. "*Oh*."

Exactly.

"You're thinking about that now?" he asks in a hushed voice.

"I *was*," I reply, and he closes his eyes.

"All right, enough with the whispering, you two." Right. Emmett. We're not alone. Looking up, I catch his grin. "Hey, Edward. Why don't you tell Bella about the song you found today?"

"Ooh, please tell me, Edward," I say, excited. Nowadays, I'm not the only one who has a new song for each day. It's something Edward has

adopted, too, and I love hearing his choices. It sorta gives me a peek into his mind.

Edward, seeing my enthusiasm, answers with a soft smile. "Um, it's 'Take A Picture' by Filter."

I squeeze his leg. "I'll listen to it."

Too soon, it's time for Emmett and Edward to go home, and once the older Cullen has said his goodbyes, it's just us two left. Standing by the door, he holds me like I'm fragile and precious to him.

"Tomorrow," I murmur, reaching up to kiss his lips.

"I can't wait," he mumbles. He cradles my face, pecking me gently, softly, sweetly. "Be ready at six o'clock."

Oh, I'll be ready.

27.

~Around you, a deep breath brings both relief and weight. Very odd, but I like it~

"You're wearing sexy lingerie, aren't ya?" Jasper smirks at me as I untie my apron. "Come on, you can tell me."

Thank God that Pops is in the back...and that there aren't any customers near the counter.

Jasper's always blunt, and when I asked him to cover my shift tonight, I knew he'd be unable to shut up.

"That's not any of your business, is it?" I shoot back with a smirk of my own. But yeah, I'm totally wearing sexy lingerie. Definitely not slutty, but

hopefully good enough to make my boyfriend squirm. Dark purple lace oughta do that, right?

"Girl, your blush says it *all*," he drawls, leaning against the counter. I chuckle and throw my apron in his face. "Now, now, don't get violent on me, Swan. You should be nice since I'm skipping a hot date with Peter so that you can go out with your man."

And that's why I don't want Jasper to meet Edward yet. All right, to be honest, I know that Jazz would do his best not to make Edward uncomfortable, but still...

It doesn't help that Jasper acts like a big brother to me. *Or maybe a big sister*, I snicker to myself. Whatever, I don't need Jazz to ask Edward about his intentions toward me.

"I'm gonna ignore you now," I sigh lightly and bring out my compact mirror from my back pocket. What? I want to make sure my makeup is still good. It's just some mascara and eyeliner, and...soon some lip balm. Yep, all good. "Have a good night, Jazz." I send him a wink as I walk toward the door. I've already spotted Edward's Volvo outside. "I know *I* will."

Jasper's laugh fills the coffee shop as I walk out in the early night.

And my gorgeous Edward is leaning against his car, looking incredible in a pair of stone-washed jeans and white button-down.

"Hello, Coffee Bella," he says softly as I reach him. "Ready for our date?"

"Very ready," I murmur, kissing him once, twice, three times. By the third, he's smiling widely. "Where are we going?"

Admittedly, I'm a bit nervous. So far, we've had our bubble. Simply Coffee, pizza dates, several passionate moments in my apartment

upstairs, but...now we're actually going out. But I remind myself not to shelter Edward, as Emmett has told me not to do. Edward is capable of choosing whatever he feels comfortable with.

At times I still feel bad, though, because I get apprehensive about what Edward can and can't do, which is so unfair of me. Luckily, Emmett once called me out on it and, in his blunt way, he said, "You're human, Bella. You're gonna fuck up whether you like it or not, and Edward isn't unaware of that fact, either. And he isn't counting on you to be perfect, all right?"

So, I'm just gonna relax and let Edward lead the way.

Trust.

"You'll see when we get there," he says, opening the door for me.

When he joins me in the car, he tells me that he prefers quiet while he drives and, with an anxious smile, he even asks if that's okay.

He is the sweetest man I've ever met.

"It's more than okay, Edward," I assure softly. "I want you to be comfortable."

With a relieved smile, he starts the car.

The silence is comfortable and oddly soothing. It calms my nerves.

28.

~Why does it feel like I'm whole only when you are near, Coffee Bella?~

Edward takes me to the aquarium where he works.

It's absolutely amazing, and I can't believe I haven't been here before. It's also place where he feels comfortable.

Hand in hand, he shows me around. We walk slowly, taking our time. He's a great guide, too, offering small pieces of information and anecdotes. And then we're quiet for a while. Again, it's so comfortable and serene. Relaxing.

"There aren't very many people here," I mention quietly after a while. In front of us is a massive window, and behind it swim sea turtles and fish, many of which Edward points out the names of.

"It's a Friday night, an hour before closing time," he explains. "Not many people are here then."

I squeeze his hand. "Well, I'm very glad you brought me here. It's amazing."

"I'm glad you like it." He smiles down at me. "Can we talk about names now?"

I scrunch my nose in confusion, and Edward leads us over to an empty bench where we sit down. "Names?"

He nods quickly, just once. "Yes, I read about, um..." He thinks, thinks, thinks, and in the meantime, I rub slow circles on his hand.

"Endearment...terms of endearment." He nods again. "Pet names for boyfriends and girlfriends, and I don't like 'baby' or 'babe', because we are adults, but I want one for you. A name. A name for you."

He renders me speechless.

Deep breaths.

I'd like to see a woman able to *not* fall in love with Edward, 'cause I'm pretty sure it's impossible.

"I talked to Emmett about it," he continues, and I notice that his knee is bouncing a little. "I definitely didn't like his suggestions, though I *think* he was just trying to be funny." He takes a deep breath. "I do not want to call you 'sweet *thang*'."

29.

~Your smile makes me breathe heavier~

"Guh-" I laugh-choke-splutter. *So* attractive. An unstoppable giggle-fit follows, and I can't believe Emmett! "No, no," I pretty much wheeze out. "You definitely don't have to call me 'sweet *thang*', Edward."

While I try to control my laughter, Edward looks curious, smiling *at* me, I guess, not with me. "So, Emmett was just being funny?"

"I hope so!" I laugh. *Okay, calm the fuck down, Bella.* I take deep breaths, reining it in. After a moment, I manage, thank God. But that shit was funny, and Emmett is so gonna hear about this!

"So, do you want us to have names for each other?" he asks anxiously.

All traces of humor are gone when Edward's vulnerability shines through. It's both beautiful and heartbreaking.

"I definitely do," I tell him softly, taking his hand in both of mine. I smile reassuringly for good measure, knowing how important that is for him. "Is there anything you want me to call you?"

