

## **1. In which a battle is won**

Let me tell you something about myself. My name is Edward Cullen. I'm twenty-six years old, a little on the tall side, and I have ridiculously messy hair. I try to keep it tamed, but every strand stands tall and proud, each in its own direction, each giving me and my "extra firm hold" gel the big fat fucking finger every time I try.

I work in a marketing agency, in the "Interactive" department. That means we do webbie stuff. You know, web sites, landing pages, emails, banners, Flash demos, whatever. I'm a coder, a.k.a "geek". The *new* definition of "geek", that is - not the "bites heads off chickens at the carnival" definition.

Now let me tell you something about battles. Sometimes you engage in battles that you know. You suit up, arm up, and get the fuck out there. You either kill, or you are killed. You either win or lose. But sometimes in life, you engage in a battle before you're even aware you're in it.

This is the story of my battle of the latter variety. It was a battle that I began waging long before I was aware of it. A battle to win the woman of my dreams. The woman who, as I look at her now sleeping beside me, is part of every breath, every thought, every action I take. The woman who is so amazingly perfect for me, I cannot imagine for one moment my soul being complete without her.

As they say, all is fair in love and war. In this war, not much was fair. But this dear readers, is a war I *won*. That's the good news.

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### **Geek Love Chapter 1: In Which a Battle is Won**

The explosion to my right sent me flying to the floor. Bullet after bullet whizzed past my head, ringing as they struck the precious things around me. It was a fucking *automatic*. Dammit! I thought I had the only one.

My plush oversized microbes were the first collateral damage, one flying from its huge petri dish, landing with a splash in the beta's bowl. The poor fish was confused—and rightly so—as it was attacked by a Microbe of Unusual Size. The onslaught continued, and I seethed to see Brainiac the Remote Controlled Zombie fall. He had put up a worthy defense, but ultimately was only as good as the man controlling him. That man—me—was currently playing Cowardly-fucking-Lion, hiding under my desk. Still the missiles rained down, taking good soldiers at every turn. Boxing Nun fell next, taking Jesus Bobblehead with her. Half-Dead Potted Plant was the last to fall, suffering a mortal blow as the desiccated soil spilled from its overturned pot.

*Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ how long is the ammo belt on that thing?*

Suddenly I felt something warm and disturbingly wet dripping down the back of my neck. Looking up I saw it was coffee. Drip after drip was playing lemming on the edge of my work station.

Son of a bitch! There was coffee all over the schema I had been working on. That was my only copy. Now I have to go talk to the asshat hipster kids in the Creative department in order to get another one. Ugh.

Right now though, I had bigger things to worry about. Like the twatwaffle who shot at me. *She was going to pay.*

Looking around at the damage, I saw the Nerf dart soaking in the pool of brown liquid around my overturned coffee cup, ironically drowning in its own victim. Anger wrapped its ugly fingers around my heart. That right there is unadulterated sacrilege. You don't fuck with my coffee. Grabbing my own Vulcan Automatic Nerf blaster—stashed handily under my desk for just such occasions—I channeled my inner ninja and crept stealthily along the inner sanctum of my cube.

*Bitch. Must. Die.* Or at least be slightly bruised by the Nerfageddon I was about to unleash on her. Peeking around the corner I saw nothing. She must be hiding behind the half-wall of her cube.

Coward.

Crouching lower, making sure my back and head were well below the top of the low filing cabinets, I crept along the wall towards the next set of cubicles. Rounding the final corner, still crouched, I raised my weapon in anticipation of the hell-fire of terror I was about to unleash, when—

"Cullen! What the heck are you doing down there, man? I've been looking every where for you. We need you in a status call with the client. They're really hot to trot on this new interactive project and we need someone to speak geek to their geeks."

Holy poop on a stick, it was Mike Newton—Project Lead and King Asshat. I sighed, not bothering to disguise it and got to my feet, waiting for the gloating that was sure to come. As I rose, a dark slender figure stood on the other side of the half-wall. Hood pulled up, dark hair peeking out, she gave me the exact shit-eating grin I feared seeing.

"You're learning well, padawan. But not well enough," Bella's voice was quiet but had an unmistakable ring of victory.

I had nothing. She owned me this time. Who am I kidding, she owned me always. But just this once I might have had a chance had Mike "Fucktard" Newton not called me out.

"Coming, Cullen? We're meeting in McD's."

All of our conference rooms had been named for fast food chains. McD's was one of the biggest, with nasty-ass yellow walls. I think the color was supposed to be "Golden Arches", but it turned out more "Baby-shit Mustard".

"Yeah Mike, I'll be there in a minute. Let me just get my notebook."

Mike scurried down the hallway, his loafers squeaking on the polished cement floors as he went. Turning, I spoke quietly, giving my words a solemnity appropriate to the occasion.

"You killed my Microbes of Unusual Size"

"No I didn't Edward, they're only *mostly* dead."

She reached in her hoodie pocket, handing me a fuzzified almond M&M.

"The chocolate coating makes it go down easier."

She offered the candy, clearly intended as a "miracle pill", to revive my Microbe of Unusual Size. She was truly a strange girl. I took it, holding back my comment on M&Ms being *candy*-coated, not *chocolate*-coated. You don't fuck with a movie quote, even if slightly misused. It's just rude. Walking back to my desk, I put my Vulcan Automatic Nerf blaster down, frowning at the mess.

"I'll reprint the schema for you, Edward. Sorry about that."

She sounded genuinely penitent. It wasn't necessary—I would have fucked her up the same way if I had thought of it first. But Bella Swan was always one step ahead of me. Hell, who was I kidding. She was like four fucking steps ahead of me, at all times.

God she was a bitch.

And by "bitch" I mean "the most amazingly brilliant, funny, beautiful, wank-worthy woman, I will never, ever, ever have."

Ugh.

I had a client call to get to.

Did I say "ugh" already?

Running a hand through my disheveled hair I turned, walking down the hall towards McD's.

Twenty four and a half minutes, three eye rolls, and eleven stupid questions later, I was just wrapping up the phone conference with our latest panic-inducing client and their equally bored, eye-rolling geeks, when I got a text message.

*What ever you do, don't answer their questions. It's exactly what they'd expect you to do.*

I quickly typed my response.

*It's too late for me, they know everything. Get out! Save yourself!*

We did this goofy shit all day long. It made my day — every day.

## **2. In which a door is closed**

The next afternoon, enjoying a quick nap at my desk—as I was wont to do—I missed her stealthy entrance.

"I need worms, Edward."

Lifting my head from my slightly drool-dampened sleeve, I cracked open a single eye to see Bella—UXGoddess and Crushtastic Ego Destroyer—watching me intently. This could only mean nap time was over.

"Worms?"

I cringed. There was verifiable evidence that I was an intelligent man—IQ tests showing me well above average—yet this woman was capable of reducing me to a monosyllabic idiot.

"Yes, worms. I need some worms. Can I use yours? Bruce is hungry and I'm out."

Worms?...Bruce? I was trying desperately to make two and two equal four. Bruce is her fish. Realization dawned. *Blood worms*. She wanted to borrow fish food. Jesus Christ was it so hard to process a simple request?

I pointed to the container of Hikari blood worms next to Chum's bowl. She took it, eyeing me carefully again. I resisted the urge to check my nose for a stray booger, or massive pimple. The girl looked for all the world like she wanted to say something, but instead, she just sighed, turned, and walked out. Of course I kept watching her as she went into her own cube farm. She was wearing her favorite "Zombies Were People Too" hoodie, feeding Bruce, singing to him in hideous gloomy bass-baritone.

*"The worms crawl in and the worms crawl out; the ones that crawl in are lean and thin; the ones that crawl out are fat and stout; your eyes fall in and your teeth fall out; your brains go tumbling round your skull; be merry my friends, be merry..."*

"Cullen, can you make the three o'clock?" Newton's irritating voice broke through my reverie.

Three o'clock...my mind raced. UI review for the new interactive project.

"Yeah. Sure."

"Great!" Turning, he hollered over me in Bella's direction, "Bella? You coming? We have to go over the site map now."

I was displeased to discover that the fuckwadish quality to his voice increased exponentially in relation to its volume.

"Sure Mike. I'll print them out. Meet you in your office in a few." As she turned to sit, intending to print her documentation, I cocked my six-shooter and totally fucking nailed her in the back of the head, the dart trying to bounce off her mass of brown hair, but getting caught in the curls. I fived myself internally at my fan-fucking-tastic aim, but again the woman stole my thunder by not even turning around. She had no reaction at all, other than slowly raising a single finger to me.

You can probably guess which one.

~oOo~

Bella returned about twenty-five minutes later from her meeting with Mike. She seemed...deflated, somehow. Tension rolled off her as she sat down at her desk. No-one else around us seemed to notice, but then again, no-one else paid quite as much attention to Bella as I did. Not that she knew.

I opened our idiotic corporate messaging app, IT having blocked the messaging port on our network.

*EC: You OK?*

*BS: Yeah.*

*EC: Really?*

*BS: Yeah.*

*BS: ...no.*

*BS: ...yeah. It's fine.*

*EC: Liar.*

*BS: Asshat.*

*EC: Wanna talk about it?*

BS: Nah.

BS: ...maybe.

EC: Can I tempt you with a Trifecta?

BS: Sweet baby Jesus! Does the Pope shit in the woods?

She was by my desk in less time than it took for me to lock my screen, and we went wordlessly to the kitchen together. As we entered I waved her toward the tables with an exaggerated maître d' arm motion.

"Sit, milady, and I shall serve."

She raised an eyebrow at me, but said nothing. Taking a seat at one of the empty tables, she watched as I worked. Once it was ready, I placed the food on the table in front of her with a flourish.

We gave a moment of silence, contemplating the Trifecta before us. Two cups of steaming coffee—straight from the Fauxbucks insta-serve machine, a bowl of microwaved (now liquid) Hershey's chocolate, and a plate of peanutbutter-filled cookie sandwiches.

Bella sighed deeply. She always did when faced with the Trifecta, but this sigh had undertones of genuine tension. Taking a cookie sandwich, she scooped an impressive amount of chocolate on to it. Raising the devilish dessert to her mouth, her eyes closed in appreciation.

I thought of my grandmother. And dead kittens. And plane crashes.

Bella was upset about something, I knew that, but I was sitting here being an utter dick. All I could focus on was the way her lips wrapped around that cookie, and her moan of pleasure as the chocolate hit her tongue.

*Dead kittens. Dead kittens in a plane crash. Dead kittens in a plane crash and my grandmother naked...*

Yeah, naked Grandma usually did the trick. Returning my focus to Bella, I saw her staring blankly into her cup of steaming heaven.

"What's up, Buttercup?"

She sighed again, and I waited patiently for her to speak.

"I don't know exactly. Maybe it's nothing. No, it *wasn't* nothing. It's just not...quantifiable. But it was something. Unless...No. Shit. It *was* something."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, now that we have *that* all cleared up..."

She laughed a little then, the tension visibly easing from her shoulders.

"Sorry Edward. It's just, well, my meeting with Mike was...weird. We were in his office going over the site map for the new UI, and..." her voice trailed off, stopping for a moment, before picking up again much more quietly, "...he shut the door."

All the tension that had left her entered me, and then some. There was no good reason a meeting between those two should be closed-door. He wasn't her manager. He wasn't HR. They weren't on a conference call. They weren't friends. Or...

"Why?" My voice sounded strained to my own ears.

"I don't know. Well, I mean, it was sort of—"

"Did he touch you?" I interrupted, my voice hard.

She looked up, startled, then her eyes opened with a hint of curiosity. My demeanour was making her suspicious. Shit. I tried to settle myself, calming my voice before I spoke again.

"Sorry. But Bella, did something happen that—"

"Nothing *happened*, Edward. It's just...he just made it pretty clear he would *like* for it to. I had no idea how to react. You know me, I had to take remedial classes at the School for the Socially Retarded."

Normally I would have said something insulting, and mean, and we would have both laughed. Something like "Yeah, you are kind of a bitch." But my brain wasn't in that place right now. My brain was working around a shit-ton of questions.

Then the other shoe dropped. It hadn't until this moment, occurred to me that she might *want* something to happen. My throat went dry, a knot forming in the pit of my stomach. Scrubbing my left hand through my hair—no wonder it's always a mess!—I took a big chug of coffee, trying to give myself a minute to think.

But the coffee was fucking *hot*. It scalded my throat going down, making me take in a gulp of air, which of course made me inhale the coffee. Let me tell you something I've learned about coffee over the years: Inhaling is the distinctly *sub-optimal* method of ingestion.

As I tried to reign in my choking, gagging, and other nasty sounds, Bella leaned back in her chair laughing—*laughing*—at me.

After half a minute of me spluttering like a toddler in bathwater, she giggled out, "Edward, I swear, you can always make me feel better. Your suffering—it's like a balm to me."

But I wasn't ready to joke about it. I figured out, while I was gasping for life-sustaining oxygen, that I was fucked. I'm either pissed at Mike and upset for Bella, or I'm pissed at Mike and all

angsty-emo sad over Bella. Which is stupid, because we're not together. She doesn't want me like that. She's never shown even the tiniest hint of wanting to be with me other than as a friend. So, what the fuck? She's not allowed to date? God, where is this coming from? Like I said, totally fucked.

"Edward?" Bella's concerned voice broke me from my reverie. "You look like a 418 error personified. What's up?"

OK, now I had to laugh. "Bella, I am *not* a teapot. That's not even a real error."

"It's on Wikipedia, Edward," she said with absolute solemnity, "therefore it's valid."

I rolled my eyes, not even wanting to open the whole "truth about Wikipedia" discussion again.

"I'm *not* a teapot. I can't believe we're even having this conversation." I wanted to get our "chat" back on track.

"So, how did things end with Mike?"

She looked wary, and slightly embarrassed. "He, well, he made an...offer...and I didn't know what to do, I just froze, and so—" she flung her face into her hands, voice becoming muffled against her palms, "—God Edward, it was fucking hideous. I just left. I walked out—didn't say anything—felt like I was going to throw up, couldn't stop shaking, it was awful."

Relief washed over me. She was uncomfortable, unhappy, and most clearly *not* pleased by his advances. As ridiculous as it was, I wanted to jump up and down and sing a stupid song about birds or butterflies, or some Disney shit.

"I mean, we *work* together, for fuck's sake. How awkward would that be? Can you *imagine*?"

Oh, there it is. The cold claw grabbed my insides again, and again I tried to reason with it, telling it she's not mine. She never was mine. She will never be mine. It's not my place to get all stomach-achey over her.

Ugh.

Or have I said that already?

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### Geek Love Chapter 3: In Which Edward is Cantaloupey

I spent the night trying to tell myself I was fine—and I *was* fine—I just had a hobgoblin living in my abdominal cavity. I felt him squeeze an internal organ like he was testing a cantaloupe. Otherwise I was just freakin' peachy. Or cantaloupey.



Tossing and turning in bed that night I decided there was nothing left to do. There were two—possibly three—very good reasons Bella wasn't mine. She didn't want to be mine; she didn't want to date anyone she worked with; and she didn't want to be mine. Did I say that already? Well, that's OK, it's probably worth repeating to get it through my goddamn thick skull.

Bella and I had worked together for eighteen months and one day, or so. I had been lusting after her for seventeen months and twenty eight days, approximately. I had been crushing on her for seventeen months and twelve days, give or take.

It's OK, you can say it. I'm a pussy. I know it. Say it again if it makes you feel better. It helps me *tons* and *tons*.

*Did I really just roll my eyes at my own internal monologue?*

Part of what made me so mad about Mike making a move on Bella today, other than his general douchitude, was that he had the balls to do it and I didn't. On the other hand, I like to think that she is so incredibly important to me that the power of her potential rejection is what's holding me back. For Mike, he probably couldn't give a rat's ass either way.

Or at least, that's what I told myself. But it didn't really matter much, if in the end I still didn't have her.

Sleep eluded me, so another round of tossing and turning ensued. Normally I would get my Jerkins on, imagining Bella in all manner of unseemly positions. After today's self-revelations I'm thinking I should be looking for my clitoris instead. Truth be told, I was too pissed at me to even touch myself.

Finally, at approximately 2:43 a.m., I fell asleep.

At rooster-ass o'clock, Clocky, my robotic alarm went off, leaping off my night stand, rolling through the apartment dinging like a fucking arcade game. *Sweet love of sleep, why did I ever buy that thing?*

After cleaning, grooming, and pop-tarting, I made it to the bus stop just in time. I hadn't even made it to my desk when I heard the annoying sound of Newton calling out to me.

"You'll be at the launch party today, right Cullen?"

Fuck! The launch party for a site I had nothing to do with was tonight. A company-wide email had gone out "requesting" our attendance. In other words, you'd better damn well be there.

"Um...yeah, I'll be there...it's mandatory, right?"

"Yeah, but still, it's gonna be a *blast*!"

I shuddered. I may be a geek, but this guy was a *dork*. A crush-stealing twatwad, placed before me to fuck with my day. OK, he hadn't exactly "stolen" her, but he was still a twatwad.

"Yes Mike, I'll be there. I'm sure it *will* be a...blast."

Sitting down at my desk a few seconds later, I was restarting my computer when a soft thunk to my left got my attention. I looked down to see a triple grande light-chocolate no-whip extra-hot mocha from Café Divinia sitting on my desk. Bella stood beside it, smiling a slightly sleepy smile at me. She was wearing a pink t-shirt with "STFU" printed across the front in big black letters.

"Happy Friday. Thought you could use the good stuff this morning. You look like you got about as much sleep as I did." She raised an eyebrow suggestively, smirking at me. "Another hot iDate? Ahhh...there's nothing like giving it hard to your virtual girlfriend, to make those bags under your eyes."

"At least I give it hard to *something*. You know, I was gonna give you a sex toy for your birthday, but then I realized I'd probably need to get you a dust buster first, clean that thing out!"

She punched my shoulder, grinning. I grinned back hiding the pain shooting down my arm. God I really *was* a pussy! Nodding in the direction of the coffee, I smiled beatifically at Bella.

"You, Miss Swan, rock my world."

Her smile broadened for a moment, then turned down a little, as she began to chew her lip thoughtfully.

"So...um...are you going today? After work, I mean?"

"To the launch party?"

She snorted. "No dumbass, to the *strip club*. I totally thought we could share a lap dance and then hire an escort to have a three-way with us."

I choked on my coffee, grabbing at a napkin before she could see it coming out my nose.

Bella rolled her eyes. "Yes, the launch party. Are you going?"

"Of course! I dutifully attend all mandatory corporate events. Go team!" I dimpled at her.

She rolled her eyes again, then paused for a moment. "So...I'll see you there then?"

Hadn't I just *said* I was going? "Yeah...?"

She turned and left, seeming a little less happy than when she came in.

"Hey, Bella?"

Turning, her eyes lighting up just a little when she did. "Yeah?"

"Thanks for the coffee."

She smiled - a little tightly - and walked out in the direction of her cube. *What the hell?* Was it my imagination, or was she peeved? I had the distinct feeling one, or both of us, had just shown stellar social geektardation. The fact that I didn't know meant it was most likely me.

~oOo~

Ten hours and twenty-one minutes later found me in hell. Absolute hell. Biz dev people surrounded me, talking about how to leverage the project we were launching to sell more interactive work to our existing print clients. My VP was already drunk, standing with his arm around my shoulders, dangerously waving a shot of tequila around as he told me - in no uncertain terms - how the project's success had *everything* to do with my excellent work. I didn't have the heart to tell him he either had me confused with someone else, or he didn't have a fucking clue what I did for the company. Eventually he offered me the half-spilled shot in his hand. I took it without hesitation.

The launch party was at a billiard hall slash games arcade slash bar - a popular spot with hip young professional douchebags. It was a Friday night, so the place was pretty full. Another round of shots came by. VP had just coaxed me into doing another, when I felt something - or someone - grip my hair, fisting it tightly.

"Edwrd, yu'll play air hockey wth me? Why's your hair alws so messy, anyway? S'cute y'know. Sortawannalickit."

VP removed his arm from my shoulder, inexplicably choosing *now* to become uncomfortable with our contact. Bella's hand was still gripping my hair when I turned, causing it to wrench painfully. When I saw her, I had to laugh out loud though. Shot-glass in hand, three-point-five sheets to the wind, she was glassy-eyed, bright-cheeked, and cute as a goddamn cherry pie.

"What the hell happened to you?"

She frowned, concentrating on her answer. "Mike's tryin...he's bein'..." she sighed exasperatedly, then braved on, "Iss fuckin' *skeezy*, that's it is. Tryin'a get me drunk." She wagged a finger at me. "But I foiled his plot. Reverse psychology, aswhat I did."

I felt something dark, angry, and *very dramatic* inside.

"Mike's been buying you drinks? Trying to get you drunk?"

"Aswhat I said, isnnit? But don't you worry Eddie-poo," she tapped my nose several times - mostly getting my eye, "I gave 'im teh slip."

"What *reverse psychology*, Bella?"

"Ah..." her eyes opened wide, and she tapped the side of her own nose, raising her eyebrows knowingly, "...he dinnt expect me to drink, you see. Take the drink, tells'im I don't wanna do the fucking."

"You don't wanna do the fucking?" I was forcing myself not to smile. This was Bella at her finest, weirdest, most illogical - or "alternate-logical" as she liked to say. To her, accepting a drink from someone who wanted to fuck her was using "reverse psychology", and somehow let them know she *wasn't* interested.

"No, I donwanna do teh fucking!" she called out, unintentionally loudly.

I put a hand over her mouth, laughing out a "shhh..." at the same time.

Standing - or rather, swaying - in front of me she reached up, wrapping both arms around my neck.

*Oh hell.* Time for the dead kittens again.

She swayed again, and I put my hands on her hips to steady her.

*Fuck.* I needed more than dead kittens. Plane crash. Grandma. Grandma *and* Mom-

"Edward?" her eyes blinked up at me owlshly.

Breathing deeply, trying desperately to keep my erotinaughty thoughts at bay, I responded, "Yes, Bella?"

"Play with me."

#### **Geek Love Chapter 4: In Which Edward is Schooled**

I blinked. Twice. Slowly.

"Sorry?"

"*Play* with me. I'munna kick your ass at air hockey."

A nervous laugh escaped me. Bella took that for acquiescence and smiled. Pulling her hands from my neck, I turned us in the direction of the neon-lit air hockey tables on the other side of the room.

Three games and one argument later, I was well and truly schooled. The woman was more juiced than the Odwalla factory, but had still somehow managed to kick my ass. She had absolutely no defense, and her aim was total shit. What she had was a killer serve. Four out of five times she slammed that fucker straight into the goal. How the hell she did it was beyond me. She held the paddle (which she called a "goalie", spawning our one argument) in a weird-ass sideways hold, with her fingers *inside* the center ring.

The fourth game was a different story. She was up two points—to my big fat zero—when Mike sauntered over, leaning against an adjacent table, watching. He was behind Bella, and was clearly not focusing on the *game* so much as the *view*. Unapologetically watching her ass as she moved left to right defending her goal against my inept attacks, I seethed violently at him. Whenever she moved he would make a seemingly supportive comment, but with an unmistakable subtext.

"Nice, Bella. You got *moves*, girl."

"Sweet action there Bella!"

"Way to hit it, Bella."

Just to mix it up a bit, he would reference my masculinity—or apparent lack thereof—every few comments.

"You need to take on a *real* man, Bella."

The more comments he made, the more Bella's game slipped. At first I wasn't sure, given her current state of sobriety, how much of his shit she was catching. After a few points, however, it was clear she got it—all of it.

"Hey peen gallery, why dn't you make yurslf useful and go get ussum drinks?" Bella asked him archly.

"Bella," he oozed condescension, "you don't *need* anything more to drink. Hurry up and kick his butt so I can give you a ride home."

Like hell he was. I knew as well as he did that the last thing Bella needed was another drink, but fuck me if she was going anywhere near his car.

*Thunk!*

The puck landed decisively in Bella's goal. I hadn't touched a thing. She was scoring against herself. And muttering. Oh great. A muttering Bella was never, ever a good thing. That was something she did when, and only when, she was really pissed off.

*Thunk!*

She slammed another shot against my end of the table, watching it ricochet then slide with a satisfying clunk in her goal.

I had given up any pretense of playing and was standing, arms crossed, watching her slaughter herself at air hockey. Mike watched us both; head tilted at a cocky angle, asswadish confidence exuding from him like Old Spice from my grandpa. He didn't have a clue she was pissed. What a worthless dunce.

When Bella had soundly beaten herself and the air stopped blowing from the table, she stood, eyes slitted like a cat. Her gaze met mine, and then looked away quickly. She was pissed—and really uncomfortable. Bella loathed personal confrontation.

I wanted to swoop in and fix this for her—tell Mike to go fuck himself, and whisk her away—but I knew better than that. Bella would have my balls if I flew in to rescue her, proving I had no faith in her ability to take care of herself. Newton, unaware of the shit-storm brewing in Bella's mind, walked over to her.

"Bella, sweetheart, let's go."

I sat back, wishing like hell I had some popcorn for the show. Mike had no idea what a colossal grave he was digging himself. A quiet chuckle escaped me, but I stifled it when I realized what an ass I was being. Bella was upset about this. I had no right to enjoy it.

*Stop it!* Not. Funny.

OK, it was a *little* funny.

"What wassat, Mike?" Bella was still slurring, though the time and anger had clearly sobered her somewhat.

"I said let's go, Bella. I'll take you home."

"Why?" she demanded, a little louder than she probably meant. "Why you wanna take me home?"

"Bella," his tone was what you would use to address an ornery toddler, "you need a ride home. I have a car. Come on, let's go." He put his arm in hers, pulling her with him.

Looking at his arm, I itched to rip it the fuck off, imagining the blood squirting out of a gaping wound in his shoulder like in some sick psycho movie. He'd be screaming, and I'd raise the limp limb up over my head in victory, yelling something manly and impressive.

"*Why?*" she demanded again. "You wanna tryta get in mypants? Is that it, Mister Newton?" Her eyes narrowed as she spoke.

Mike looked around to see who might have heard, then returned his eyes to Bella, scowling.

"Bella, I don't...I was just trying to...damn it! Why do you have to be such a bitch?"

"Natural talent?" She glared in response. It would have been much more intimidating had her "natural" not sounded more like "nashurul."

My name being sternly intoned broke my reverie.

"Huh?" Looking up I saw Bella glaring at Mike, but clearly addressing me.

"Edward, you'll take me home. Right?"

"Of course," I said simply. The fewer words the better when Bella was in this mode. She was glorious in her "Bitchtastic" mode, but let me tell you what is sub-funny: Being on the receiving end of Bitchtastic Bella. That is unfunny, frightening, and occasionally physically painful.

Mike scoffed. "Bella, that's ridiculous. Cullen doesn't even have a car. You can't take the bus ho—"

"*Why not?*" she interrupted.

"Well, for starters the buses don't run this late."

"Actually they do," I countered quietly.

"Bella, I don't want anything to happen to you. You need someone to walk you to your apartment, make sure—"

"Look, Mike," I had to step in at this point, she was trying to get through to him - had made herself clear - but for fuck's sake the dinglenut couldn't let it go, "seriously, let it go. I'll get her tucked in safe and sound with a glass of water, some Tylenol, and a bucket."

"Absolutely not! Bella you can't seriously—"

Bella's foot stomped—*stomped*—on the floor. Oh, nice, we'd moved on to Tempertastic Bella! I loved this Bella.

"Mike Newton, I don't wanna go home with you - or have you take me home, " she added quickly, seeing he was about to speak, "I'm gonnago home wth Edward. I don' care if I hafta walk—*on my eyeballs*—to get there, I'd rather walk with him than go in your skeezemobile."

Mike looked like he'd been hit with a two-by-four. The very naughty part of me wished he had. *Wow...when did I become so violent?*

"Lessgo Edwrd."

At her command, I turned, walking out of the arcade section, heading for the main doors. A moment later I heard a soft thud behind me, followed by a giggle. Turning, I saw Bella in a wasted pile on the floor, giggling at having tripped over...herself, apparently, as there was nothing around her.

"Edward, can you, ya know," with an unsteady hand she pointed at her feet, then me, then vaguely at herself, "*help* me?"

I chuckled. "Are you referring to the fact that you can't walk across a flat, stable surface without finding something to trip over?"

Bella turned her wobbly pointy finger at herself, somewhere in the direction of her tits, jabbing four times, slowly. It took me a minute to realize she was pointing to each of the letters on her t-shirt: S-T-F-U.

Laughing, I reached down for her, pulling her to her unsteady feet. As I turned to walk out the door, she almost felled me by a surprisingly accurate leap onto my back.

"Piggy back ride!"

Fucking hell. Bella wants to ride me home. Oh sweet baby Kermit, my karma bank must be full tonight. But wait, stay calm...stay calm...just do it and stay the fuck calm.

"Bella, I'm thinking that's probably a good idea. Your feet are about as trustworthy as Oprah with a box of Ding Dongs." OK, I couldn't hide my grin, this was going to be good.

Her knees were wrapped around my hips—firm, sexy, *intimate*. Her arms were wrapped around my neck—soft, lovely, *asphyxiating me*.

"*Mellah...*" I choked out.

She giggled, loosening her grip around my throat. "Sorry."

I walked through the doors, drunken, hellishly sexy object of my affections on my back, wondering how the hell I was going to hold her up and not grope her. Or at least, not grope her in any *obvious* way...

I had just started mentally chanting "dead kittens", mixing it up this time with the impressively alliterative "baby bunnies bathed in blood", when I felt Bella's hot tequila-scented breath on my ear.

"Thnkyou Edwrd," she whispered. "You're my superhero."

Thinking about my semi-wood, and the fact that my hands were technically on her ass, I didn't exactly feel like the good guy in this scenario. Chuckling quietly I asked her, "What if I'm not a superhero? What if I'm the bad guy?"



"Then it's win either way," came her response, almost imperceptibly quiet.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well, Edwrd," she was still slurring her words, but sounded a tad more coherent, "thingis, if you're the goodguy? You rescue me. *Win!*" She tugged at my ear for emphasis. "If you're the badguy? You haveyur wicked way wthme. *Win!*" Tugging at my ear again, she broke into helpless giggles, tucking her face into my neck to stifle the sound, sending shivers down my spine. I brought back the bloody bunny chant, with renewed vigor.

Let me tell you something. I know for an absolute fact that I'm a social retard. Always have been. Believe me when I say it's been a point brought up at every Cullen family gathering for the past...well...since I was born, pretty much. So, given my permanent status on the social bench, I'm never quite sure if I have "signals" right, but it seemed to me that Bella was...being...flirty? With *me*?

I decided to forego the bus, preferring to haul a hundred-and-something pounds uphill for ten blocks; or as I liked to think of it, having Bella ride me for twenty minutes. Something I never thought I'd actually get to say.

For her part, Bella was exceptionally quiet once I started walking in earnest. I was beginning to wonder at it, when she finally spoke. Her voice was calm and clearer than it had been in hours, warm breath drifting across my ear.

"Edward?"

"Yes, Bella?"

"I'm pretty certain I'm going to—"

Vomit rained down the front of my shirt as she puked over my shoulder and down my chest.

*Fuck me.*

Well, at least I wasn't hard any more.

## **Geek Love Chapter 5: In Which Some Porn is Watched**

"I can't believe you're making me *walk*," Bella grumped at me.

I laughed, with only a touch of bitterness. The woman had just covered me in vomit—*hell yeah* I made her walk. Somehow she had managed to escape pretty much unscathed from the Linda Blair Vomit Storm, and still looked fresh as a fucking daisy.

Half a block from my apartment building we walked past my bus stop. A man waiting for the downtown express watched us trudging up the hill. As we walked past him he stepped closer to me on the sidewalk, arm outstretched. In it was a pamphlet—yellow, with a photocopied image of a sun, radiant beams of light emanating from it.

"Let Jesus help you. Let *us* help you. Son, you don't need to live this way. We can work together to exorcise the demon you carry."

Excellent. *Supremely fan-fucking-tastic*. He thought I was a drunk. Fucking karma bank is empty again—and I didn't even get a good grope out of it!

"Thank you sir. We can't stand to see him this way either," Bella's voice chimed in. Damn it all if she didn't sound sober and collected—with just the right touch of pity and condescension. Shielding her mouth on my side, she stage-whispered conspiratorially to the man, "We're holding an intervention tomorrow. Thank you *so much* for your concern!"

Bitch.

I glared at her, and she stifled a giggle. The man merely nodded, looking from Bella to me again. We continued on our way, ignoring the pointed stares of some neighbors chatting outside the main door as we entered the building.

Five floors up, I was unlocking the door to my apartment when I heard a noise coming from within. A woman's voice.

"Uh, yeah baby, uh...uh...uh...fuck yeah baby! Fuck my pussy. Yeah! Fuck my pussy. Harder! Ooooooh...you're so *big* baby...fuck it baby...my pussy loves you, honey..."

I'm not an audiologist or anything, but a quick assessment told me they were most likely *sex noises*—and they sure as hell weren't being caused by me. Opening the door, it got louder.

"...oooh yeah, yeah, uh huh, give me that big cock of yours baby, slap me with it!"

"Jasper!"

My brother lay on the couch watching porn on my TV. He turned at my exclamation, jumping up with a grin, fly wide open. I took a moment to be grateful his pants were actually still *on*. He, however, seemed completely unfazed by my interruption. Typical Jasper.