He shakes his head quickly, furrowing his brow. "I don't know yet, but I want to call you 'sweetheart'. Is that okay?"

A rush of emotions makes my eyes well up.

I know what I want to call him in return.

"I like that very much," I say thickly, just above a whisper, and place my hand on his cheek. He smiles softly and presses his forehead against mine, something he often does. "And is it okay if I call you 'love'?"

"Love," he mumbles softly, again knitting his brows together. "Um, you're my sweetheart, so... Does that mean..." He squeezes his eyes shut, struggling internally for a moment. "Does- Is that the s-same? Does that mean I'm y-your love?"

30.

~You love me, love me, love me, you're in love with me, something's squeezing me from the inside, you love me~

"Yes," I confess. "I love you, Edward." He blinks, and I tell him again. "I'm so in love with you."

"Oh," he breathes out. "Oh, I...I..."

"You don't have to say anything back," I rush to say. He's obviously struggling again, and I only want him to be relaxed. "Please, Edward. Deep breaths." He nods, focusing on his breathing. Eyes closed, foreheads still touching. I cup his cheeks and brush my thumbs over the soft skin under his eyes. "Just deep breaths." Another nod. He exhales. "No rushing. It's just us two here," I whisper. "Want a quiet moment?"

"Yes, please, sweetheart," he mumbles.

I smile and blink back tears.

Minutes in silence go by.

I keep touching him gently, soothingly, and my relief is palpable with each steady breath he draws. The fact that I seem to work as a comfort factor

is incredibly heartwarming. I won't ever waste it. I won't jeopardize the trust he has in me.

"I want you to call me love," he admits softly after a while. "But...but how do you know? That you, uh..." He flushes. "That you love me."

31.

~Deep breaths. It's so heavy inside of me. Incomprehensible. It wants out, Coffee Bella~

This is what Emmett meant, I take it. Now Edward's turning to me instead of his brother with his feelings. Well, at least with this topic.

So...the honest truth. "I miss you when you're not around," I begin. "You make me smile a lot. I always feel...warm and...happy, when you're with me. I love talking to you, listening to music with you, making you chai tea... I love seeing your smiles. I have this..." I lick my lips, trying to find my words. "This need. Yeah, a need to make sure you're happy." And... "When we kiss, it feels like there are a million butterflies inside of me. My knees get weak." God, I cannot sound cheesier, but it's the truth, so... "And just now, when I told you that I love you, it felt good. Natural, right, perfect. *Easy*. It made me feel lighter to say it."

He hums quietly, in thought.

Another comfortable silence follows.

He plays with my fingers.

I watch him.

"This is right," he whispers under his breath. "...makes sense..." A smile plays on my lips, and I can tell that I'm not a part of the conversation yet.

It's just him and his thoughts, and he struggles to work it all out. "...the same, easier, light and heavy..."

Looking up from our joined hands, he smiles. "I have to love you, too. It...I..." He exhales. "Feels right," he whispers. "Feels right to say it. It clicks."

I breathe out, I revel, I shiver.

32.

~Your bra strap is in purple lace! It's very sheer~

After our visit at the aquarium, Edward takes me to dinner at a small bistro near Kerry Park. It's quiet and romantic. We hold hands a lot. Smiles. Heads tilted together. Soft murmurs. We've found another bubble to get lost in. A corner booth.

Then he gives me a present. They're pictures – photos he's taken of me, and a few Emmett's taken where Edward's also in the shot. And it's so Edward, because they're developed to look like stamps. Tiny shots of the two of us. Secret smiles, affectionate looks, and often with our foreheads resting together.

After thanking him over and over, we look at the photos together and, in my mind, I'm already displaying the pictures all over my apartment. Some will go on the fridge, a few for my wallet, a couple for the mirror in the hallway...

"I have a gift for you, too," I say, keeping my voice low. "But it's at my place."

"Um, okay, can we go there now, please?"

Oh, he *knows*.

33.

~Faster, slow down, I want more, now, hold up, again, oh fuck!~

It's clear that the gift I have for Edward will have to wait, because as soon as I close the door behind us, he pins me to a wall. This is something he knows. He's instinctual and hungry, but still gentle and sweet.

"No more waiting," he moans pleadingly in between frantic kisses.

I whimper as he cups my breasts. He always goes for them first, and he has...

Gotten. So. Good.

"No more waiting," I agree breathlessly. I tilt my head back, exposing my neck for him. He kisses passionately, wetly, always tasting.

"Bed...bedroom, Edward."

"Yes," he hisses before tugging me along. Away from the narrow hallway, through the quaint living room, past the guest room, into my bedroom. Then we're kissing frantically again, shedding clothes as we stumble toward my bed. This, we know. This, we've done before. Touching, tasting, we know. The first time I put my mouth on him...yeah, that was over fast. That sure was a proud moment for me.

"Beautiful, sexy, gorgeous," he mumbles, kissing his way down my cleavage. "Lace, sheer, purple...off."

Yes. Off.

Panties, too. Be gone. And boxers. Gone.

He whimpers.

Next to the bed, we stand before each other naked.

I wait, because there is one thing I love about Edward's impatience. See, if I don't start touching him, he does it himself. And then he does. His hand goes to his erection, and he moves his hand over it slowly but hard. Hard grip. I lick my lips. I love seeing him, watching him.

"I want...need to be inside of you," he groans. "Inside, sweetheart-Coffee-Bella...please."

I shiver. It's one those violent ones. One that runs through my body as a long, drawn-out event, making me tremble and exhale shakily.

Taking his hand, I guide us to the bed. I lie down, pulling him with me. More shivers. He moans when his cock nestles in between my thighs. I know he can feel my arousal – how wet I am for him, how much I want him.

My fingers get tangled in his hair as we kiss hotly. His hands are everywhere, touching eagerly.

"I'm so hard," he breathes out. Frenzy, frenzy, frenzy, he kisses my collarbones, my chest, down, down, down, until he captures a nipple in his mouth. And he sucks. Hard.

I almost arch off the bed as the pleasure shoots through me.

Two of his fingers graze my slit, making me moan.

"Wet," he mumbles. "So warm and wet..."

I realize there won't be anything slow about tonight.

It's just not possible.

I've come to learn that Edward is an eager learner; he wants to bring me pleasure, and...I don't really want to know where he's gotten the info from, 'cause I'm way too aware of how open Emmett and Edward are with

each other. But that doesn't matter now. I don't want the orgasm Edward can give me with his fingers or tongue. I just want him inside of me. Right now.