"Eddie! Welcome home, little bro!" His joyful smile changed to furrowed concentration as he took in my appearance. "What the hell did you get up to tonight, man? You smell like shit. Actually, I've smelled shit that was more appealing than you right now. Jesus, Joseph and Mary, what happened?"

Pulling Bella out from behind me I point at her grumpily. She smiled timidly at Jasper, wiggling three fingers at him in greeting.

"I'm going to take a shower. Babysit her, would you?" I then gave the briefest possible introduction. "Bella, Jasper. Jasper, Bella. Jasper, zip your pants and watch Bella for me. Bella, do not, under *any* circumstances, play 'Find the Purple Headed Lava Onion' with Jasper. He'll let you win, every time. I'll be back in a few."

With that I found my way into the bedroom, peeling off my vomit-covered clothes before getting in the shower.

After scrubbing every square centimeter of my body, dressing in non-vomitous clothing, and throwing away my outfit from earlier, I returned to the living room, stopping short at what I saw.

Bella was curled up on the couch next to Jasper, munching on popcorn from the bowl in his lap. He was pointing at the screen, thumb on the remote's pause button, wearing a look of deep concentration. He looked much like a scholar extemporizing upon his area of passionate interest. She was watching the screen, equally fascinated.

"You see, you can't just *do* that out of the blue. They make it look like you can, but in reality you need lots of prep. They would have had to lube up a lot, then start small and work their way up. You know, fingers first, then small objects, then larger ones, then eventually you can fit a whole—"

"What the hell are you watching?" My question was ridiculous, because the TV was displaying forty-seven inches of what they're watching, in eye-popping color. For the love of ABBA, sometimes I wanted to kill my brother. Bella would be *disgusted* by this...but wait, she clearly wasn't...hmmm...I wonder if she's into—

*Stop it!* Stop thinking of Bella and sex. Not yours. Not yours. Not. Fucking. *Yours*. But goddammit, not Jasper's either.

"*Jasper*," I drenched my voice with as much menace as I could manage, "what the hell are you guys watching this for?"

"Edward, I'm giving this poor girl a rudimentary education that—quite frankly—you have been negligent by not providing. What the hell Eddie? She's never even seen—"

"Where did you *get* that? Did you order pay-per-view?"

"Naw man, they don't show this stuff on pay-per-view! It's a DVD. Speaking of which, where the hell is your porn? I looked everywhere. I had to go *buy* this!" He looked genuinely injured.

"I get it online, like everyone else. You *bought* it? *Why?*"

"Desperate times call for desperate measures, bro."

Sighing, I ran my hand through my still-damp hair. Bella was giving me a grin so wide I was expecting a canary feather to pop out of her mouth at any moment. I love my brother, but he was touching Bella, and I didn't like it. He was touching Bella and *watching porn* with her.

In eighteen months I hadn't even kissed the girl. He'd known her less than eighteen minutes and had her snuggled against him watching porn. *Fuck*.

"Jasper, why are you watching porn in my living room?"

"Because you didn't have any cereal."

"*What?*"

"I came for cereal. You didn't have any. I was bored, so I got some porn."

"Cereal sounds good," Bella's voice chimed in, sounding amazingly sober. Vomiting had done wonders for her.

Walking into the kitchen I opened the cabinet to the left of the fridge, pulling out a selection of cereal boxes and placing them on the counter.

"Well shit, I didn't think to look *there*," Jasper said as he walked into the kitchen, Bella trailing behind him. "Where do you keep the milk?"

I rolled my eyes and open the fridge, and pulled a half-gallon from the door. Jasper gave me a look of utter amazement, not dropping his façade for a second.

"That's the last place I would have looked," he said, shaking his head in mock disbelief.

We each poured a bowl of cereal—Cap'n Crunch for me, Apple Jacks for Jasper, and Kung Fu Panda for Bella—and settled on the sofa to eat. I grabbed the remote as I sat, making sure Jasper didn't get his dirtyman hands on it. Switching the input source from DVD to cable, I quickly settled on a re-run of House.

Jasper chose the arm chair perpendicular to the sofa. Bella sat next to me on the couch. Looking at Bella, she was completely engrossed in her cereal, removing all the purple marshmallows, placing them carefully on a napkin. Jasper looked from her to me then back again. When his eyes returned to me, his eyebrows waggled licentiously, looking for all the world like a bad guy in some Twenties talkie, about to make a grab at the heroine.

I couldn't tell if he was suggesting something about me and Bella, or if he was making an implication about his own intentions. Either way I didn't like it, so I scowled at him. He laughed. Jasper never took me seriously. I guess that's what older brothers do.

"So Bella," Jasper began. "What do you do?"

"Um...I'm a UX person. Edward and I work together."

"UX? What's that when it's at home?"

"User Experience. I tell the designers how to lay out a web site so the user knows what to do and where to go. I also write documentation, like site maps, user flow documents, and functional specs—the document that says what everything is supposed to do."

Jasper snorted, rolling his eyes. "*Geek*, Bella. You're a *geek*, just like Edward. That's all you needed to say. You two are a match made in heaven."

Suddenly Bella was carefully examining the soggy remains of her cereal, a faint blush rising up her cheeks.

"Jasper! Be nice. Geek isn't a bad word in our world."

"Chillax Eddie. I didn't mean it like that, I was just stating a fact. Besides, I don't think *that's* what Bella's getting all pink about."

Before I even had time to contemplate what the hell he meant, Bella stood, sloshing cereal milk on my coffee table in her hurry to get up. She started collecting cereal bowls—mine straight from out of my hands, spoon midway to my mouth—taking them to the kitchen sink.

"Hey Eddie—"

"Jasper," I said, as darkly as I could, "if you call me Eddie one more time, I swear to God I'll—"

"You'll *what*...Eddie?"

"Cockburn."

He glared at me. "Fuck you, Eddie."

I glared back. "Cockburn, Cockburn, Cockburn."

"Shut. Up. Edward."

"Huh? What are you guys talking about?" Bella had returned, and was watching our tense exchange with interest. Jasper hastily jumped in.

"Nothing. It's nothing. Right *Edward*?"

He totally wanted me to let this go. I had him. There was no way he'd call me Eddie for the rest of the night if I let it go. I really *should* let it go—Aw hell no—he started it. I'll win it. "Oh, sure, it's nothing. Jasper Cockburn Cullen."

Bella burst out laughing. "That can't actually be your name—"

"It is," I confirmed. "Absolutely. Legally. His name."

"What the fuck? Were your parents high, or just cruel?"

Jasper looked genuinely put out, and more than a little embarrassed. I decided to explain for him, since I did feel a *little* bad.

"Our middle names are all where we were conceived. It's a family tradition going back several generations. I'm Edward Anthony, because I was conceived in St. Anthony, Idaho. He's—" I had to stop to laugh for a moment, before continuing, "—Jasper Cockburn, because he was conceived while our parents were on a vacation to Australia visiting some relatives. In *Cockburn*, Australia."

Her expression was sympathetic when she looked back at Jasper. "And they couldn't make an exception for you? Or lie? Hell, they must have gone through Sydney at some point. Couldn't they have just said it happened there? Or just go with 'Australia'?"

He sighed. "I know. *I know*, but they just didn't really see it like that. To them it was just a name, and they'd already named Rosalie for where she was conceived. They wanted to keep the tradition up."

"Where was Rosalie conceived?"

"Hale, Texas."

"Wow, you really got the short end of that stick, Jasper."

He sighed again. "Tell me about it."

"Well, I'm Bella Marie. The 'Marie' comes from my aunt Marie."

"Nothing wrong with that," Jasper said, a little grudgingly.

"Nope, but she married a man named 'Steve Volting.'"

"OK...?"

"Marie Volting?"

"Your revolting what?"

"Exactly."

He groaned.

Bella settled back on the couch next to me, and we focused on the House re-run, getting into a debate over which was the bigger win—Hugh Laurie as Prince Regent in *Blackadder the Third*, or Hugh Laurie as Gregory House.

Bella voted for Prince Regent, Jasper voted for House. I was the tie breaker. I had to side with Bella—only *partly* because I thought it was true. As the episode played Bella began to droop, her earlier overindulgence taking its toll. Within fifteen minutes she was laying back on the couch snoring quietly, her bare feet planted firmly in my lap.

Her left foot had a tattoo of a yellow Sneetch with a green star on its tummy. Underneath were the words: "Now, the Star-Belly Sneetches had bellies with stars." Her right foot had an identical Sneetch with no star, and the words: "The Plain-Belly Sneetches had none upon thars."

I gently stroked the two images. The Sneetches had been one of my favorite books as a kid. First I loved it for the memories of snuggling up to my mother as she read it to me, and then later for the meaning behind the story.

I hadn't known Bella was so passionate about social equality. It was another thing we had in common.

My chest tightened a little. Turning to look at her sleeping, she took my breath away.

Her long hair in messy chocolate waves flowed over the side of the couch. The t-shirt she had so clumsily tried to insult me with earlier rose and fell with her breaths. It was pulled up just slightly, exposing a narrow line of flesh on her belly. One arm was thrown haphazardly across her forehead, while the other draped off the edge of the sofa.

Watching her face, she looked completely at ease. Sleep erased a few years from her, and she looked very young—like a college freshman. Thick, dark lashes swept above her cheekbones, and her skin had a peaches-and-cream quality that made me want to—

"So it's like *that*, huh?"

Startled I looked up to see Jasper grinning at me.

"Huh?"

"I thought so. Wasn't sure—you hold your cards pretty close to your chest—but I haven't been your brother for twenty-six years and not learned to read you a *little*."

"What the hell are you talking about Jasper?"

Jasper pointed to Bella, then me, then back again.

"*That's* what I'm talking about."

I sighed. This was really, *really*, not a conversation I wanted to be having with him right now. Or ever.

"Jasper, it's..." What? What can I say? It's not like that for me? Bullshit. It's not like that for her? Ugh. Do I need another reminder? "...fuck. It's never gonna happen. I'm not holding my cards close to my chest—I don't *have* any cards. She's not interested."

"Edward?"

"What?"

"How the fuck do you know that?"

## **Geek Love Chapter 6: In Which Some Porn is Watched, Redux (Jasper)**

### **Jasper**

It was getting late, so I decided to spend the night at my brother's apartment. I'd been on what had to be the worst date *ever*, and came down with a "stomach flu" about forty-five minutes into dinner.

Stomach flu wasn't my favorite thing to fake when jumping ship on a bad date, mostly because it takes a lot of effort. Looking nauseated and clammy isn't my thing—I'm way too pretty for that—but this girl was tenacious and I knew she wouldn't settle for "not feeling well," or "sick mom."

No, if I'd pulled "sick mom," this girl would have followed me home, on foot, cooking chicken soup from scratch as she walked, just to get in good with who she hoped would be her future mother-in-law.

She was the sort of bunny-boiling psycho girl who was so desperate to land *the guy* that the zeros in her phone number started to look like wedding rings.

*Shudder.*

So, I decided to spend the evening at Edward's. My place is about forty minutes away, and I really didn't feel like driving all that way just to get home to my incontinent cat. That is the *last* time I take advice from my mother about quelling my loneliness by opening myself up to love—from stray *cats*.

Fuck my life. And my shit-spraying cat.

Anyway, I figured Edward and I could sit down, have a drink, catch up on family stuff, work through remaining details about Rosalie's wedding, bond over a game of—



Aw, who the fuck am I kidding? I figured we'd drink some cheap tequila and watch some "outside the box" porn. Then when he passed out I'd draw line-art cock'n'balls on his face with a Sharpie.

*Again.*

Not that either of us were really into "outside the box" stuff, but it was sometimes funny as hell. I saw this one once, where the chick snorted a guy's load using a funnel. A *funnel*. In her *nose*.

Never once in my life have I wanted to find out what a nose full of come felt like. *Ever*.

So, anyway, I ended up at Edward's place, waiting for his geeky ass to get home. I figured he was either at work still, or out on a terrible date too. His dates were usually much more painful than mine because he wasn't willing to fake communicable disease to escape.

Edward has a "standard of gentlemanly conduct"—as he puts it—that includes seeing a date all the way through, no matter how much of a rabbit-cooker the girl is.

I hadn't seen Edward with a girl in awhile, though. Not since...what was her name? Jamie? Jenny? *Jessica!* It made me shudder a little just thinking about that one. She was *way* the hell wrong for my baby brother. He knew it too, but it took him awhile. He was painfully slow about breaking it off with her, mostly because he's a shit communicator. But it happened eventually, and I sure as hell wasn't sorry to see her go.

The thing that always sticks in my craw about Edward is that he doesn't know why someone is right or wrong for him. Instead of calling a spade a spade—or in Jessica's case, a "slutty, backstabbing gold-digger"...he finds ridiculous flaws with her. The way she eats; her shampoo; the way she walks; whatever. Sometimes I think he might actually believe that shit himself!

Anyway, there I was at Edward's apartment. My fruitless search for his porn stash had forced me to leave for a bit to pick up some new adult entertainment. Luckily that errand took all of twenty-five minutes. Edward's place was conveniently located in Pioneer Square, one of those wonderfully complex neighborhoods conversely both a nice spot to find million-dollar apartments and art, as well as tons of porn. Oh, and guns, hookers, and meth.

I limited myself to the porn—this time.

I was lying on Edward's couch watching my new movie when he came home. I'll admit to nothing—*nothing!*—but there's a remote possibility that I was using his laptop to sign him up for a shit-ton of penis enlargement and Viagra mailing lists. Which may or may not be why his laptop ended up under the couch a split second before he walked in.

I'll admit to nothing.

So, in walked my little brother, adorable little fuck that he is, covered in what I'm hoping is vomit—otherwise I *really* don't want to know—towing a goddamn ray of drunken sunshine behind him.

There are moments, when you look back on them, that your life turns. It doesn't shift completely, it just...makes a turn. It may not seem earth-shattering at the time, but a year, or maybe a decade later you look back and see that your life would be very different had that moment not happened.

The minute I met Bella Swan, I didn't need that week, or year, or decade. I knew that Edward's life—and by extension all of our lives—were taking one of those turns. Not the road less traveled by, just the road that needs to be taken. The *right* road.

OK, let me take a step back.

Edward is what I like to term "socially retarded." Now, don't get me wrong...I love a good social retard. Some of my favorite people are social retards. But in Edward's case it's a problem, because he is, at heart, a social person. He wants friends, he wants love, he doesn't want to lock himself in a room playing WoW all day. But he has a shit ability to read people. So when it comes to women, he gives all the wrong ones a chance, and doesn't know what the fuck to do with the right ones. Not that he's brought a "right one" around me yet.

And the women...oh the women, you see...women *love* Edward. They always have. It has something to do with him being young, smart, good looking, wealthy and having "fuckable hair," whatever the hell *that* means.

It's a mental image I'm not sure I need, I know that much. I just hope he washes it afterwards.

So women throw themselves at poor Edward. In response, he does one of two things: He engages in an actual relationship with them and treats them like gold—even though usually that's all they're after; or he ignores them.

Two seconds in the same room with them, and I could tell Bella was different. In she walks, being dragged by my little brother, having apparently just blown chunks all over his geekwear, and she's giggling—*giggling*—about it. Most of the women I know would be crying with embarrassment over something like that; needing their hands held and their egos stroked back into shape.

But Bella just smiled this huge, sweet, lovely smile, and wiggled her fingers at me in greeting. Edward was pretending to be grumpy with her, and she was pretending not to care. What she wasn't pretending to do was hide her curiosity at the TV screen. Edward, however, was studiously ignoring it.

Right off the bat, I knew he wasn't sleeping with her. I also knew he desperately wanted to. He was too physically *aware* of her. You could actually see him tense when she got closer. Not an uncomfortable tension, a *restraint* tension. An "Oprah sees a package of Ding Dongs and can't have it" tension.

Even though he was genuinely annoyed by being bathed in chunks of vomit, the way he presented her, the way his arm hovered almost-but-not-quite around her in a subconscious protective motion, told me he was possessive of this woman. On some level, he felt she was his to care for.

Edward left the room to go shower, and Bella's arms unconsciously wrapped around herself as her gaze followed him. Her eyes were huge, expressive, chocolate-brown things. As she watched him they widened, her feelings playing out across them like a daytime soap in HD. She wanted him.

The sound of her voice broke my contemplative staring.

"So...you're Edward's brother." She watched me closely. "I've heard about you."

The laugh that followed made me a little nervous. Edward knew a lot about me...

"No shit? What did he say?"

"Tons—we've been friends awhile. A few things stand out though. Recently there was something about tequila, tape, a wig, and an assload of glitter?"

I laughed. The little shit was sharing a lot with her! "Yeah, but did he show you *photos*?"

She giggled. "Yes." Her eyes narrowed, assessing me. "You were really pretty."

"I'm *always* pretty. It's my thing."

She snorted derisively. "Keep tellin' yourself that, Cullen. Maybe one day you'll find the right man who likes just your kind of 'pretty' and you can settle down, paint the white picket fence, and give him babies. Pretty little glittery babies."

I *liked* her.

"So, how long have you known Edward?"

"Um...about a year and a half. Since we started working together."

"But you're not..." I let my sentence drift off.

"Huh? Oh! No. No, we're not."

"How come?"

She opened her mouth to answer, then stopped, looking confused.

"He doesn't, I mean, we've never talked about it, and I really don't think he's—"

"Bullshit."

She looked startled, and a bit confused, by my vehemence. And possibly a tad annoyed.

"Sorry Bella, but I seriously, *seriously* doubt my brother isn't into you."

Walking over, she flopped on the couch next to me, kicking her feet up on the coffee table, and sighed heavily. The air smelled slightly like vomit.

"You think so?"

I just rolled my eyes.

She looked thoughtful for a moment, then her eyes caught sight of the TV screen, with the paused image of a woman deep-throating a guy with shaved balls.

"What are we watching, anyway?"

"Romancing the Bone. I got a three-pack of quality Grade-A porn with movie-title themes."

She laughed. "Seriously? God I love porn titles. I think that's the best part."

Oh no she di'int.

"Jesus jam on toast woman, do you know *nothing*? The best part of porn is *watching* it. Well, that and the dialogue. No-one can write dialogue like a porn screenwriter."

"Jasper, no-one *should* write dialogue like a porn screenwriter!" She picked up the stack of DVD cases on the coffee table, and started giggling helplessly at the titles.

"Intercourse With The Vampire? Schindler's Fist? What the hell, Jasper?"

"Well, at least I stayed away from the Disney three-pack! They had one that was, The Little Sperm-Aid, The Loin King, and Sleeping Booty. Give me *some* credit."

She looked appropriately disgusted, then was thoughtful for a moment.

"Do they really have screenplays for pornos? Do you think they write the moaning and the dirty talk? Or do they just put 'Actress makes a lot of noise'?"

"You know, Bella, I've never thought about it. I'll make some calls—see what I can find out."

I got up to make some microwave popcorn, and when I returned, Bella had the remote in her hand, watching the next scene in Romancing the Bone, a grin splitting her face.

No way in hell had Edward brought anyone like her home before. He was so utterly fucked.

As I sat, she handed me the remote and reached for some popcorn, eyes never leaving the screen. I could hear Edward shuffling around in his room, dressing. I figured I'd do the poor geek a favor and at least try to get the ball rolling for him.

Edward may be socially retarded, but he deserves everything good that can possibly come his way. I can't even sum up what I would do for my brother; and this woman—this fuckawesome, crazy, beautiful woman who clearly cared for him—could quite possibly make him really fucking happy.

Pausing the movie, I broke the silence. "Bella, he wants you too, you know."

She looked genuinely confused. "Who?" Her eyes flitted from me to the screen and back again.

Laughing out loud I gave her a gentle kick. "No, not *him*, dumbass, my brother.

"Oh." Her face fell a little, looking apprehensive. She unconsciously picked at her sock. "What makes you say that?"

"Bella," I sighed, considering how to put it. "I know my brother better than anyone else in the world. I *love* my brother more than anyone in the world. In twenty-six years I have *never* seen him look at someone the way he looked at you a few minutes ago—and that's *after* you vomited on him. Now I don't know you from Eve, but I'm pretty good at reading people, and I don't think it's a one-way street poor Eddie's on."

She shook her head slowly. When she spoke, her voice as quiet. "No, it's not."

"So, what's the problem?"

Silence.

"Bella?"

She sighed.

"It's...complicated, Jasper."

Oh sweet Jesus, *two* of 'em!

"OK...try me. What's so complicated? Are you married? Have six unwashed, hungry children that you're hiding in your basement? Unlovable because you have a tendency to vomit on potential hookups?"

"Jasper, I'm not. I'm *not*. I...fuck it. Never mind."

She looked really annoyed, I had to remind myself she was still pretty toasted.

When Bella looked up at me and I was able to see her clearly, two facts—other than her lack of sobriety—hit me like a ton of bricks. One: Bella liked my brother more than she let on. In fact, I was pretty sure she was in love with him; Two: Bella had been hurt.

By what, I had no idea. In my experience—and I have a lot in this area—it could be anything ranging from serious heartbreak, to childhood issues, to sexual abuse.

There's a particular look that people have—something in their body language—that identifies them as damaged. In my years as a grief counselor I've learned to identify that look.

In Bella, the signs of her past hurt were subtle. The signs of her being in love with my brother, were not. Only Edward would be dense enough to miss it. I wondered, briefly, how long these two had been pining for each other.

It wasn't my place, unless she invited me to listen, to know what her past was. But I knew that if she and Edward wanted any chance at being together, they absolutely had to be on the same page. Getting them there might be a problem. They were clearly both socially inept, particularly Edward, and Bella seemed a little short-changed in the "sharing" department.

I took the best stab I could.

"Bella, are you trying to tell me it's complicated because you have a past? You have history? Something happened to you that's bringing you into this damaged?"

She looked up at me, eyes wide as saucers, but didn't say a thing.

"Look, I'm here to listen if you want. It's what I do for a living, and I'm really, really good at it. But I don't expect that. I'm going to give you a piece of advice though. I hope you don't mind."

She shook her head, silently giving me permission to continue.

"What it comes down to is this: Everyone has damage of some kind, Bella. *Everyone*. Some people's damage is a helluva lot more than others, true, but at some point we all—every one of us—need to get up, dust ourselves off, and decide it's time to keep going. Decide it's time to live again. I work with people whose children have died; whose spouses have been murdered; shit you think *no-one* can recover from; people whose stories might be more traumatic than yours, or less so, it doesn't really matter. What matters is that you figure out how to take the first step in living your life again."

I paused for a moment before adding quietly, "Seems to me that having someone to share your life with, someone who makes you happy, is a pretty fucking good first step."

Bella wiped away a single tear that ran down her cheek, nodding silently.

With nothing left to say, I turned the movie back on, only to have it end within a few minutes. Bella silently handed me the next one—Schindler's Fist—for me to put in.

"Really? Another one?"

Glancing at her inquiringly, she just shrugged, smiling at me, almost all signs of sadness erased.

"I like Schindler. He's a personal hero."

Laughing, I put the new DVD in and we watched. After a few minutes Bella's eyes grew huge.

"Jasper?...Um...*really*? I mean, *seriously*? Is that...*normal*? How do they...?"

So I began to teach my brother's not-quite girlfriend the ins and outs of fisting (no pun intended), a lesson I was in the middle of when Edward finally came out of his room, cleaned, groomed, and—I'm secure enough in my masculinity to say it—as fuckhot as the rest of us Cullen men.

I'll freely admit it: We were a very fuckable bunch, we Cullens.

After his normal stick-up-the-ass routine about my porn, not to mention a little shock at Bella's obvious interest, we settled down for a little cereal and chit-chat. It took Bella about 3.2 seconds to fall asleep. I think she was just waiting to see if Edward had forgiven her for the vomit thing. Once it was obvious he wasn't pissed anymore, she relaxed, and boom! Snoozles overcame her.

About three minutes later I learned, through my own fuckawesome deductive skills, that Edward more than just liked Bella. The way he watched her sleeping; the look that came over his face—awe, desire, tenderness—said more in that two seconds than he could ever tell me with words.

He was totally fucked.

## **Geek Love Chapter 7: In Which Edward Has An Epiphany**

A myriad of responses went through my mind, but when I considered saying any one of them out loud, I cringed knowing what Jasper's response to each one would be. He would tell me I had nothing. In a way he was right. I had no single conversation with Bella that had let me know she wasn't interested—just eighteen months of small things. I guess you could say I just *knew*.

With a sigh, I rose, motioning for Jasper to help me carry Bella to the bed—I clearly wasn't getting her home tonight.

"Jasper, it's...complicated."

He snorted. "Oh yeah? Is it...*complicated*...little bro, or are you just making it like that?"

Grunting as I picked up Bella by her legs, Jasper taking her under the arms, we began moving her into the bedroom. She wasn't that heavy—probably one-twenty, tops—but it was just awkward.

"You'd think with my years of working for the Mob, I'd have figured out how to move a dead body more gracefully."

"Jasper, you never worked for the Mob."

"Well...OK, but I played that game on Facebook a lot."

I laughed. He was such a dork.

"So, back to you and Miss UX here...why are you making it all angsty and complicated Edward?"

"I'm not. Seriously, why the hell would I do that? I'd *love* it if she felt like I did."

"Uh huh. Sure. You never overcomplicate things, kiddo." Snorting, he continued, "I have one word for you: Tanya."

Oh Jesus. Was he serious? "Fuck you Jasper, you know she was weird. All possessive, and clingy. No-one could handle her. Besides, wasn't she a little...strange...looking?"

Jasper rolled his eyes at me, grunting as we heaved Bella on to my bed. "OK then, Jessica."

"For fuck's sake Jasper, why are you bringing up all my old girlfriends?"

"I'm making a point, Edward."

"OK, what *about* Jessica?"

"Why'd you break up with her?"

I pulled the covers back on one side of bed, and Jasper helped me roll Bella so she was under them. What the hell, was she three years old? How could she sleep through all this? Guess the alcohol was still hitting her harder than it looked. Turning out the lights, adjusting the bedding, and grabbing my own pajamas were my delay tactic, but eventually I had to answer him.

"I can't tell you."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because, *Jasper*, I'm a gentleman—and a gentleman doesn't tell tales."

"Whatever. So it was a 'sex' thing?"

Walking out of the bedroom, I shut the door behind us.



"Yes," I sighed, exasperated, "it was a 'sex' thing." I could feel heat rising up my cheeks, reaching my ears. I knew he wouldn't let it go, so I ripped off the Band Aid..."She had wonky nipples."

Jasper did exactly what I expected him to do. He burst out laughing. "You broke up with a girl because she had 'wonky nipples', and you don't think you have an issue with over-complicating relationships?"

"Jasper, they weren't just a *little* wonky. They were...*alien* wonky. They pointed in completely different directions. It was like a chameleon looking at you—only one focused on you at a time. Gave me the heebiejeebies. Plus she made this noise when we had sex...like she was asking me a question over and over. It made me feel rude for not answering her. Having sex with her felt like too much social pressure."

"OK, so what would you do if Bella threw herself on you tonight?"

"Hope she didn't puke on me again."

He rolled his eyes and smacked me—gently for Jasper—in the back of the head. "OK, fine...what if she did it tomorrow night? No alcohol. She comes up all sexy-sexy geek girl," he walked up to me, doing what he clearly thought was a sexy girl move, rubbing on my thigh, cupping imaginary boobs, fluttering his eyelashes, "and asks you to do the big nasty. Do you do it?"

"Are you fucking stupid? Or have you not been paying attention?"

"That's a yes?"

"*Yes!* That's a yes. *Jesus*, Jasper."

"Even though she upchucked all over you tonight?"

"Yes."

"So, wonky nipples trumps vomit on the wood-softener scale?"

"This is ridiculous Jasper. What's your point?"

"Bear with me. OK, so you're down with the whole vomit thing, that's cool. Now tell me, what happens if you're all up in her stuff, you get to second base, pull up her shirt, get into the goods, and realize...oh shit!...*Bella* has wonky-ass alien nipples. Or a third nipple. Or *no* fucking nipples. What do you do?"

"I wouldn't care."

"Why?"

"Because...I don't know...because it's Bella. She's...*different*. It's not like that—I mean, I *want* her, but I don't just want her like *that*, you know? That's not what it's about. It's...more than that."

Jasper was silent for a moment, just staring at me. When he spoke, he sounded incredulous.

"Holy mother-of-the-bride, you are the single most socially ass-tarded person I've *ever* met. For fuck's sake Edward, is that your way of telling me you're in love with her?"

My brain went silent. My hands went cold. It was like a black hole opened up in my head and I was momentarily sucked into the swirling vortex of terror. Why hadn't I even thought of it before? I was so focused on having an unrequited *crush* on her, it hadn't occurred to me that I was actually in love with Bella.

In twenty-six years I hadn't actually been in love before—not for real. I had a girlfriend in high school I had exchanged "I love you's" with, but I realized later that was just...expectation. Jasper was right though, my feelings for Bella went beyond anything I'd had for anyone else before. If I, the master of excuses for being alone, could still want her after all this time, that was the only answer.

Fuck.

"Oh, Eddie, you poor bastard," Jasper laughed, not without sympathy, "you didn't even realize it, did you?"

I walked over to the arm chair and sat—no, collapsed—into it. Words wouldn't form. He would just have to take my silence for agreement.

I have no idea how long I stared at the coffee table, my mind a maelstrom of questions, thoughts, observations. Eventually my attention was grabbed by the sounds of sex coming from the TV again. On the screen, two women were making out on a bed, grinding against each other, moaning and panting. A close-up camera shot left absolutely nothing to the imagination. Jasper lay back on the sofa, arm propped behind his head, remote in his left hand.

"It doesn't change anything," I said quietly.

"Like hell it doesn't. You're an idiot if you think otherwise."

"She doesn't feel the same—"

"Edward. Have I mentioned you're socially retarded? She feels...*something*. I have no idea what it is, but I can promise you that even if she's not on the exact same page as you, you're somewhere in the same chapter. Ya know?"

Sighing, I realized that my heart ached...it actually physically hurt.

"She said she doesn't want to go out with anyone she works with."

"When did she say that?"

"A few days ago."

"Then get a new job."

"Not helpful, Jasper."

"Edward, if you love her, it's worth it. But if you're going to be such a fucking pussy about it, then be my guest. Go ahead—keep moping around and jerking off thinking about her when you could have the real thing. How long has it been like this, by the way?"

"Um...a few months." Ducking my head, I added quietly, "Eighteen or so."

He gaped at me. "Jesus, get the fuck out of here. Really? You, my little brother, rate a fifteen on the fail scale. And it only goes to eleven."

His head shook in disbelief. "Why haven't I heard about this? I mean, I've heard about her as someone you're friends with at work, but Edward, you and I are close. You and Bella are close. Were you...I mean...it's like you were...Oh my God...you *were*! You were *hiding* her. Why? Why the fuck would you do that?"

"Jasper, I didn't hide it from you on purpose. It's not like Bella and I see each other much outside of work." Sighing, I tried to formulate the words adequately. "I thought, at first, that it was just a little crush. Honestly, until about ten minutes ago I thought it had just turned into a big crush. But she's made it clear where she stands on this, and, honestly, it sorta hurts to talk about it. So I just haven't."

"Lil' bro, what the fuck has she said that's so clear to you?"

"*Big bro*, don't you think that in eighteen months, I would have seen *some* sign she was interested, if that were the case?"

"Ye-e-es..." he said thoughtfully, "unless she's as socially retarded as you are. Think about it, could she say the same about *you*, Edward? If I woke her up right now and asked her if you were interested in her, would she say the same thing? Would she tell me that you haven't put out any signals for eighteen fucking months, so you must not be interested?"

Ho-ly shit. Slap my ass and call me Self Involved, I hadn't even thought about it that way. Maybe I really *did* play my cards so close to my chest she had never seen a hint of them.

"Edward, you need help. I gotta think about this. Don't worry kid, we'll fix it. But right now, go climb in bed with your girlfriend in there, and leave me alone so I can watch my quality programming. After all this hormonal angst I need to hand-crank the one-eyed yogurt thrower."

My jaw dropped as I processed what he was saying. How could he be so cavalier about—

"Oh, don't look at me like that—your couch and I are practically married now. You're just lucky it can't get pregnant."

I shuddered, visibly. "You're disgusting, you know that?"

"I'm also your best friend, and you don't deserve me."

He was right. Again. "Night, Jasper."

Going into the bathroom to put my pajamas on, I contemplated what lay ahead of me. I either had to share the bed with Bella, or the couch with Jerk-off Jasper. Very little debate happened over which I would choose, but the thought of spending the night in bed with Bella was...torturous. I was half-way hard just thinking about it. Holy Papa Smurf, I was goanna end up with the worst case of blue balls *ever* by morning.

Walking into my bedroom, I noticed she had turned the bedside lamp on. She had also—Jesus fuck—taken off some of her clothes. She was lying on my bed wearing just a t-shirt and panties, her bra and pants thrown haphazardly on the floor. Her pink t-shirt looked almost red in the dim lighting, the bold black lettering matching her black panties exactly.

Bella was obviously a sleep-kicker, the blankets showed clear evidence of being pounded to a pulp in the past hour. Then I noticed her panties had writing on them. Oh, crap. There was no way I couldn't look at them. Not because I'm pervy—though I undoubtedly am that—but because I'm insatiably curious. I had to know what they said.