"Edward," I breathe out, and then I whimper when he pushes two fingers inside my pussy. "Oh, fuck..." Focus. "Condom, Edward. They're in my nightstand."

"Oh God, right now?" he moans against my breast. "But...what about you? I won't...I won't last..."

I cup his face, bringing him closer. Mouth to mouth. "I need you."

"Okay, I need you, too," he pants quickly, reaching over to the nightstand. Once he's taken one of the foil wrappers, I offer to help him, but he shakes his head. Kneeling between my parted legs, he says, "It's okay. I've practiced."

I crack a huge smile at that, but as fast as the smile appeared, it's gone.

The sight of him rolling on the condom...

Hot fuck.

And then he's there, aligning his body with mine, his cock at my entrance...

"Can I push in now, please?" he breathes out.

"Yes," I moan pleadingly. My nails dig into his shoulder blades, my heels pressing against his ass, and I can't help it. I'm suddenly as needy and desperate as Edward. He just makes me crave, crave, crave- "Fuck, Edward!" I cry out. Oh, he's in, all right!

He freezes. "Are-are-you-"

"I'm okay, love," I moan, and what an understatement! "Please, more."

"Am...oh, God..." He swallows hard and pulls out a few inches. A strained whimper slips through his lips. "Am I supposed to go slow?"

I shake my head and cup his face, peppering it with kisses. "Do what you want, Edward. Make love to me."

"Okay," he grunts, and then thrusts. Hard. "Bella! Oh, Coff- *Bella*, Bella..."

He takes me. I can't call it fucking, though he pushes hard and deep, because his hands, his mouth... There's this need, this raw hunger, in each kiss. The tenderness is hidden behind his impatient needs. It's like he wants it all at the same time – all at once. It's lovemaking like I've never dreamed of. His hands on my stomach, breasts, thighs, ass, they're squeezing and caressing as he moves. And his moans, unrestrained and loud, they tell me how lost he is in the pleasure.

"*Ungh*, sweetheart...I...oh, so much," he groans against my neck. "I feel so much, Bella...everything..."

I keep focus on him. I kiss and touch. I whisper and move with him. All I want is for his first time making love to be as special as it is for me. I want him to take it all.

"You feel so good, love," I whisper breathlessly against his temple. He moans, he slams in again, my breathing hitches, I cry out in pleasure, he follows, jerky thrusts, I know he's close, and he doesn't stop. "That's it, Edward. So amazing." I kiss him. Every spot I can reach. His Adam's apple as he swallows a moan, I kiss it.

After a few more thrusts, he slows down, rocking against me instinctively as he comes.

A strangled noise escapes him, followed by harsh pants.

His weight on me feels incredible.

I can feel his heartbeat pounding furiously against his ribcage.

"Mmm, Bella, Bella sweetheart," he breathes out, shivering violently as I start scratching his scalp. "That was..." I smile and kiss his neck. "There's no word. Sorry."

"It was beyond amazing," I supply in a whisper, and he nods furiously into the crook of my neck. "I love you."

He shivers again. "I love you, Coffee Bella. Can we make love again, please?"

34.

Flipping a few pages...

I'd like to say that everything proceeded naturally after our first night together, but that would be a lie.

Edward was...*is* a man of habit, and breaking a routine isn't easy for him.

A schedule means stability and security in his eyes.

During one of my many coffee breaks with Emmett, he asked me if I felt like I was sacrificing too much. This was back in 2005 when I met Edward and Emmett. The question was innocent. He was simply wondering, though...Emmett is a worrier, so I'm pretty sure there was concern behind the question, too.

My answer was no.

I didn't sacrifice too much.

I sacrificed, but don't we all? At all times, in every relationship...there are sacrifices.

There were the dates – dates that really only came with pizza – there were the quiet moments, the stuttering, the need for reassurance and comfort, the brutal honesty, the anxiety, the tantrums – though, they come few and far between – and all the other things go hand in hand with Edward.

In the three or four months that followed our first night, we began to settle into our new life together. Edward finally met Pops and Grams, and I learned how Edward really acts around strangers. There are curt nods...muttered replies – polite, but short and quiet. Well-rehearsed "Nice to meet you" and "How are you?" There's fidgeting and no eye contact. Around strangers, Edward is also territorial. Definitely not possessive, but he's afraid that I'm going to disappear.

That took a while to get used to.

It was also during these months that Edward expressed his opinions concerning our living arrangements. He told me that he didn't like going a whole day without seeing me. He said that he wanted us to sleep in the same bed every night. And this wasn't about hinting. No subtle words about moving in together. Edward doesn't do that. He doesn't do subtle. In fact, it was whining and complaining about how far away I was. I think he even stomped his foot once.

My heart was ready to ask him to move in.

My brain took caution. My brain urged me to talk to Emmett. So, I did. I also started reading about Edward's disorder. No matter how individual the condition is, I wanted to know more and more. At least, it couldn't hurt.

Flash forward two months. That's when I asked Edward to move into my apartment above Simply Coffee.

He was ecstatic. So was I.

But thank God for Emmett, is all I'm saying. Still, to this day, I can honestly say that Emmett was a much needed crutch for that transition in our life. Because living with Edward sure wasn't easy in the beginning. It was time to break a few habits. Simple things as settling into a new morning routine, or driving two extra blocks to get to and from work, or making time to meet Emmett, or finding a laundry detergent we both liked...yeah, not all that simple. It took time, but we had Emmett. Still do, of course, but back then...well, I can snicker and laugh to myself now. Back then? Not so much. I was so afraid of stepping on Edward's toes, basically causing him anxiety, and...at the same time, he was afraid of annoying me to the point where I gave up on him.

I could go on and on, but it doesn't matter. We made it, because the good stuff outweighed the bad. He still so incredibly affectionate and sweet. Still soft-spoken and tender. Always honest. Always appreciative. Always trying.

He's simply Edward, and I love him with everything I am.

Having what I have today, I can't say that I had *everything* back then, but life sure was pretty damn perfect for me anyway. Living with my boyfriend, spending my nights with him, teaching him how to make chai tea, cooking dinner on the stove in our quaint kitchen while he sat at the table as we talked about our day, finding music together, dragging him outta bed each morning – he's not a morning person, by the way – eating breakfast in the living room so that he could watch the morning news before work...

Routines. Memories. Compromises. Smiles. Good stuff. Bad stuff.