I decided a quick swoop-and-read was the best tactic. I didn't want to get caught staring at her—*Fuck!* Stop thinking about that! The only thing worse than getting caught staring at *any* part of her, is getting caught staring at her with a massive erection.

OK, maybe not 'massive'.

Swooping in I quickly scanned the alluring article of clothing.

**Warranty**

**Void if removed**

Like on a laptop motherboard. Cute. Fucking cute. Goddammit she was ridiculously cute.

Stepping back into the bathroom to brush my teeth, I noticed the sink was wet. So was my toothbrush. Bella must have used my toothbrush.

*Bella had used my toothbrush.*

I actually laughed out loud. For some reason that stupid act made my heart soar. Intellectually I knew I should be grossed out by it, but I wasn't. All I could think was that she felt close enough

to me to do that. Well, that and she was weird enough to do it, without bothering to ask if I had a spare one handy—which I did.

I was so fucked. If any—and I do mean *any*—of my previous girlfriends had done that, I would have found that to be more than enough cause to break up with them. With Bella, I found it endearing. Adorable.

*Gah!* Totally screwed.

After quickly brushing my teeth, I turned out the lights, and headed to the bed. Climbing in, I took a minute to rearrange the bedding over Bella, before laying back on the far side of the bed to try to sleep. To ignore the beautiful body laying next to me.

Like I said...to *ignore* the...

*Ignore* it Edward!

*Ig-nore.*

La la la la la...sheep. Count sheep. One. Two. Three. Four. I hate sheep. Dammit!

"Medward?" Bella's very quiet, very sleepy voice mumbled my name.

"Yeah?"

She rolled over towards me, laying on her side. Reaching an arm up and across me, her fingers ran through my hair before her hand slumped down, settling on my shoulder. Right arm flung across my chest, the warmth of her body radiated up my side. The warmth of my hormones radiated somewhere else entirely.

"G'night," she mumbled, very—*oh!*—close to my ear.

"Night, Bella."

It was going to be a very, very long night.

## **Geek Love Chapter 8: In Which Our Flummoxed Lovers Spork**

I had spent the last fifteen minutes and twenty three seconds trying to get rid of my painful erection, when Bella—unintentionally—made matters worse.

She closed the gap between us, scooting herself flush against my side, wrapping her arm tightly around my torso, and placing her head on my chest with a sigh. My arm, naturally wrapped itself around her shoulder, cradling her head against me.

After a moment, Bella—who I thought was fast asleep—raised her face to mine and kissed me firmly on the cheek before lowering her head again. Her sleep-muffled voice rose from the vicinity of my chest.

"G'night, Edward. Thanks for taking care of me."

Leaning in, I kissed the top of her head, smiling. "Any time, Bella."

I wasn't sure exactly what it was, but to at least some degree Jasper was right—he had to be. At this particular moment, it certainly didn't feel entirely one-sided.

The longer I held Bella, the more natural it felt. After a few minutes I was able to relax. She was deeply asleep almost instantly, which made it easier. I lay on my back, contemplating everything that had happened during the evening, while actively ignoring the sounds coming from the living room.

The next thing I knew, sunlight was fighting its way into my bedroom—but for the most part failing, since I had closed the curtains. Blinking a few times to clear the fogginess from my head, I looked at Bella. She lay on her side, her back to me. I was effectively curled around her, arm draped over her hip.

I should move. I really should. This felt very...*intimate*...for the cold, hard, sober light of day. But the woman felt *fantastic*...

Aw, fuck it, I wasn't moving.

Bella stirred slightly, turning her face just a fraction towards me.

"Edward?" she asked sleepily, "Are we sporking?"

Laughing, I had to spit some of her hair out of my mouth before I could reply.

"I'm pretty sure most people call this 'spooning' Bella."

"Well that's stupid. If I have to be an eating utensil, I'm sure as hell not a spoon. I'm *way* cooler than a spoon. And unless I'm totally off-base, we're not forking."

I groaned. The woman was killing me.

"Nope. I'd have noticed if we were forking, for sure."

Just then a ray of sunlight broke through a gap in the curtain, shining on her face. God she was beautiful. She also looked hung-over. Her eyes were red and swollen, her cheeks puffier than usual, and there were...wait...what the hell was that? There were telltale shiny tracks down her face. The kind only left by dried tears.

I pulled back, turning her toward me a little. "Bella?"

"Yeah?" She sounded hesitant.

"Were you *crying*? Last night, I mean?"

Silence.

"Bella?"

"...no..."

"Yeah, *that's* convincing. What's wrong?"

Silence.

Shit. "Is it *this*?" I indicated the space between us. "Did I do something to—"

"Jesus Edward!" She threw the covers back, swinging her legs over the side of the bed, walking towards the bathroom.

"What?"

"It's not all *about* you, OK? This isn't the goddamn Edward Show."

She probably would have slammed the bathroom door had my bathrobe not been hanging off it, and the sleeve not caught between the door and jamb. Struggling for a moment, she closed the door decisively, turning on the shower a moment later.

Realizing that she would want privacy to get dressed at some point, and in desperate need of a social interpreter, I left the bedroom to join a still-sleeping Jasper in the living room.

He was sprawled out on the couch, wearing nothing but a pair of Spongebob Squarepants boxer shorts, a blanket thrown randomly over his legs.

"Jasper!" I called out as I walked past him, heading for the kitchen. Whatever the hell was going on, coffee could only help.

Fifteen minutes later, Jasper was propped up on my breakfast bar nursing a steaming mug of coffee, one eye still closed, the other looking at me dubiously.

"I have no idea. Honestly. Things seemed fine — *good* even. I have no idea what's going on with her. One minute we're joking around, the next minute she's pissed at me."

Jasper shrugged, looking much more intent on his coffee than on my problems.

"Eddie—" Stopping at my look, he corrected himself, "Edward, I don't get you two. Why didn't you just ask her? Seriously, how hard is basic fucking communication?"

"I *did* ask her!"

"And?..."

"And nothing. Apparently it's not all *about* me, and this isn't The Edward Show."

"Oh man..."

"What?"

"Nothing. You two deserve each other, that's all."

Sighing, I contemplated the lettering on my coffee mug.

### **RTFM**

Read The Fucking Manual. If only she had one, I *would* fucking read it. *Jesus*.

I pulled out some frozen microwaveable bacon and a few eggs to fry up, and proceeded to make breakfast. Jasper pulled up my laptop and started browsing the news. By 'news' I mean the Entertainment section—that's the only news Jasper reads.

"Dude! One step closer on the Arrested Development movie. Yes! Third best show ever made, that was."

"What were the first two?"

"Blackadder—not the first season of course—and Teletubbies."

"You can't be serious."

"Look at me Edward. Would this face lie?"

"Yes."

"OK, well it's not right now."

Flipping the eggs and pulling the bacon from the microwave, I started to plate the food, unsure if Bella wanted any or not.

"Sweet! That sparkly vampire movie's coming out—the newest one. What is this, the second? Third? I can never keep track."



"You watch that shit? Jasper...what, are you a thirteen year old girl now?"

"Edward," he intoned solemnly, "have you *seen* that chick? You know...the one with the spiky hair? Seriously, I would tap that, lil' bro. Tap. That."

I snorted. "Like you'd have the chance. You'd have to leave the DVD player long enough to go out on a date with her—if she even would."

Rolling his eyes he grunted at me. "That's what they make portable DVD players for, my friend."

Just then Bella walked out of the bedroom, showered, dressed, and looking much less hung-over. She stopped cold when she saw Jasper, cocking an eyebrow at him, letting out a long, low whistle.

"Jas-per...*hello* there. God I love a man with a pink starfish on his ass."

Jasper waggled his eyebrows at her, holding his arms open for a hug.

"Morning, sweet thing."

Laughing lightly she gave him a quick hug, and then came into the kitchen, standing next to me. I eyeballed her dubiously.

"Can I have one?" she asked shyly.

"One what?"

"A hug." She looked down, embarrassment written across her face. "Sorry for being so tookie about...everything."

I took the pan off the heat and set down the spatula, pulling her into my arms. My face nestled into her still-damp hair, and I breathed in for just a moment.

"I just wish I knew what I did," I told her quietly.

She squeezed me a little tighter before letting go, taking a step back. "Nothing. Honestly. It's me. I'm just...messed up. Let's just forget about it, OK?" She leaned in and planted a kiss on my cheek before turning to walk out of the kitchen.

"Do you want breakfast?"

"No thanks, I have to get going."

Walking toward the door, she stopped for a moment, looking thoughtful.

"Jasper, it was really nice to finally meet you." Her expression cleared and she grinned at him. "You're everything I heard—and more. Edward, I'll see you at work."

"Later, Bella," I waved the spatula at her, pushing a plate of food in front of Jasper, who was blowing a kiss as she closed the door behind her.

"You know Edward, she's really cool. I like her. You should marry her. And have babies with her. And then teach those babies how to not communicate like normal people. Make it a family tradition. Ya know?"

I leaned over and stuck my thumb in his eggs.

"How's *that* for 'socially retarded'?"

## **Geek Love Chapter 9: In Which a Wedding is Discussed**

It's such a cliché to hate Mondays. Not to be contrary or anything, but I actually hate Tuesdays more. Don't get me wrong, I hate Mondays too, but Tuesdays are sneaky bastards. Just turning up on Monday feels like it should count for a couple of days' work. You should be able to skip from Monday to, say, Thursday. But then you wake up on Tuesday and realize you didn't get a freebie, and you sorta wanna cry. Just a little...

"Cullen!"

Guess who that was?

"Newton."

"Bella get home OK on Friday? I tried calling to check on her, but didn't hear back."

I shouldn't. I really shouldn't—

"She got home OK, but not till *Saturday*..." I let my voice carry all the misbegotten implication it could.

"Oh? What happ...*oh!*" His eyes narrowed. "Cullen, she was pretty wasted. That's not really—"

"Morning, Edward," Bella's melodic, sexy, spank-my-nuts-and-call-me-Alice voice sang down the hallway. OK, that was mostly in my head—she actually sounded pretty down. Still, the "Morning, Edward" part was accurate enough.

Bella stopped, seeing Mike next to me.

"Good morning, Miss Bella," Mike oozed, doing something approximating a courtly bow. Jesus, was it possible to get an STD from someone's voice? If so, you'd definitely need to be tested after listening to Newton.

Bella stonewalled him, saying nothing. I was *so* over my jealousy thing with these two. Whatever Bella wanted, it clearly wasn't Mike. I decided I'd help her out—just hoping it fell under "charming" and not "possessive-creepy-stalker".

"Mike was worried about you getting home OK on Friday. I explained that you stayed at myplace, which is why you didn't return his call."

"Yeah..." She looked momentarily confused, then twigged on, "...yeah, that's right. I meant to call you back, Mike, but by then the message was, like, a day and a half old. I figured I'd just see you on Monday." Sidling up to me, she exuded intentional sexy—something I'd never seen in Bella before.

I liked it.

"Hey, Edward," she was petting my arm. Oh-h-h-h... "thanks again for taking care of me. I can't remember when I slept so well. Your sheets are *amazing*. I meant to ask you—what do they *say* anyway?"

"It's dirty talk," I smirked at her, then looking towards Mike I clarified, "In binary."

She grinned mischievously at me. Playing it up for Mike, she put her arm through mine.

"I *like* it," she purred.

Down boy. *Down* boy.

Just then Justine, our office manager, wafted by, all stick-figure wrapped in frilly stripes and too much perfume.

"Edward," she called out to me, "there's a package for you in the delivery closet. From that thinky place again."

"Think Geek," I called out to her.

"*Whatever*."

Bella walked away, muttering something along the lines of "Fn nont itch...should be shot."

Stopping at the goodie closet I grabbed the box with my name on it, wondering which item it was. I had gone on something of a spending spree recently, and was waiting for several things.

Back at my desk I opened it, pulling out my new magnetic poetry set—in LOLCats. Bella and I often sent each other messages in LOLCats, the unabashed bastardization of the English language making us both giggle geekily.

I threw together a few lines on my small whiteboard, writing the words not provided in dry-erase marker, and carried it to Bella's desk.

**OH HAI FRIEND!**

**KOFFEH? FRIEND HAZ TRIFECTA. NOM NOM NOM!**

Bella's smile seemed a little forced, but she grabbed the board from me and wrote back:

**EVRY TIME U LOLCATS, GOD KILLZ A KITTEH—DED!**

I laughed, asking her in actual English if she wanted some Fauxbucks from the kitchen.

Ten minutes later we were quietly nursing cups of mediocre heaven, when I decided that two things needed to happen: I needed—*wanted*—to invite Bella to come with me this weekend. But first I had to find out what the hell was eating at her, making her act all bipolar on me.

"Bella?"

"Yeah?"

"What's up?"

"A chicken's ass when it eats. Why, what's up with you?"

I sighed. As much as I love joking around with Bella, I needed a moment of serious conversation.

"Am I doing something that pisses you off all the time? Or am I missing something?"

She frowned, staring deeply into her coffee, looking rather beaten-down.

"Edward, it's...it's not you, OK. I said that before, and I mean it. You're...great. You're...you, which is..." she sighed, sounding both frustrated and very sincere, "...great. You really are."

She took my hand in hers, but quickly let it drop when someone walked in to grab a snack from the Scooby Snack cabinet.

"I don't know what exactly anything is right now, but please just know, it's not you, OK? Can you trust me on that?"

"Will you tell me what it *is* then?"

"Yes...no...I mean...yes, but not right now. Ugh. Can you be patient?"

Sighing I tried to swallow my frustration. I had known her for a freakin' year and a half already. Jesus, I think I've been patient. Then I mentally backhanded myself for being such a self-involved asswad. Just because I've suddenly had an emotional vivication, and realized I'm in love with the girl doesn't mean I have any right to expect her to spill her guts. Hell, I'm not even man enough to kiss her!

"Yes, Bella. I can be patient. Can you try not to keep me hanging too long?"

She snorted—a short bitter sound. Yeah, that's not good.

We nursed our coffee in silence while I tried to find my balls.

"Bella?"

"Yeah?" She sounded very dubious.

*Balls, balls, balls, balls...oh hai! There you are, balls.*

"Will you come to my sister's wedding with me?"

Surprise colored her features. "Um...sure. When is it?"

"Saturday."

"What? What the hell kind of notice is that, Cullen! Jesus, Edward, do you know how long it takes someone like me to find a dress suitable for a wedding?"

"Well, I can probably help you with that."

"What, you own a stockpile of cute dresses I can borrow?" She leveled her gaze at me, eyes narrowing. "Are you a cross-dresser Edward? You *are* kinda pretty. Oooh...can I see you tuck?"

"Shut it, Swan. No, I don't put on dresses, and I most *definitely* do not tuck—that's Jasper's thing, and only when there's a lot of tequila involved. The wedding is on a beach. Very informal. I'm quite serious when I say clean shorts and a t-shirt will be just fine."

Her face brightened. "Seriously? That's awesome! Shorts I can do. Bring your sunglasses though—the glare you'll catch from my legs could possibly blind you."

She stopped a moment, thinking. "Edward, you must have known about this for awhile. Why ask me now? Did your date fall through?"

Wow, were we pretty freakin' far from the same page.

"No, Bella," I smiled at her, trying to keep it light. "I wasn't planning to bring anyone at all, but I realized there will be a dearth of geeks, and I need some of my own kind."

She smiled faintly, looking a little disappointed in my answer. She had a right to be. I sucked at this. Taking her hand in mine, I decided to screw lighthearted and go for honest.

"Bella, I'd really like you there. I would have asked you before, but...I was...well, honestly, I was too chicken-shit. I didn't ask anyone else. There's no-one else I'd want to take...*fuck I suck at this.*"

Keeping her hand in one of mine, the other one automatically began running through my hair—something I almost couldn't control when I was nervous.

"I just want you there." I finished quietly. "Is that bad?" My eyes stayed locked on my coffee cup, unable, or unwilling, to read her face at that moment.

Then I heard her let out a quiet laugh, and I looked up to meet her shining gaze, a smile playing at the corner of her mouth.

"Edward, you suck at that in an awesome kind of way. Yes, I'll totally go with you."

Thank fucking God.

"Where is it?"

"Friday Harbor."

"The San Juan Islands? Holy ferry ride Batman! That's going to be quite a Saturday to get there and back, and spend any time at all at the wedding."

*Oh crap*, I need them balls again.

"Um...it's actually a weekend invitation, Bella. My family rented a lodge—" Seeing the look on her face I quickly added, "—you'll have your own room of course. We would go on Friday night and come back Sunday afternoon."

You know how there are some people whose faces show their every thought? Bella's one of those people. I could see that she wanted to go, then fear or concern flitted across her face, then her features settled into a steely expression of resolve.

"OK. I'll bring my stuff in with me on Friday. We can leave from work."

Inside—deep, deep, deep inside—I was doing a happy dance.

## Geek Love Chapter 10: In Which There is a Kiss

Friday morning I rented a car to get us to the ferry. Bella and I could have, no doubt, found space in one of my family's many cars, but I wanted the time alone with her. We'd never even been in a car together before.

Sometime around 5:45 we hit the road trying to catch one of the last ferries that runs through the San Juan Islands. We were headed for the biggest island in the group—aptly named San Juan. Destination: Friday Harbor.

It was about a ninety minute drive to the ferry in Anacortes, then a seventy-five minute ferry ride to San Juan Island. We were crawling up I-5, stuck behind an accident near the 405 junction.

"So, tell me about your sister and her fiancé."

"Hmmm...how do you sum up someone you've known your whole life? Rosalie's the classic blonde with a big heart. She can be a mean-ass bitch, but what big sister isn't? She's the oldest Cullen kid—about fourteen months older than Jasper, and about three years older than me."

"Wow, your mom was busy! Three kids in three years?"

"Yeah, well, my parents are...um...*into* each other, if you know what I mean. Honestly I'm surprised there aren't a dozen of us."

"Ew."

Laughing, I changed lanes—the HOV one was moving faster now. "Yeah, tell me about it. This one time, when I was about four, Rosalie went into their bedroom and found what she thought was a bottle of hand sanitizer on the nightstand. She brought it out thinking she'd score Brownie points with Mom by having all of us sanitize our hands before lunch. When Mom came in, she *fuh-reaked* out!

Bella looked a little reluctant, like she knew the answer but didn't *want* to know it. "I hate to ask, but what was it?"

"Astroglide. Mom didn't realize until later that we had no clue what it was. *Then* she had to explain why she was so upset."

"Oh, noes! Parent fail!" She laughed again, clearly picturing the three of us as little kids, rubbing Astroglide on our hands, wondering why it didn't evaporate.

"So what does Rosalie do?"

"Well, she *was* a kindergarten teacher, but decided not to go back this year once the wedding planning got started. They're going to try for a family right away, apparently."

"Wow. She must like kids."

"Or like the idea of trading twenty-five of them for just one."

"Good point."

"Emmett, is also a teacher in a way—but definitely not to little kids. He's an instructor for the SWAT team."

"Seriously? Wow, that sounds like something out of a movie."

"Yeah, I know. But he's actually a really cool guy. Totally down to earth. I'm happy for Rose, she's found someone just right for her. It's about time too. She dated some utter asswipes."

"*Right*. It couldn't possibly be that you're just an over-protective brother."

"Mike Newton."

"What?"

"She went out with Mike Newton a few times. They met through a friend of a friend. This was right before I started working there. But even Rose was able to see what an epic douche-count the guy had, and she dropped him after a few dates. Actually, he didn't stop making references to it until recently—about the time he started making goo-goo eyes at you."

Bella mock heaved, catching imaginary vomit in her hands and wiping it on her pants—and my sleeve.

"Careful Bella," I warned, trying to hide my smile. "It'll be a very, very long time before you, me, and vomit are funny again."

She lowered her head, trying—and failing—to hide the blush creeping up her neck, flooding her cheeks. I felt bad. I shouldn't be teasing her like that. Reaching up to tuck her hair behind her ear, mostly so I could see her face better, I couldn't resist stroking her cheek lightly. Her skin was so soft.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"*You're* sorry, Edward? Jesus, how do you think *I* feel?" She reached up and took my hand in hers, pulling it from her face.

Chuckling, I squeezed her hand. "Quite honestly that was one of the most interesting nights of my life. Please don't be sorry."

"Really? What a sad life you must lead."



"Tell me about it. It's just me, my laptop, and occasionally Jasper."

"You left out the porn, Edward. Where there's Jasper, there is, undoubtedly, porn."

"True dat," I chuckled. "How about you?"

"Oh, I never watch porn with my brother." She hadn't let go of my hand, a detail I was very, very aware of. It felt wonderful, soft, natural, amazing, and...horribly arousing.

"Bella, you don't *have* a brother."

"No-o-o...but I can promise you that if I did, we wouldn't watch porn together."

"So? Who *do* you kill your time with?"

"Pretty much it's just Stinkybritches and me. Occasionally I'll drive down to have dinner with my dad, or visit my mom in Phoenix if it's a longer holiday. But mostly I'm just home with—"

"—Stinkybritches."

"Yeah."

"Stinkybritches is a—"

"Cat, Edward. What the hell else would you give a name like 'Stinkybritches'?"

I snorted. "Bella, with you, who knows. Could be you're hiding a fourteen year old love-child you've horribly scarred by naming 'Stinkybritches'. Could be a pet cockroach. You're one of those people who keeps everyone else on their toes when it comes to the details."

We kept talking—and she kept holding my hand—all the way to the ferry. I had *mostly* won the battle with my erection, only occasionally having to make up things to point at out the window—deer, signs, dead bodies—to draw her attention away from my little problem.

OK, maybe not 'little'.

By the time we pulled into the San Juan line at the ferry terminal, it was comfortable between us. I set the emergency brake, turned off the ignition, and sat back. Looking at her hand, so fair and soft, I slowly passed my thumb over the mound at the base of her palm. Without noticing, we had both turned a little, facing each other.

I wanted to say something to her, to let her know how amazing I thought she was. To tell her that something as simple as holding her hand had made my entire fucking year. But what to say? "I like this?" Cheesy. Pathetic. "Please don't ever let go?" Desperate, bordering stalkerish. "Can we fuck now?" Wow, my brain needed to be washed out with soap.

"Edward, this is..."

Looking up into her face—her beautiful shining face—it said everything I was thinking and more. I was elated—for a moment. The 'more' concerned me though. Her eyes were bright, hopeful, happy, but clouded over *just slightly* with...doubt? Concern? Whatever it was, I wanted to put an end to it. Jasper was right, I needed to man the fuck up and declare myself.

Putting on what I hoped was a reassuring smile, I squeezed her hand.

"Good," I answered her. "This is good." Then shaking my head, I clarified, "*Better* than good." Using my free hand I reached up to touch her cheek, and pushed a stray lock of hair out of the way, tucking it behind her ear. She leaned into my hand slightly, causing a tightening in my chest.

When I looked at her, we both knew what was coming next. Her eyes flickered with something—expectation?...hope?—I couldn't say. But she didn't pull away, that was the important thing. I leaned in slowly, knowing, without understanding why, that this was a "kid glove" moment, one hand holding hers, the other laying against her cheek.

Her eyes fluttered shut, lips parting just slightly as my mouth met hers, a tendril of warm breath escaping between them. I melted into her, losing myself in the luscious welcoming feel of her lips. Letting go of my hand, she reached around, grasping the back of my head, clutching at my hair in an attempt to pull me closer.

My reaction to her was immediate. Grasping her waist, I pulled her toward me, deepening the kiss until I felt her tongue meet mine. A tiny whimper came from Bella, igniting an inextinguishable fire in me. She was glorious. Passionate. Fan-fucking-tastic!

Then in a flash she was gone.

Startled, I opened my eyes to see Bella sitting on the far side of the seat, against the door, cheeks flushed, eyes wide like a frightened deer, mouth shaping itself into a word that never came.

"Bella?" My voice was tight—constricted by the pace of my heart and rapid breathing.

Her arms wrapped tightly around her body, and she hunched over slightly, looking defeated. As her eyes squeezed shut, a single tear ran down her cheek, quickly hidden by the wall of hair that fell in front of her face as she bowed her head.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"Bella, what is it?...I thought..." My hands scrubbed distractedly at my hair, "What did I *do*?"

I wanted desperately to touch her—to comfort her—but I suspected that touching her was the cause of this, and sure as hell didn't want to make it worse. She didn't look at me, didn't come out from under the curtain of hair, but she did speak.

"Edward," her voice so quiet I could barely make out her words, "I'm *so sorry*. I'm not good at—"

The sound of banging behind my head startled both of us. We looked up to see Jasper and Emmett standing next to the car door, grinning like a couple of frat boys at their first party.

I panicked for a split second, thinking Bella might just hightail it and run home. Then Jasper looked through the window, and taking one look at Bella, walked to her side of the car, throwing her door open. Offering her his hand, he pulled her free of the car, and into a bear hug, whispering something in her ear.

She laughed lightly, a sad sort of laugh, but looked a little better already. He turned them away from us, calling over his shoulder, "Edward, I'm stealing your girlfriend. Take care of Emmett for me, would you? If he tries to abandon ship and leave Rose at the altar, shoot him."

Emmett laughed loudly, calling out, "You could only hope, Jasper. You're stuck with me for life, *bro!*"

Bella turned to give me a wave and a tentative smile, apology written all over her features, before they disappeared into the walk-on line for the ferry.

## **Geek Love Chapter 11: In Which There is a Play**

OK, seriously? *Seriously?* This sucked. I had finally kissed the girl of my dreams, and what does she do? She fucking cries. Oh, and then runs off into the arms of my brother. Talk about wood fail.

I didn't see Bella for the first half hour or so after the ferry pulled away from the dock. Jasper had whisked her away somewhere, presumably to chat. Why was it so easy for him? He'd met the girl twice and was comforting her. I had known her a year and a half and was doing nothing but make her cry—or storm out of the room.

WTF?

I was sitting at one of the tables, looking out the large plate glass window when Emmett joined me, a mischievous grin on his face.

"Hey Ed, what's up?"

I glared at him. "Emmett?"

"Yeah?"

"I like you, and you're joining my family, so I'll say this as nicely as I can. My name is *Edward*. Not Ed. Not Eddie. Not Eddalicious. Not Eddie Munster. Not Edward Scissorhands. Not E-Pain. Not anything that is a humorous, or not-so-humorous *version* of Edward. It's Edward. E-d-w-a-r-d.

"Please take the next few minutes to let that sink in, and do your abso-fucking-best to remember it for the next, oh, fifty years, or I swear I'll make four-foot by six-foot prints of the lap-dance photos from your bachelor party. You won't be able to turn around without seeing Jasper's ugly drag-queen ass doing the bump-nasty on you—and you decidedly enjoying it."

He stared at me, eyes wide. "Rose *told* me it was fun to see you go off about your name. I figured I had to try it at least once." Chuckling, he added, "She was totally right—that *was* fun."

"I'm here to entertain," I rolled my eyes. "Sorry for going off...it's been a bad day. But I do hate the name thing."

"Yeah, got it," he grinned at me. He was so different from anyone else Rosalie had dated. I really was hopeful about this new brother of mine.

"So...what's up Edward? Girl trouble?"

"Girl? You mean the one that's off with my brother, because apparently she can talk to him but not me? Nah, no problem there."

Emmett's expression was thoughtful for a moment, and when he spoke it was measured—almost careful. "Edward, don't take it too hard. Jasper's...different. He does the same thing with Rose and me. I really think he can *feel* what's wrong with someone, and somehow he just knows what to say to you. My guess is he's trying to work his magic on Bella to help you out." He grinned at me. "From what I hear, you need it!"

"Shit. What did he say?"

"Not much. He just said he'd met Bella, thought she was awesome, and that you were totally gone on her. Said you guys were perfect for each other, but that you were both...crap, what was the phrase he used?..."

"Socially retarded? Communication-challenged asshats?"

"Um...yeah. But without the asshat bit."

I laughed. "Well *that's* something, I guess."

"What the hell *is* an asshat anyway? Sounds uncomfortable."

Just then Jasper and Bella walked towards us. As they approached, Jasper steered Bella so she was on my side of the booth. Sliding in next to me, she smiled shyly. Jasper scooted next to Emmett—who took up most of his side because he was, like, one and a half people huge.

"Hey," Bella said quietly.

"Hi, you."

"I'm sorry. *Again.*" Bella looked down, sheepish.

"Bella did I—"

"Edward, you didn't do *anything*. For the *eleventeenth* time, this is all me. It *is* the Bella Show." She smiled and threw in some jazz hands to add pizzazz. "Look, I know I'm being a big vajayjay about everything, but—" She looked significantly at Jasper and Emmett, "—let's talk later, OK?"

Leaning her head on my shoulder, she took my hand in hers. It surprised me how quickly that became natural. It still felt amazing, and exciting, and all that good shit, but it also just felt *right*. And now that I knew she felt at least something like I did, that made everything a lot easier—except for whatever the hell was going on in her angsty little mind.

We decided to hit the ferry cafeteria—partly because Emmett was hungry, partly just to kill time. Bella ordered a burger—or as she put it, "a slab of dead cow between two fluffy buns." Since she's apparently a bottomless pit, she also added a bag of apple slices with caramel dipping sauce, two bags of potato chips, a banana, a large soda, and a chocolate sundae. Then she proceeded to drench the burger patty in ketchup, singing "yak's blood, yak's blood, warm and squishy yak's blood!" in a high-pitched squeaky voice.

After that, I opted for fish and chips.

About the time I was ready to puke, having eaten far too much for someone who wasn't hungry in the first place, Jasper started playing with our food. I don't mean "random touching" sort of playing. I mean, four-year-old playing.

Taking one of Bella's fries, he scooped a little caramel sauce onto one end of it, standing it upright. He then took another fry and did the same but with chocolate sauce from her sundae.

Sauce covered the top of each fry, dripping down a little on either side. Walking the chocolate fry across the table towards the caramel fry, he started speaking in a high-pitched "girl" voice, but with a stupid cartoonish accent.

"Oh hai Ed-waaard! You're so *cuuuute*, and *sexy*, and *delicious* and I just want to NOM NOM NOM on you!"

Then he lowered his voice to a dark Darth Vader rasp, wiggling the caramel fry back and forth.

"Bella, that's fuckawesome, 'cos I want to frag you, and stick my hard drive in your floppy slot'n'shit. You know, whatever it is us geeks *do*."

He was putting on a play.

About us.

With Bella's fries.

**Squeaky Chocolate Bella Fry:** "Oh Edward, I just love your hair! It's so messy, and hot, like it just got fucked by a room full of monkeys. And it smells so *good* too. Sometimes, I dream about eating it on toast. Hey, are you, like, *huge*? You know...in the penis area? I've always wondered..."

**Vader Caramel Edward Fry:** "Bella, you're so hot. Maybe one day I'll be able to talk to you and we can figure out that we're fucking perfect for each other. Then I can finally stop fwapping over you and we can make the geek with two backs! Maybe even make some baby geeks! Cos I lo—"

**Squeaky Chocolate Bella Fry:** "—What?"

**Vader Caramel Edward Fry:** "Huh?"

**Squeaky Chocolate Bella Fry:** "Did you say something?"

**Vader Caramel Edward Fry:** "Bella! I can't hear you!"

**Squeaky Chocolate Bella Fry:** "What?"

**Vader Caramel Edward Fry:** "Oh no! Communication fail! Dammit Jim, why can't I understand her?"

**Squeaky Chocolate Bella Fry:** "Edward! Every time we say anything serious we can't understand each other! Oh no! We'll have to cloak everything in a veneer of flippant comments and ridiculous geek humor!"

**Vader Caramel Edward Fry:** "What?"

Any concern I had about Bella being offended by my brother went away when she doubled over, laughing so hard she banged her head—*hard*—on the table. Holding her forehead, she kept giggle-snorting with the occasional "ow!" mixed in.

When I returned my focus to the play, Jasper had the fries lying down on the table, one on top of the other, Caramel Fry giving it hard—and *loud*—to Chocolate Fry. Sauce was dripping down on to the table.

The sex noises were drawing all kinds of attention from fellow ferry passengers—one woman getting out of her seat and marching her young daughter out, a look of disgust thrown our way.

**Squeaky Chocolate Bella Fry:** "Oh, Edward, you're so hard, and hot, and spudly! You feel *so good*! Give it to me! Yeah, just like that!"

**Vader Caramel Edward Fry:** "Yes, oh, yes! Bella, God you're so greasy for me. Mmmm...I just wanna lick all the salt off you...Oh, shit I'm gonna...I'm gonna...Oh!...Ooooh!"

Just then Emmett threw a glob of Ranch dressing onto the two French fries, and Jasper stopped, eyeballing the glob significantly, then levelled us a very serious look.

"Kids, despite what you saw here today, withdrawal is not an effective method of birth control."

"Unless you're a potato," Emmett added helpfully.

"Unless you're a potato," Jasper confirmed, solemnly.

~oOo~

Two hours later we were settling into the lodge. It was on a lake, with fantastic views from the bedrooms. Bella and I had adjacent rooms. Apparently word had spread within the family that we were something of an 'item' so they made sure we were close.

The first night was just a rehearsal dinner—there really being no need for an actual rehearsal. The 'wedding' part was scheduled to last less than twenty minutes, and involved gathering on the beach wearing shorts and holding a cocktail.