Solidness.

In 2007, the foundation of our relationship was perfected. We'd been together for a little over two years, and we worked together like a well-oiled machine. There were routines and habits, but it never got old. I was happier than ever before, and I still found myself falling for Edward. It was the small things that aren't really small when you think about it. I'd say it's the little things that matter most. Like how ecstatic he was when he found a new stamp he'd been looking for, or how he often smiled into a kiss. These things haven't changed, but let's stick to 2007 for a while.

Things were going great. We woke up together, ate breakfast, he went off to work, I went downstairs for work... Sometimes we had dinner with my grandparents, who Edward was trusting more by that time. He wasn't blissed out or serene, but still comfortable enough. Same went for when we met up with Jasper, Peter, and Angela. He stayed quiet mostly, but I often caught smiles playing on his lips, silently telling me that he was paying attention, not to mention that he wasn't miserable.

It was early spring, and I'm only bringing up this time because it triggered something that led to what I have today. A hurdle, if you will, that was a blessing in disguise. It was painful to go through, but it gave us more in the end.

I don't remember what day it was, only that Edward had an appointment with his dentist about his nightly teeth-grinding problem. Well, it was more my problem than his, but...ya know. Anyway, that's why he wasn't at home when Emmett pounded on our door...

I open the door, confused when I see Em. "Hey." I frown, 'cause I'm *sure* Edward called him and rescheduled their...man-date, as I like to call it. Or bro-time, whatever. "Didn't Edward call you?"

"Yeah," he replies, rubbing the back of his head. He looks distraught, I realize. "Um, I know he's at the dentist's. But I'm here to see you."

"Oh?" I utter, opening the door wider. "Well, come on in. I'm covering for Jazz in an hour, though..."

"This won't take long," he says quickly, entering the apartment. "I just need to give you a heads up."

I head for the kitchen and he follows. "For what?" I ask. Automatically, I load the coffeemaker.

"You know that our dad calls every now and then, yeah?"

I snort, too aware of Emmett and Edward's family. I've heard it all now. Sometimes, a few times a year, Carlisle Cullen tries to contact Emmett over the phone. Em picks up because he'd go insane with thoughts of "what if something's wrong" if he didn't. But it's always about Carlisle trying to make the brothers move back to Chicago, which leads to heated arguments, refusals, and – on Emmett's part – threats about restraining orders. The latter has been the reason they've stayed away from Emmett and Edward so far. And we don't keep this from Edward, 'cause he knows when something's wrong.

"Did Carlisle contact you?" I guess, joining him at the kitchen table.

For a small moment, there's just the sound of the coffeemaker, but then he sighs. Heavily. And nods with a dip of his chin. Fuck. "There's more than that, though." He scrubs his hands over his face. "He called me two hours ago and told me he's at the airport. Here in Seattle."

35.

~Okay, you can come with me to the dentist next time, sweetheart. Don't like this. Ugh!~

As far as I know, Carlisle is a doormat. Esme runs it all and Carlisle stays silent. So, when Emmett tells me that his dad is here without Esme's knowledge, I'm in disbelief.

"He said that he just wants to meet us," Emmett sighs.

I sit quietly for a while, mostly thinking about the effect this will have on Edward. Because the times when Carlisle has called, it has taken a day or two for Edward to return to normal. It's always the same process. At first, he becomes introverted. He closes himself in for a while, only to grow angry next. Stuttered curses, frantic hand gestures, and stomping feet. He tends to pull at his own hair when he's angry. And then, after a long fucking day, I usually manage to calm him down.

"Do *you* want to meet him?" I ask quietly, imploringly, as I pull up my knees to rest my chin on them. "Do you really think he 'just' wants to meet you?"

He sighs again, offering a one-shouldered shrug. "I can't know for sure."

I hate seeing Edward in pain, but seeing Emmett in pain isn't much easier. He's carried this weight for so long, always being the one to take charge and make decisions. Now he's conflicted and torn. It's his parents, for chrissakes. Hating them takes energy. You're supposed to have your parents' support. You shouldn't have to push them away. But Emmett did. For Edward's sake. And he grew up too quickly, all for his little brother's welfare.

I chew on my lip, hesitating, but...no, it's for the best, I decide. "Edward's going to work after his appointment," I state quietly, which is more of a reminder since he knows this already. "We have a few hours before he comes home."

Emmett looks at me, uncertain.

And I continue. "Edward's going to find out, regardless." He nods. "And I don't want him to meet with Carlisle without knowing for sure..." I trail off, sighing. "So, my suggestion is that you see your dad first. Like, right now. Or, if you want...I can go with you." I smile at the obvious relief in Emmett's features. "And then we can tell Edward when he comes home."

"Thanks, Bella." He exhales. "Really, thank you."

36.

~Yes! Yes! Yes! We're gonna make love tonight, too~

"Do they know *anything* about your lives?" I ask as Emmett drives. "I mean, do they know about your jobs, where you live, *me*...?" I trail off. My phone vibrates in my pocket, so I say "Hang on," to Emmett before he can answer my original questions.

Done at the dentist. Did not like it. Not at all. Off to work now. Can we make love tonight, please? – Edward.

I snicker to myself and reply.

Sorry that you didn't like the dentist, love. And yes, we can make love tonight. ~Bella.

Spontaneity isn't Edward's thing. He likes to make plans, and this includes having sex.

Okay! I love you, sweetheart! – Edward.

I'm *beaming*, and he *so* gonna get lucky before I bring up his family tonight.

I love you, too, Edward. ~Bella

"Even after two years with my little brother, you're blushing," Emmett chuckles, bursting my little bubble. "Now, quit sexting with him, all right?"

"I didn't-" I sigh, stopping myself. It's not worth it. "Answer my questions instead."

He laughs quietly, but my cocked bitch-brow shuts him up. "Fine." He clears his throat. "The answer to all your questions is no. They don't know anything. Pretty much just my phone number."

I let that sink in for a while.

But then I'm out of time, 'cause we're here, outside the hotel Carlisle's staying at.

"I'm just gonna call him again and say that we're here," he mutters.

37.

~Three hours to go, three hours~

I'm used to silence, but there's a difference between this one and the one I usually share with Edward.

This one is far from comfortable.

The silence I share with Emmett, right here in the elevator, is heavy.

He wants to find redeeming qualities in his family members, and who can fault him for that?

Ding!

The opening of the doors almost startles me. Chancing a glance at Emmett, I steel myself. Unsurprisingly, he looks both pained and angry.