I had decided to dress up a little bit for the dinner, so I put on my one and only suit—a charcoal grey slim-fit three-button suit Rose had helped me pick. Bella had said she would dress up a little too—I guess she had brought something other than shorts after all.

It was a little early for dinner, but I figured if I went to Bella's room now, either I'd get to watch her finish getting ready—*down boy!*—or we could have a quick cocktail before dinner. Opening the door to my room, I stepped lightly into the hallway, turning toward Bella's door.

I'm not sure which hit first: the smell of her perfume, her touch on my arm, or hearing the sound of her voice. But any one of the three was enough to turn my stomach.

"Edward?" Her surprised voice assaulted my eardrums.

I looked up to see the smiling, overly made-up face of Jessica Stanley leering at me. OK, she wasn't exactly 'leering', but she was *there*, that was enough.

"It's so nice to see you, Edward." Her hand lay lightly on my upper arm. I remembered that oddly light touch with a shudder.

"How have you been, Jessica?"

"Good, good. You? It's been awhile, huh?"

"Um...yeah. I didn't know you and Rose were still friends. Are you here with someone?"

I mentally kicked myself in the ass for asking her that. It made it sound like I actually *cared* when really I just wanted the woman to keep walking so I could get to Bella.

She took my question exactly how I feared she might. A smile slowly crept up her face, and her hand tightened on my arm. I fought the urge to shake it loose.

"No, I came all by myself. In fact, I was hoping we could see more of each other Edward," she purred.

Then her smile faded, her expression growing serious—earnest—as she looked me directly in the eye. "I've missed you. Maybe we could spend some time together later. You know, talk about old times? Maybe you could come to my room later?"

Eyes slitting in what she must have thought was a sexy expression, she leaned in closer, stage-whispering, "It gets awfully cold at night on the island."

"Jessica, that's really sweet of you, but—"

A noise to my left startled me. I looked over to see Bella turning to walk down the hallway, anguished expression on her face. I hadn't heard her door open, so I was a little confused at first. Then I realized her door must have been open—at least a little. I had been so distracted by Jessica I didn't even look.

She must have heard everything. *Holy miscommunication Batman*, did she think—

No, she couldn't possibly!...but...what the hell *did* she think?

I took off after Bella, without even a wave to Jessica. Catching up with her halfway down the stairs, I grabbed her arm, wrenching her around a little more harshly than I had intended.

"Bella, stop! Whatever you think you heard, it wasn't—"

Bella was shaking her head, mouth pressed firmly shut with the effort of holding back tears.

"Look," I tried again, "I don't know what you're thinking, but there's nothing going on with Jessica. That was over a very long time ago and—"

"Edward." Her voice was tight, sad, but not angry. She sounded defeated. Miserable. Her hand came up to rest on my arm, where Jessica's had been just a moment before.



"Edward, this isn't some made for TV movie where the girl hears the guy talking with some B-character, and misunderstanding and hilarity ensue. I *know* you weren't going to go off with...whoever that was."

If she knew all this, then what was the problem? Frustration started rearing its ugly head.

"Well then what the hell is this Bella?"

"Edward, I told you I'm not good at this—the communication part. I'm *trying*, but—"

"So am I, Bella. I'm trying to do what you asked—I'm trying like hell to be patient, to let you talk to me when you're ready, but you're making it pretty fucking hard when—"

"When I keep pulling shit like this all the time?" She sounded so sad. It knocked my anger out cold. I paused a moment before answering.

"Bella, I just want to *be* with you. I've taken my own long-ass time telling you that, so it's not fair for me to expect you to jump on board the minute I do. I know that. But I just don't get it. If you want to be with me, then let me in. If you don't, then tell me that. *Please*."

Running a hand through my hair, I let out a frustrated breath, trying not to look at Bella's heartbroken expression.

"I do," she said quietly—her voice barely audible.

Relief washed over me.

"Then what is it Bella? Is it *me*? Is there some reason you can't talk to me? I know, I know it's not the Edward Show. But I'm one of the key players here, and I'm starting to feel like a bit part. For some reason you can talk to Jasper, but not me. Why is that? Am I really that shitty of a communicator?"

She let out a deep sigh. "Edward...no. That's not it at all. Jasper doesn't know much more than you do. It's just been easier to let him in a little because—"

She looked down at the floor, rubbing her forehead. "—because he's less important than you are. To me. You're—" Her voice choked off with a sob. "—important."

I had been oblivious, until now, of the increasing sounds of guests arriving downstairs for the dinner. We were almost the last to be seated, and were highly visible from our position in the middle of the stairs.

Taking each of her arms in my hands, I looked down, meeting her teary gaze.

"Bella, I want to be with you. I can't say it more clearly than that. I can be patient—I'm not pushing you, honestly. But I'm worried that unless you tell me whatever the hell is going on with you, it's going to kill—*this*," I indicated the space between us.

Bella nodded sadly, a fat tear rolling down her cheek.

"You're right, Edward." Her voice was barely audible. "About all of it."

"Hey Edward!" My dad's voice called out from the bottom of the stairs. "Dinner's on, kiddo. You guys coming down?"

~oOo~

Dinner was...long. Not the most fun I've ever had. We toasted the happy couple, who drank each of the toasts with relish, and finished dinner with loud sloppy declarations of love and promises of wild sex on their wedding night—which were disturbingly cheered on by my parents.

Bella did her best to put on a happy face, and at times even looked convincing. I hadn't noticed, while we were talking on the stairs, what Bella had been wearing. I got the chance to check her out during dinner, and—as always—she looked fucking amazing. For once she was wearing make-up, but true to form it was minimal and perfect. Just some thing that made her eyes look dark and smudgy, and her lips were all shiny.

She was wearing a flowy kind of skirt that was cut on an angle—so it was mid-thigh length on one side and just below the knee on the other—along with a shirt that gathered under her boobs, and some sort of strappy heels. I had never seen Bella in heels—or a skirt for that matter. Her legs were in-fucking-sanelly sexy.

But I couldn't focus on that. I just wondered what the hell was up, and if I was going to lose this fuckawesome girl before I really ever had her. I really, really wanted to skip the emo-drama part and just get to the happily-ever-after part.

After everyone finished and were repairing to their various drinking locations—the billiards room, the living room, a variety of bedrooms—I was wondering what Bella and I should do for the rest of the evening when Jasper walked up with a full bottle of champagne in his hand.

"Bella! Edward! Get your asses over here you retarded geekizoids."

When Bella walked over to him she got the bottle of champagne shoved at her. I joined them, just in time to hear the tail end of what Jasper was telling her.

"—to him. Just open up. I don't know what it is, Bella, and I don't need to know. Honestly, I don't think he even needs to know. But I think you sure as shit need to tell him."

Bella looked embarrassed, and not a little scared, but she didn't disagree. Her expression hardened a little, as if she had made some internal resolve. Looking at me, she offered her hand.

"Edward? Will you please take a walk to the lake with me? I think we need to talk."

I took the proffered hand and lead Bella out the glass doors, towards the lake.

## **Geek Love Chapter 12: In Which All is Revealed**

Bella and I walked in complete silence, hand-in-hand. Neither of us were in a hurry to get to wherever we were going. She was thoughtful as we walked, eyes directed at the ground.

The closer we got to the lake the softer the ground became. After a few minutes Bella stopped and handed me the bottle of Champagne Jasper had given her.

"I need to take my shoes off, my toes are making mud pies in these things. Will you open this while I deshodify?"

Nodding, I began to open the bottle as she leaned on me, one hand on my shoulder for support, the other working the buckles on her sandals. At one point she almost fell, and I heard her muttering.

"Stupid strappy girly things, don't you fucking sparkle at me. Go back to college and become something useful—like Texas."

I realized then that with everything that happened before dinner I hadn't told her how nice she looked, and made an attempt to remedy that.

"Bella? You..." I rubbed the bridge of my nose, "...you looked amazing tonight. Really...beautiful." For some reason I felt Grade-A lame saying it just then, like it was completely out of the blue, so I added, "I'm sorry I didn't say it earlier."

She looked up at me, a little surprised.

"Oh! Um...thanks." She laughed lightly, sounding a little embarrassed. "I don't do this often. I always feel weird in a skirt. You know, since I seem to end up flat on my ass half the time, I'm always worried about putting on an inadvertent peep show. But...thanks."

I just smiled at her, not wanting to say anything to set her off again before our "talk". I groaned a little internally at the thought of our "talk". There probably hasn't been a relationship ever in the history of the world that didn't encounter at least one "talk", but still, it felt like it didn't bode well for us that we were having one before we even had a relationship.

In truth, I wanted Bella so fucking badly I would have walked through hot coals—while eating live beetles—if it meant getting a single step closer to having said relationship with her. So all in all a "talk" was OK. Better than hot coals. *Way* the fuck better than live beetles.

As we started back on the path leading to the lake, Bella took a swig from the open bottle, handing it to me silently when she was done. I followed suit. We passed the bottle back and forth for the next five minutes, until we reached the secluded picnic area on one side of the lake. Apparently this was our destination.

Once there, Bella immediately scoped out the picnic tables—long wooden things that probably seated eight people comfortably—looking for the cleanest. Once she had chosen, climbed up on top of the table, sitting, as the kids say, "criss-cross-apple-sauce". Or "Indian style" as they said in my less-PC childhood. I laughed a little—Bella was so carefree and childlike sometimes. It cracked me up.

I followed her up onto the table, removing my jacket and tie, and undoing the top few buttons of my shirt. I felt pretty damned overdressed to be drinking straight from a bottle, cross-legged on a picnic table.

We sat in silence. Drinking.

After five or so minutes, Bella reached over and gingerly hooked one of my fingers with hers. She passed me the bottle.

More silence. More drinking.

After another five or so minutes she leaned over and laid her head on my shoulder. I passed her the bottle.

More silence. More drinking.

A full fifteen minutes after ascending the table, and about two minutes after we'd emptied the Champagne bottle, Bella finally spoke.

"I love you," she said quietly.

My heart stopped. My breathing stopped. I was momentarily speechless because my throat closed with tension and emotion, so I pulled her tightly against me in response. I can't even begin to explain the warmth that enveloped me then. Inwardly I was soaring. Ecstatic. Delirious. Outwardly I was immobile.

It was as if my entire life had been comprised of pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and someone else had been assembling one section while I was assembling the other. They had just brought that last huge piece of the puzzle over and attached it to mine. It was complete. It was beautiful. It was brilliant.

"I love you too," I managed to choke out, after a moment.

Pulling away from her slightly so I could kiss her, and bask in our newly declared love, I stopped cold at what I saw.

Bella was silently sobbing.

Not happy tears. These were big fat *heartbroken* tears.

"*Bella...*"

She put a single finger up to my lips, silencing me. When our eyes met, I could see, for the first time, the bone-deep sadness she carried with her. It was like a dark hole I fell into when I looked into her eyes. I knew then that she was a master at hiding whatever this pain was, and had done so brilliantly since I met her.

But now the mask was gone. She was letting me in. I knew that *this*...whatever it was...was why she pulled away from me. *This* was why she became inexplicably upset with me. Now, here she was, opening up whatever *this* was and letting me look inside it. Looking at Bella, looking into her eyes, I could see that whatever *this* was, it hurt like hell.

Every instinct I had said she was opening up was because she was scared of losing me if she didn't. Those same instincts told me she didn't *ever* let people see this pain. I knew in that moment that she did, in fact, love me. So much so she was willing to cause herself emotional pain to let me in.

What the hell was *this* anyway?

"Edward," she said in a quiet, broken voice. "Edward, I need..."

"What Bella, what do you need?"

"...a tissue."

I would normally have laughed at the absurdity of it, but I couldn't. Bella was hurting—truly hurting—and it felt, right then, like it would be a very long time before anything was funny again.

Reaching into my pocket, I handed her a handkerchief. She blew her nose loudly, and then shifted a little, so we were facing each other, knees touching. She took one of my hands in hers, and squeezed it gently.

"I'm sorry, Edward. You deserve much, much better than that. You deserve to be happy. To love someone who isn't going to be an emotional train-wreck when you profess your love for each other."

"Bella," I sighed, considering my words before speaking, "I love you. I have no idea how long I've loved you, but I suspect it's been awhile. Whatever *this* is," I wiped a tear from her cheek to indicate what I was talking about, "we can handle it. I don't *want* anyone else. I want *you*—train-wreck and all."

She nodded almost imperceptibly. "I need to tell you," she whispered.

"I know you do. In your own time, OK?"

She huffed out a laugh—a bitter sound. "That would be never, if I had my way. But I can't seem to...get past it, so it looks like I have to...live through it...again."

There was nothing left for me to say. This was her decision, and she was the only person in a position to make one.

We spent another ten or so minutes in silence, hands entwined, foreheads pressed together. She looked down at the tabletop, while I looked at her.

Then she began her story. Eyes trained downward, she spoke slowly and quietly, but her voice didn't falter.

"I haven't ever been much of a social person. I had a really hard time making friends in high school. I was a big gamer, which freaked out pretty much everyone. There weren't that many gamer girls back then, at least in Forks, so I got made fun of a lot. The girls hated me for being a geek, the guys didn't want me to join in their games because they thought they'd have to stop swearing, or not talk about tits any more.

"So, anyway, I didn't exactly date much in high school—actually, *ever*. But when I finally got to the UW, it was a different world. The CS program there is huge, with *tons* of girls like me—and guys who weren't freaked out by girls like me. So, to cut to the chase, I met a guy."

My body stiffened hearing this. I knew, logically, that since Bella was close to my age she must have had boyfriends before, but this was the first I'd ever heard of any.

"His name was Jonathan. He was in the CS program too. We started dating. I—" she laughed quietly for a moment, "—I was so unsure of myself. I didn't know anything about dating. Everything I knew was either from my mom, who is a walking 'What Not To Do' manual, or from books. I actually went out and bought 'Dating For Dummies'."

Our eyes met, and she must have seen some sign of incredulity on my part, because she added, "I *did*, I swear."

Nodding, I wordlessly encouraging her to continue.

"Anyway, we started dating. It was really...nice? Fun? I don't know. We got along great. I'd never gotten along well with a guy before—at least, not one that was actually *interested* in me. I really liked it, you know?"

She looked up at me for confirmation that I understood. Nodding again, I desperately tamped down the jealousy that rose up, causing physical pain in my chest.

"Everything was great at first. At least, *I* thought so. We had some of the same classes together, and then we'd hang out in the evenings, or go out. But a few weeks in, I started sensing that I was doing something wrong. He seemed upset with me. Took me awhile but I finally figured it out."

Suddenly Bella's demeanor changed. She sat up straight, and one of her hands started running through her hair, tense, aggravated, she seemed at a loss for how to explain something—almost defensive about it. I kept silent, waiting for her to continue.

"See, Edward, I grew up in this family where...where I was really fucking confused about things. We—my mom, dad and I—almost never hugged, or got all lovey-dovey-touchy-feely. I didn't even know people thought hugging was *normal* until...well...until college really.

"Then there was sex. My mother told me constantly how having sex just leads to babies, and having babies when you're young fucks up your life. She pushed the 'be a strong independent sex-free woman' agenda. But on the other hand, she had a shit-ton of boyfriends, and didn't exactly hide them from me.

"Then there was my dad, who did most of the serious parenting, and he pretty much told me if I ever had sex before I was married, or thirty-five, or quite possibly both," she laughed a little, a bitter humorless sound, "he'd chain me up in my room and castrate the guy.

"So when I realized Jonathan wanted to have sex with me, and was confused about why we hadn't already, I...well...I freaked out. We had kissed and stuff but whenever he tried to...do more...I stopped him. At first I didn't even think about it much. I had always been told that's how it was. The guy tries to get the girl to do things and the girl says no."

An uncomfortable feeling started growing within me as she talked. I started to have a very bad feeling that I knew where this was headed. But it was her story, and I knew I had to keep quiet and listen. Any future we had together hinged on her having the strength to tell me this story—and me having the balls to listen and keep my fucking mouth shut.

"I didn't even have time to decide if I *wanted* to be...closer...to him, before things got tense about it. We talked about it a few times, and I explained about my family. I told him I was a v—hadn't been with anyone before. He seemed to understand, but then the next day it was back to the same thing.

"I felt so much *pressure*, I didn't know what to do. I was so afraid I'd lose him over it, but couldn't get myself to a place where I was OK with it, either. I...I...fuck, I don't know. I couldn't think straight because I knew that no matter which way I turned, he was there, expecting it from me, you know? Like, even if I wanted it, it felt like it wasn't my decision anymore. I felt trapped.

"Then one day it just stopped. He stopped saying anything about it. He would kiss me goodnight and leave, or spend the night on my couch—or even in my bed, just holding me. He didn't push me any more. I was so fucking *relieved*." She paused for a moment, letting out a sob. I couldn't tell if it was relief, anger, or just sadness.