"I'm here for you," I say softly, words I often use on Edward. Words that have a calming affect on my boyfriend. On Emmett...not enough. He nods in thanks, taking a deep breath, and then we're walking toward Suite 754.

Once we reach the door, Em knocks quickly.

I can't help but feel furious. There's a mama bear in me, and I swear on all that is holy...if Carlisle says the wrong thing, I will explode. The shit he's currently putting Emmett through...the pain they inflict on *both* of the Cullen boys...

The door flings open, and I find myself staring at someone who can't possibly be Carlisle.

'Cause it's a woman.

Emmett stiffens.

38.

~Coffee Bella, sweetheart, you are not answering my calls~

"Emmett!" the woman exclaims, throwing herself at the rigid man next to me. Now, I've never seen photos of their family, but the woman is young – too young to be Emmett's mother. So, I presume this is Alice...unless there are other family members lurking around. "Oh, how I've missed you, big brother!"

The feeling is not mutual. Emmett's radiating anger. The quiet kind. And he's not returning the hug. His hands are balled into tight fists along his thighs, and I have the strongest urge to kick the woman for making Emmett this uncomfortable.

"Alice," Em grits out quietly, politely stepping out of the hug. "What the..." He takes a deep breath, and I can see him restraining himself. Or trying to. "What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

I take a deep breath, too, automatically moving closer to Emmett.

Alice flinches, but recovers quickly. A smile is soon plastered on her face, and that's when an older man joins us. Carlisle, I believe. Mr. Cullen.

"You told me that it was just you here," Em says accusingly, narrowing his eyes at his father.

"Please, son," Mr. Cullen cautions. "We haven't seen you in *eight* years. Why don't you come in and..." He spots me then. "A friend of yours, Emmett?"

Em ignores Mr. Cullen's question. "We'll come in. But only if Mom isn't here."

"She's not," the woman, Alice, says quickly. "We promise, but..." She pokes her head out the door, checking the hall. "Where's Edward?"

"At work," Em replies flatly, and Mr. Cullen's eyes bug out.

Alice has a similar reaction. "*Work?*" she asks in disbelief.

And I frown in confusion.

What's so fucking weird about Edward being at work?

"You heard what I said," Emmett chuckles mirthlessly. "Anyway, let's get this over with."

39.

~You always answer the phone, Coffee Bella. Always, always, not now, always, but not now~

"I think introductions are in order...?" Mr. Cullen looks questioningly at Emmett as we all sit down in the living room area of their suite. Emmett and I sit on one couch, and the other two are seated across the coffee table in two plush chairs. Alice's eyes flick between Emmett and me as if she's trying to figure something out.

"Bella, this is my dad and my sister – Carlisle and Alice," Emmett says...only humoring Mr. Cullen, it seems. "Dad, Alice, this is Bella." Then he smiles. Or smirks, rather. "Edward's girlfriend."

"G-g-girlfriend," Alice splutters. My eyebrows rise up slowly. "Edward has a *girlfriend*?" She barks out a laugh. "First a job and now a girlfriend! Priceless!"

Aaand there's the anger again.

"Alice," Mr. Cullen sighs tiredly. "Please."

Emmett just shakes his head, eyes on the floor, elbows on his knees.

"You're *kidding* me, right?" Alice chuckles.

Fuck this. "Excuse you, but you better shut up before someone does it for you."

"Don't even bother, Bella," Emmett mutters, looking exhausted. "This is how my sister's always been." Well, that's just fucked up. Turning to Mr. Cullen, he continues. "You have two minutes before we're outta here."

Alice scoffs, but says nothing.

"I want my family together again," Mr. Cullen says bluntly. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"Yes," Em returns in the same blunt tone. "And it's not gonna happen. Edward and I have everything we want right here in Seattle. We're not going *anywhere*."

"What Edward needs is-"

"Don't even start!" I snap, cutting Alice off. "You don't know *anything* about Edward's needs."

She glares at me. "Look, I don't know you, but Edward is my *brother*, and he needs to come home with-"

"Stop it!" Emmett shouts at her, shooting up from the couch. "Just shut the fuck up, Alice!"

"Emmett." I stand up and place a hand on his arm.

Alice and Emmett glare at each other, basically holding a staring- well, *glaring* contest.

"Are you really Edward's girlfriend?" Mr. Cullen asks me quietly, and Alice scoffs...*again*.

She's really out on thin ice, I gotta say.

"There's no way," she says indignantly. "Maybe she's his caretaker, but girlfriend? Please."

"You did *not* just say that!" I seethe. Never in my entire life have I been in a fight. I'm not a violent person, but this... How *dare* she?

It's not until Emmett's grabbing me by the shoulders that I realize I was on my way to actually charge at her.

40.

~Bella, Bella, please pick up the phone. Worry, worry, please, please~

"Bella, calm down," Emmett murmurs in my ear. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking coming here." I breathe heavily, still envisioning my fingers around Alice's throat. "Just relax, all right? We're leaving."

"Please don't," Mr. Cullen says, getting up from his chair. "I apologize, but please don't leave yet. I want to know how you are. I...I miss my sons."

I roll my eyes and Emmett shakes his head.

"All you need to know is that we're happy here," he tells him, grabbing my hand so that we can leave. "That's what matters to *us*, Dad." I focus on my breathing as we head to the door. "You just want the entire family to be together. That's your priority. Our priority is happiness."

"Emmett, be real here!" Alice snaps.

I turn around again, ready to insert my fist into her mouth, but Emmett's grip on my hand is too hard.

"Let me-" I grunt in effort, trying to break free from Emmett.

But he's a big dude.

"No can do, Bella," he mutters, and then he hurries to usher me out the door. "Goodbye, Dad. I'm changing my number, so this is it."

He ignores Mr. Cullen's pleas.

I huff as we get closer to the elevator. "You can let me go now, you know."

"I'm sure," he drawls, surprising me with a tiny smile. "Can't wait to tell Jeff about this."

I gasp. "You're *not* gonna spill to Pops!"

"Oh, but I am."

With that said, he ushers me into the elevator.

"I think I'm gonna call you Badass Bella from now on."

I huff again.

41.

~Red light, red light, red light, yellow, yellow, green!~

"Oh, shit," I mutter, bucking my seatbelt. Apparently, I forgot my phone in Em's car. As he starts the engine, I check to see if I have any missed-
"Oh, *shit*," I repeat.

Twenty-seven missed calls and six texts.

Would you like pizza tonight? I can buy it on my way home – Edward.

Are you busy? I love you – Edward.

Let me know if you want pizza, please? – Edward.

Please text message me or call me, sweetheart – Edward.

I'm worried. You always answer. Please let me know – Edward.

Have I upset you? I'm so sorry. Please, please call me. I love you – Edward.

"Fuck," I breathe out and my eyes well up.

He gets worried so easily. God, I'm so stupid!

"What's wrong?" Emmett asks.

"Edward's called," I say thickly, dialing his number. I chew on my lip, nervous and feeling like a horrible girlfriend. "Pick up, pick up," I whisper.

But he doesn't.

I text him and call him, but without reply. When we get back to the apartment, I even call Edward's boss, and I find out that Edward left early, stating that he had an emergency. Oh, God...

I'm officially freaking out.

"He doesn't pick up, Em," I whimper, pacing in the kitchen.

I call again and again. *Please, love...*

"He's probably on his way home," he tries to reason with me. "And you know that he doesn't answer his phone when he's driving."

I know, but...

"Relax, Bella," he adds softly. "He'll understand, you know that."

"This is still my fault," I argue. "Had I not left my phone in your car-"

"But you did, and as soon as he comes home, you'll work it out." He smiles ruefully. "You can't protect him from everything, remember? And this is easily fixable. Hell, it's nothing compared to our dad and sister being in town."

Yeah, that's not exactly making me feel better.

Before I can respond, though, I hear the door being slammed open.

Edward!

42.

~Right again, right again. You love me, I love you, you love me, never stopped~

As I run the short distance between the kitchen and the hallway, I get my words in order. I'm ready. I know what he needs. Answers. Right away. Answers even before the questions are out. He will be distraught and incredibly frightened.

I almost tumble into him when I round the last corner.

"Edward!" I gasp. I throw my arms around him, and he makes a choking sound as he crushes me to his body. He's already trying to speak, already trying to figure out what he's done wrong, which is nothing. "I'm so, so sorry, love," I breathe out. I refuse to cry. I just need to get the words out. So, I cup his face, forcing him to look me in the eye. "You did *nothing* wrong, Edward," I start by saying. My voice is quiet but strong. "I accidentally left my phone in Emmett's car, and I missed your calls."

He whimpers, breathing heavily. "No...no an-answer... I-I called y-you..."

"I know, and I'm so sorry," I choke out. Forehead to forehead – he needs contact. Hell, so do I. "I didn't mean to make you worried, love."

"Coffee Bella," he utters in a small, strangled moan, and it kills me. He only calls me Coffee Bella when he's extremely upset. I've been "Bella" and "sweetheart" for so long now.

"I'm here, Edward," I whisper thickly, starting to pepper his face with soft kisses. "I love you so much. You did nothing wrong. Nothing to upset me. I just forgot my phone." He gulps and nods quickly. "Deep breaths, okay?" He nods again. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I love you."

When he buries his face in the crook of my neck, I keep whispering to him. I apologize, I tell him I love him, I reassure him. And after a few moments, we lower ourselves to the floor where he leans back against a wall and I straddle him. He holds me painfully hard, but I know he needs it.

He breathes.

"Coffee-Coffee Bella, sweetheart," he mumbles against my neck. I feel his soft lips moving over my skin as he calms down. "Only forgot your phone..."

"That's right, love," I murmur, threading my fingers through his hair. He shivers beneath me. "I wasn't upset with you. I only forgot it."

He nods slowly and releases a shuddering breath.

"Want a quiet moment?" I whisper, already knowing the answer.

"Yes, please," he breathes out.

And then we're quiet for a while.

43.

~Coffee Bella, sweetheart, my girlfriend, I have you, I love you, I have you~

Hours later, Edward and I are cuddled up on our couch, a blanket covering us, and Emmett sits in the chair. We tell Edward about our day, about meeting Mr. Cullen and Alice and, as expected, Edward goes rigid. He locks me in place on his lap, like he's afraid I'm going somewhere. Emmett does most of the talking, and I do my best, providing comfort with gentle touches.

It takes hours, and Edward acts like he always does when his parents and his sister are involved. He closes in on himself. Eyes squeezed shut, muscles tensed. And Emmett and I struggle to coax him out of it...which leads to his stage of anger, and that's when I move off his lap.

"They-they were wrong," he grits out quietly, pacing in front of the coffee table. "*Not* a fucking child – can handle, live, work myself. I can work." I

can feel my own anger surging through me, but adding to the fire won't help. Instead, Emmett and I agree with Edward in murmurs and soft words. "Don't *want* them here, *no*." He shakes his head furiously, still pacing. "Why do they not like it when I'm h-happy?" And the anger drains out of him. He becomes sad, and I take the hint to bring him to the couch again. Emmett and I tell him that all people are different, and that we all function in our own ways. Different priorities...different views on right and wrong.

We don't talk shit about the Cullens, because we're not vicious people. But we do make it clear to Edward that we're on his side, that he will always have our support, and the most important thing to *us*...is being happy.

Internally, I want to throttle their so-called family, but I don't say that crap out loud. Emmett's the same. He still feels bitter and angry, but they're not emotions we want project onto Edward.

We just need and want to move on from this.

And when Edward asks me, another few hours later when Emmett's gone home, if we can make love now, I know that he's ready to put this day behind him, too.

We take our time.

Unhurried kisses and touches.

Hands roaming.

Soft moans and shallow whispers.

And then, after we've been sated...*for now*...we go through our nightly routine together. We shower, we brush our teeth, we return to bed. He's on his stomach, one of his albums of stamps displayed on his pillow. I

read, my back against the headboard. Occasional touches and sideways smiles.

I know – after a day like this one – that he will be a bit somber tomorrow, in need of extra touches and reassurance, but I don't mind. I love giving him what he wants to be happy.

We bounce back.

44.

~This is not right! She's not supposed to be at Simply Coffee! Not right!~

"Here you go, love," I say, smiling as I slide a chai tea over the counter to him. "And you know the price." I grin cheekily and lean toward him.

I ignore Pops' snickering in the background.

"I do know, yes," Edward chuckles, also leaning closer. He kisses me softly. Three kisses. "Mmm."

"All right, maybe it's time for me to go home," Pops huffs, scowling playfully. He just wants me to be happy.

It's still one of my favorite hours of the day. The hour before I close the coffee shop. It's when I sit by the counter and read, while Edward sits in the loveseat in the corner, a small laptop in his lap. Either he checks for recipes, knowing that I like to try new things for dinner, or he's checking for stamps. I know that he's still trying to find Christmas stamps from Luxembourg and Andorra, but he's mainly focusing on his new collection – stamps from Africa, and they have to have animals on them.

"I'll see you two tomorrow, right?" Pops asks, putting on his jacket.

Edward nods quickly before walking toward the loveseat.

"Yes, dinner at seven," I reply with a nod. "Jazz is covering my shift."

After saying goodbye to Pops, we're quiet. The occasional customer enters, of course, but other than that, there's just the sound of flipping pages and clicking keys.

Until it's not.

The bell chimes, making me look up from my book, and...

"Motherfucker," I spit out quickly.

Chancing a peek at Edward, I see his wide eyes...

Fixed on his sister.

45.

~Please stop, please stop, please stop, please stop~

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing here?" I ask angrily, and Edward hurries across the coffee shop to stay close to me. I don't hesitate to push the button under the register. Jared or Jacob, depending on who has the night shift at Black Security, should be here within five minutes. "And how did you *find* us?" I add incredulously.

Alice sneers, still standing by the door. "I followed you and Emmett yesterday, and after Dad went back to Chicago today, I decided to pay you a visit."

Bitch! "Well, you have five minutes before security gets here," I snap, turning my back on her. I focus on Edward, who stands rigidly, trying to breathe. "She'll be gone soon, love," I murmur soothingly as I cup his face. "Just focus on breathing, okay?" He nods quickly and squeezes his eyes shut.

"How fucking cute," Alice huffs. *Don't kill her, Bella. Don't kill her, Bella. That means prison.* "You make a lovely couple. Even Dad is fooled. He returned to Chicago today believing that Edward is actually functioning. But I know better. You're his fucking caretaker."

"Don't listen to her," I tell Edward. "She's wrong."

His pained look is just as painful for me, and... *Don't kill the bitch, don't kill the bitch, don't kill the bitch.*

The sounds of clicking heels make Edward's eyes flash open, and I know what's coming next.

"Don't!" he shouts. "No, no, don't come here!"

Fighting anxiety, he's still territorial of me.

"Edward," Alice says in a sickeningly sweet voice. "This isn't right. You belong with your family back in Chicago. Not here. Now, I called Mom, and she can't wait for you to come home-"

"Shut the fuck up, Alice!" I seethe, glaring at her over my shoulder. "I swear to God, you better shut the fuck up."

"Oh, come on!" she cries out. "You cannot be serious with this! You are *not* what he needs, and *he...he* can't give *you* normal!"

She's delusional, I'm sure of it.

With my hands on Edward's shoulders, I can feel him trembling.

"I don't know what the *fuck* you're talking about." I take a deep breath, reining in the fury. "But Edward is who I want and need."

She scoffs and I turn to press my back against Edward's chest, keeping him close behind me. "He can give you what you *want*?" she chuckles

humorlessly. "I don't think so, Bella. I mean, look at him! He can barely speak! If he can't do that, then how on earth can he be your *boyfriend*?" She sneers. I'm ready to kill her now. I swear. "You won't ever get married, you won't ever have children... Hell, can he even take you on a *date*? 'Cause as far as I know, he can't go out in public!" She takes a breath. "No, what he needs is to come home so that we can take care of him-"

"ENOUGH!" I scream.

46.

~Make the pain go away, please. Think, think, think, breathe, no words~

Just as I'm about to charge at Alice, Jacob Black barges in, and I breathe out in relief.

"Get her skanky ass out of here," I tell him, a bit out of breath, and point at Alice. "And, Alice? You can count on a restraining order."

It's a promise.

"Take your hands off of me," she spits out, glaring at Jacob. "This is ridiculous."

"I expect answers later, Bella," Jake says, and I nod in thanks and agreement as he ushers Alice out.

When it's just Edward and me left, I rush over to lock the door before returning to my trembling boyfriend. I manage to lower us to the floor, right there behind the counter, and I know that I have a long night ahead of me.

"Breathe, Edward," I whisper, straddling him. I will break down later. Not now, not yet. "I love you. I'm here for you." I kiss him on the forehead,

his cheeks, the top of his head, and his fingers dig into my hips. "She was so wrong. She doesn't know the real you. She doesn't know how strong you are."

His chest heaves. He lets out strained, quiet moans. He struggles.

"But *I* know you, Edward," I continue quietly, imploringly, forehead against forehead. "I know how hard you work, I know what a loving boyfriend you are, I know what a perfect brother you are."

It pisses me off that his family can do this to him with just a few words.

Days and weeks can go by where I hardly notice his disorder, but one little visit from his father and sister and he just crumbles. What Alice said was true; he barely spoke before. Emmett has told me as much. But that was because Edward didn't feel safe. His old reality contained drugs, group sessions, ignorance, and pressure. Only Emmett had faith in him.

He has the opposite here. Here, he's listened to. Here, he feels safe. Here, he is an adult *treated* like an adult.

"Do you hear what I'm saying, love?" I ask softly, brushing a piece of hair from his forehead.

"Yes," he breathes out quickly. "You love me."

I smile and kiss his cheek. "I love you so much."

He swallows hard. "Alice is wrong?"

"Yes," I say fervently. "You *know* she's wrong."

47.

Flipping a few more pages...

Edward did know that Alice was wrong, but her visit triggered a few things in him. Her hateful words made him ask me if I really had everything I wanted. He doubted himself something fierce, and it took so, so long to make him realize that he was the one who made me so happy.

Being the perceptive man that he is, he knows that I love him. He knew even then – he felt it. But since he's always been in need of assurance and solidness, he started thinking further ahead. He wanted to know what I wanted for my – *our* – future. He wanted to prepare himself so that he could be the best man for me.

Marriage.

Children.

Did I want that?

Edward was worried that Alice was right when it came to marriage and children. He didn't know if he could give me that, especially since Asperger's can be genetic. Many cases are. And Edward was afraid that if our child had Asperger's, I would grow to resent him...or even both of them. He also feared that he wouldn't be a good parent. Last but not least, he was scared shitless that he'd fail to bond with a child of ours.

I've never been able to lie to Edward. He sees right through me. So, I had to be honest with him. Then, there, back in 2007, I had to tell him that growing up, I always saw myself having children. Marriage to me wasn't *that* important, but to have a child...

It was different with Edward, though.

I can admit that had Edward not broached the subject – thanks to Alice's visit to Simply Coffee – I probably wouldn't have brought it up. Ever. I just didn't want Edward to feel bad, I guess. And it wasn't like I'd be miserable without children. Edward was my number one, after all.

But the topic was brought up, and I gave Edward my honest answers.

He asked for time. Time to research, time to think, time to be honest with himself.

We talked a lot. Pros and cons. What ifs. Risks and fears. Strengths and weaknesses. Responsibilities and abilities.

Emmett was very involved, too. As were my grandparents. They let us know over and over that we had their support.

I never pressured Edward, but I knew he could see the hope in my eyes.

I couldn't help it.

And one day, about six months later, he gave me one of his smiles and threw out our condoms.

Our little William was born in May of 2009.

48.

2012

~This is right~

I hand back the change from the ten-dollar bill and return the customer's smile. "Have a good weekend," I say before he leaves. Then it's the next patron. "Hi, what can I get you?" Polite smiles and all that.

It's amazing how much I can do without actually focusing on the task.

'Cause my attention is definitely directed at the two Cullens in the corner of the coffee shop. It's an hour before closing time, and family and friends are soon showing up for a Friday night of board games and Chinese food. Emmett's bringing the food, and I sincerely hope he won't forget my eggrolls this time. 'Cause I want them. Ya know?

One latte and one black coffee later, the place is empty again, so I walk over to Edward and William.

Our son, who is Edward's Mini-Me, is seated on Edward's lap. It's a familiar sight. Their foreheads are gently pressed together, eyes are closed, and Will's hands are splayed on Edward's cheeks. Yeah, common sight. But so incredibly beautiful.

"Having a quiet moment?" I ask softly, sitting down next to my boyfriend-Well, fiancé now, actually. No rush, though.

"Yeah," Edward whispers, and William's eyes open. He gives me a quick smile and reaches out to take my hand, and then he closes his eyes again. One hand on his daddy's cheek, and one hand holding mine.

I revel in the comfortable silence, using the moment to watch my two favorite boys in the world.

It's hard to believe that William will turn three come May.

49.

~You two give me warmth and smiles~

Edward shouldn't have worried about bonding with his son, 'cause they're each other's world.

There was a really tough period we lived through before William turned one, and it was a good thing that we had family and friends to help us, 'cause I wouldn't have been able to get through it alone. William had colic, and his cries nearly caused Edward anxiety attacks. That's how Edward functions. If William and I are in any harm, he panics. It didn't matter how many times I explained to him that colic was common and what colic actually was. As soon as Will started screaming, Edward got anxious and found it difficult to function.

It wasn't easy for me, that's for sure. First I had to calm William down, and then I had to calm Edward down.

Thankfully, Grams and Emmett were there to calm *me* down.

To my surprise, though, Edward *didn't* freak out when we started noticing different things in William's behavior that were similar to how Edward had acted at the same age. Things that Emmett had told us, things that we had read about, things that Edward even remembered. No, he didn't freak out, because he knew that William owned us both from the second he was born. "This is right," he'd whispered when he held our son for the first time. "It clicks." And it did. The three of us click.

For us...it's just simple.

Maybe it's because we don't have high demands. We don't want much. Just what we have. We want the old apartment above Simply Coffee, we want peace and quiet, we want solidness and simplicity. Warmth, security, comfort, love. And I'm not trying to romanticize anything. There are tantrums, anxiety, and so many worries. There are days where I wanna bang my head against a wall, and there are days where I just wanna cry. But, see, I'm not just here for Edward. He's here for me, too. He's sweet and so loving, and he can comfort me like no other. As long as he is in an environment he loves, there's not much he can't do.

"Mommy, you are also in quiet moment," William whispers, bringing me back to the present. I smile and lean forward to kiss his cheek, which makes his green eyes smile. He looks so much like Edward, it's scary. Same hair, same face...eyes, hair, mouth...*personality*.

His vocabulary is amazing, but he doesn't like to talk with people he's not comfortable with. Emmett, Pops and Grams, my friend Angela...these are people he can tolerate just fine. But he prefers Edward and me, without a doubt. Though, his quiet moments are preferably shared with his father. I

don't mind, 'cause I'm the one William turns to when it comes to his passion – painting. Watercolors. His room is full of pictures. Intricate patterns.

"The quiet is good, isn't it?" I chuckle softly. "Especially before Uncle Emmett and Pops come."

He nods solemnly. "Pops laughs loudly."

Edward snickers and drops a kiss on Will's forehead. "So true, son."

50.

~This is right, too, but only on Fridays~

When Emmett, my grandparents, Angela and her boyfriend, Peter and Jasper show up a few moments later, Edward and I stay put with William. This loveseat in the corner belongs to us, and the others push tables and chairs together before joining us. There aren't many hugs, but the greetings are warm, nonetheless. William crawls over to my lap, 'cause he likes it when we share plates. An abundance of Chinese food is unpacked, including my eggrolls – good job, Em – and we don't waste time before digging in.

Peter and Emmett are the first to raise their beers, cheering for Happy Friday.

"Eggroll, sweetie?" I ask Will, and he nods in the crook of my neck.

"No burning sauce, please," he mumbles.

Edward and I exchange matching grins at that. It's no secret that Edward and William don't like spicy food. They say it burns them, and they have Grams and Jazz on their side, too.

"Promise," I chuckle quietly. "Mild sauce coming up."

Even though the chatter around us is loud at times, Edward and I manage to stay in our little bubble. We talk with everyone, of course, but every now and then we sit back and just listen.

"I love you," Edward whispers against my temple.

I tilt my head up and kiss him on the lips. "I love you, too."

"Another eggroll, please," William says, grabbing my face. I laugh and accept the napkin from Grams to wipe away the mild sauce from my cheeks. When I'm done, I reach for another eggroll for Will, but he starts squirming. Which means... "Ooh, Daddy, I have to pee!"

Exactly. And I'm not allowed to help him. I'm only allowed to bathe him.

"All right. Let's go, little buddy," Edward responds, standing up.

I chuckle, watching as Edward disappears with William behind the counter. Just another thing with William, he has to use the bathroom in our apartment. The toilet for employees at Simply Coffee isn't good enough for him.

"He's so cute," Grams sighs softly. "You're all lucky to have each other."

I know.

I have everything I could ever want.

If a stranger walked outside and looked through the window, he or she would see simplicity. Nothing special, perhaps. Well, it's special for us, but...yeah. Regardless, it's all we want.

It's simply us.

The End