"It felt like, like there was hope for me after all. Like maybe, if I gave it time, and thought, it would feel like *my* choice again, and I would *want* to. I even started sleeping better, like ten hours at a time, sometimes. I was so happy. I told him—"

Her voice was strangled, almost inaudible, now. She stopped talking for a moment, and just cried. I held her, my arms wrapped tightly around her shoulders while she cried for several minutes. My heart broke for her. I knew whatever was coming I didn't want to hear it, but I couldn't keep the possibilities from swirling through my mind. Each of them made me angry and sad and jealous. After a few minutes she pulled away, continuing her story.

"I told him that I loved him. I thought any man who could deal with my...issues...and be patient with me like that was worth loving. You know?"

At this point Bella let go of one of my hands and grabbed the handkerchief, pressing it to her nose and mouth. I realized a moment later that this was to stifle the sobs wracking her body. As she sobbed, her shoulders shook. Eventually she started up again.

"One day, a couple of weeks after he had...stopped...he was in the kitchen making me a drink. I had a final the next day, and decided at the last minute to tell him I didn't want it. When I walked in the kitchen...um...I guess he didn't hear me. I saw him put some kind of powder in my drink. I could tell it was mine because I always had a lime in my drinks, and he hated lime.

"I walked in and asked him what it was. He was totally surprised, and didn't have time to think of an answer. He just sat there with his mouth opening and closing like a fucking goldfish. Finally he told me he was worried about me being able to sleep well before my finals, and was giving me some Tylenol PM.

"I...it...fuck...long story short, he was slipping me drugs—GHB, Ketamine, something like that—in my drinks. That's what I found out. It took awhile, but he did eventually tell me."

I went cold. Stone fucking cold. Like I didn't have a pulse cold.

"Bella," I tried to keep the rising panic from my voice, "did he...what did he..."

Bella was staring down at our two joined hands, her thumb rubbing a slow circle on my palm. A large teardrop fell smack in the middle of my palm.

She nodded, and then looked up, meeting my eyes for the first time since she started her story. Her voice was clear, angry now.

"He was...having...sex with me. At night. When I was asleep. Those nights I thought I was finally catching up on sleep, were because of that. I thought I just felt like shit because I was stressed. I didn't put two and two together."



She was quiet a moment, then said thoughtfully, "You'd think I would have noticed...other things. Like being sore. But honestly I didn't. I guess he was..." she choked out a sob, "*careful* with me."

"How *considerate*," I said bitterly. It was a stupid thing to say, but my blind anger was overwhelming me. Since I couldn't go kill the guy—right now at least—anger was all I had.

She snorted, bitterly. "Yeah, he thought so."

"*What?*"

"We had a huge argument. I told him I was going to call the police, be tested, all of that." She looked up at me again, meeting my gaze with clear eyes this time, anger shining through.

"Edward, I was *horrified*. Violated. It...it...*destroyed* me. He didn't just rape me, and take my virginity, he took the fucking purity of *sleep* from me."

All I could do was nod, and swallow the bile rising in my throat.

"He told me it was my fault."

I looked at her in shock.

"They do that, you know. Abusers. That's what they say. You know why they say that? Because it fucking *works*. No matter how pissed you are, there's always a part of you asking 'is he right? Did I deserve this?'"

"Jesus, Bella! What the fuck? How could you think—"

"—Edward...it doesn't matter, OK? Even if I believed it then, it didn't matter. I knew what he had done was sick—that wasn't a question. I was raised by a cop—I understood from the minute I found out."

I nodded, waiting for her to continue, my fingernails on my left hand digging into my palm so hard I could tell I'd broken the skin. I wanted to hit something—badly. Before, or possibly after I vomited. Truly, until this moment, I hadn't understood the term wanting to crawl out of your skin.

"He told me it was my fault, and that he did me a favor. He said I was so freaked out about losing my virginity that he figured he'd take care of that for me, so I could focus on the 'feeling good' part. He just wanted us to get *past* my...issue.

"Edward, please don't think I took it...lying down," she smiled a tight humorless smile, "no pun intended. I didn't. I was *pissed*. I hit him. I yelled at him, and I started to call the cops, to call my dad."

Bella stopped talking for a moment, the silence stretching into what felt like years.

"Bella?..."

"Um...yeah. I started to call the cops, but..."

Actual goosebumps crawled down my back.

"What. Happened. Bella?" My voice didn't sound like my own. It was dark, sinister, angry. When Bella spoke again she was almost inaudibly quiet, all anger and determination gone.

"He said...he said that I was making a big deal over nothing, and that he would show me how petty I was being over it. He said once I...experienced it...I'd change my mind and realize it was no big deal. That I was like a kid who needed to be forced to eat her vegetables the first time, so she could realize they weren't so bad."

I was speechless with horror. I didn't want to hear what she had to say next. In fact, I wanted more than anything for her to take back what she'd already said. There was no taking it back though, and I knew that if Bella had survived *that*, the least I could do for her was listen and be there while she relived it.

"Bella?...What happened?"

"He *showed* me what I'd been missing," she said simply. "He was twice my size, very strong, I didn't stand a chance."

Oh, Jesus.

Letting go of her hands, I flung myself off the table and next to some bushes just in time to lose the dinner and the Champagne. Tears were streaming down my face, and my nose was running. I wondered how the fuck I was going to clean myself up enough to get back to Bella, when I felt her hand on my back. She pressed the handkerchief into my hand.

"It's not the cleanest, but it's better than nothing."

While I took a minute to clean myself up, Bella stood next to me, arms folded across her chest. Looking up at her when I was done, her expression was wary. She had dried tearstains on both cheeks, and her nose looked slightly swollen. She looked like someone bracing herself for bad news.

"That's it, Edward. All of it."

She paused, uncertainty stamped on her face. Her voice was cracking as she spoke, choked with emotion.

"Well, not quite all of it."

I waited, knots forming on top of the knots already in my stomach.

"Edward, I..." she choked off a sob with her hand, "I'm *broken*, Edward. Very, very fucking broken. But you," she reached a hand half-heartedly toward me, but let it fall mid-air, "you are the only person I've ever met who I felt normal around. I've spent a year and a half thinking about you, Edward, and wanting you. Not just loving you, but *wanting* you—physically. I didn't think..." a deep sad sigh escaped her, before she continued, "I didn't think I was capable of that anymore."

"And now I'm scared to shit that I'm going to lose you. I'm terrified what I just told you will drive you off. But I'm just as terrified that it won't. And if it *doesn't*, I'm going to end up too...broken...for you. That I'd never be able to be close to you—like *that*. It wouldn't be fair to you, and it wouldn't work, because I'd spend the whole fucking time worried that if I didn't get OK with it pretty damn quick, you'd find someone who wasn't so...fucked up."

I was stunned. Absolutely stunned. As much as I felt speechless after what she had said, I didn't have that luxury. She needed to hear from me—*now*—I knew that much.

Closing the gap between us in a single step, I slowly wrapped my arms around her, pulling her in close.

"Bella, I do love you. So ridiculously much. I'm really, really sorry for what you went through. I...*Jesus*, Bella, what do you say to that? It's amazing you survived. You're amazing to me. You were before tonight, and now...you're even more so. But for fuck's sake—"

I pulled away from her to meet her gaze, holding onto both shoulders firmly.

"—for fuck's sake Bella, you can't *do* this. You can't take all this on. *No one* could live under the pressure you're putting on yourself. As flattered as I am that you spent so long thinking about me—and believe me, I was doing the exact same fucking thing—I wish you hadn't, because I'm afraid you've thought yourself into a corner.

"Bella, I want *you*. Any way I can get you. I don't care if you never touch me. If you want to be friends forever, I'm here. If you want to be my girlfriend, and never have sex with me, sign me up. I'll sign a contract stating we never go past first base. All I want is you."

I pulled her into a tight hug then, and she sobbed into my shoulder. I felt sick. My heart hurt, my stomach hurt, my chest was in knots, my head was throbbing, and I was angrier than I had ever been in my entire life. But through it all, one refrain kept playing in my head.

*She loves me.*

## Geek Love Chapter 13: In Which There Are No Squickies

By the time we got back to the lodge grounds it was really freakin' late. The wedding was the next day, but luckily not until early afternoon.

Right now, we needed some damn sleep. Yet I was so reluctant to let Bella go. After the talking, the declaring ourselves, and all the angst, I just wanted to be able to hold her for awhile. It wasn't like I'd stopped touching her since we left the lodge though.

Well...except to vomit. I was pretty sure I didn't hold on to her when I did that. *I hoped.*

We continued into the lodge, which was really a ridiculously large house my parents had rented for the occasion. Normally I would have been bothered by such an ostentatious display of spending-power, but my parents had rightly pointed out that since Rosalie chose wedding that was almost free, renting one house even—ridiculously large one—was pretty frugal by Cullen standards.

Reaching the top of the stairs, I sensed, rather than felt, Bella slowing, before stopping entirely. I turned to face her, brushing stray hairs away from her face. When she looked up at me, she seemed...reluctant.

"Bella...?"

"Edward...I don't want to sleep alone."

OK, I hadn't actually expected that. A knot untied itself somewhere inside me. I was finally able to smile.

"I don't either. But...Bella, are you sure?"

"Edward, if you don't want to—"

I rolled my eyes, and gently placed a hand over her mouth.

"Can we *please* not do that anymore? I *want* to. I'm just worried about you. I don't want you to feel pressured. And I certainly don't want to bring up any bad memories."

She pulled my hand from her mouth.

"Edward, please stop. Look, I can spend forever only knowing what it's like to sleep next to someone who *hurt* me, or I can recognize that you..." Her voice faded as she became lost in thought.

"Edward, you remember last Saturday, when I slept in your bed?"

"Yeah."

"You asked about the crying. I didn't answer you because honestly, I just didn't know where to start. I was so drunk, I don't even remember going to sleep. Then I woke up next to you. You were asleep, and...and...I freaked out. I panicked.

"But the thing is, I wasn't panicking because I thought you had hurt me. For the first time since...everything...I knew I could sleep next to you and be OK. I knew you—*you specifically*—would never hurt me. I was crying because I was so *relieved* to know that was possible for me again.

"But Edward, I was also crying because I had no idea if you wanted me like I wanted you, and I thought even if you did, I'd be too fucked up to know what to do with it."

"*Bella*—" I began, but was cut off again.

"—I *want* it, Edward. I want it all. I want *you*. I just don't know how to do...things. But I figure one step at a time, right? And the first step is sleep."

I must have hesitated a moment too long, thinking everything through, because she raised an eyebrow at me, saying, "Edward, don't make me beg to sleep with you."

Laughing, I pulled her close, hugging her tightly to me.

"Your place or mine?" I whispered in her ear.

She said she didn't care either way, so I decided on mine. My logic was simple: If Bella became uncomfortable in my room at any time, she could leave. If we were in her room, she would need to wake me up and ask me to leave—something she would no doubt be reluctant to do.

I wanted her to have all the freedom she wanted, and more. The thing about rape is, it's usually not about sex itself. It's about taking away someone's free will. She needed to know, in no uncertain terms, that her free will would always be *hers*, at least when she was with me.

She went to her room to get ready, and I went to mine to take a quick shower. I brushed my teeth—twice, since I could still taste vomit in the back of my throat—put on some flannel pajama bottoms with a clean t-shirt, and stepped out of the bathroom. Bella was already in my bed, reading a book. Her dark hair spilled in hypnotizing waves across the pillow.

The domesticity of the moment made me smile and took my breath away just a little bit. It wasn't until I saw her there, so peaceful, so beautiful, that I realized how much I needed it. How much I needed to wake up next to her every morning, and kiss her goodnight as she read a book next to me.

Despite the tension of the evening, a tenderness came over me as I stood there. This woman was so...so *much*. Everything. She was my peer and confidante at work. Outside of work she was my friend, and now...what?

I hoped she was mine. I hoped she wanted me to be hers. She had said she did, at least that's what I took away from our conversation, but I knew there was a lot for us to get through before it would be easy between us.

Whatever the case, for me, she was love. She was beauty. But she was *broken*.

Bella had shown me the damage done to her spirit, exposed this terrible rent and let me look inside it. She thought it would likely drive me away, but instead it just made me love her more. The strength and bravery she had shown in the past two hours did nothing but add to my awe of her.

Never in my life had a day come close to the emotional impact of this one. My heart was a maelstrom of love for Bella and utter hatred for the person who dared hurt her. I carefully, deliberately, tucked the negative feelings away. There was no room here—yet—for me to indulge in them. *Later*, I told myself. Right now, take care of Bella.

Walking toward the bed, I scanned the cover of the book in her hand, and my mood changed instantly. I had to laugh then.

"Pride and Prejudice and *Zombies*, Bella?"

"Of course, Edward," she answered, solemnly.

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife," she quoted the original Austen from memory, then added, "...and brains, NOM NOM NOM!"

Laughing, I asked, "Is that really how it starts?"

"Um...nope..." Flipping through the book to the beginning, she read, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains."

Eyeballing me seriously she threw in another, "NOM NOM NOM!" in what was clearly intended to be a scary monster voice. It wasn't scary at all.

It was, however, pretty fucking adorable.

Walking to the far side of the bed, I pulled the covers back, feeling momentarily uncertain. In the past half hour we had allowed some distance to creep between us. Just enough to add awkwardness to what had become an easy physical connection earlier.

I climbed in to the bed, staying far over to one side. My brain was sorting—rather slowly given the hour—through the possibilities for fixing that "distance" when Bella put her book on the nightstand and scooped over, sidling up to me.

Her lean body stretched next to mine, as we lay face-to-face. She looked like she'd been beaten up. Dark crescents lay under her eyes. Her lips and nose were still redder than usual, and looked puffy, as did her cheeks. Despite that, there was something...different...about her now. It felt as though for the first time, I could truly *see* her. All of her. It also felt, for the first time, like there wasn't something intangible obstructing us.

She reached up and brushed a stray piece of hair from my forehead, tracing my eyebrow with her fingertip when she was done.

"You look tired, Mr. Cullen." Her voice was a little raspy with exhaustion.

"As do you, Ms. Swan," I replied formally. Then after a moment, "Have I thanked you yet?"

She snorted. "For what? The drama? The crying and getting snot all over you? Or for making you vomit?"

"All of it."

She looked at me dubiously.

"Bella, you trusted me enough to tell me your story. All of that—everything you just mentioned—happened because you *trusted* me. Hell yes, I'm thanking you."

She was quiet for a moment.

"Edward, you're the first person I've felt like I *could* trust. I should be thanking *you*. If not for that, then just for being there for me."

"Don't ever thank me for being there for you, Bella. I love you, don't you get it?"

She sighed. "Edward, if you can still say that after everything, then...you are even more fuckawesome than I had hoped." She cocked a knowing eyebrow at me, a coy smile crossing her lips. "And believe me, in my mind, you've been built up to something *quite* impressive."

I wasn't quite sure how to take that, but knew if I thought too long on it I'd revert to the insecure communication-inept Edward that Bella somehow brought out in me.

In any case, I quickly became distracted by a problem with my hands. They were trying to find a comfortable location for themselves. Bella was very close to me, but I didn't want to touch her, or do anything at all to give the impression I was making a move on her. There was nowhere comfortable to lay my arms that didn't touch her inadvertently.

Then there was the minor problem that just the thought of touching her made my body react in ways my brain was cursing it for.

In the end, Bella solved the problem. She turned away from me, grabbed my arm, and wrapped it around her firmly. I breathed in deeply, relishing the smell of her hair.

"Sporking?" I asked, whispering in her ear.

"So much cooler than spooning," she mumbled back, already half asleep.

After reaching over to switch off the lamp beside me, I lay next to Bella, one arm wrapped lightly around her, just watching her sleep.

~oOo~

The first thing I noticed was the smell. Mint toothpaste. The next thing I noticed was it was daylight. The third thing I noticed was I wasn't alone.

Peeling open one eye I saw two large brown irises peering owlshly at me. Surprised, I jumped a little—which is no small feat when horizontal—smacking my head soundly on the headboard.

"Ow!"

Bella giggled. "Morning, sunshine."

"Bella, why are you—" I stopped, confused, "—what the hell *were* you doing?"

"Watching you."

"Why so close? Are you part blind?"

"Venetian, or vertical?"

I groaned. "Wow...it's *way* too early for that. But seriously, what's with the Inspector Clouseau routine?"

"You're cute. I like looking at you." She smiled, a bright, cheerful, warm smile. "Never told you that before, did I? I've thought it like eleventy billion times, but couldn't ever bring myself to say it. So that, my friend, is my gift to you this morning."

Clearly it wasn't just the room that was brighter this morning. The mood was vastly different from the night before. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, I went with it.

"Your gift to me is that I'm cute? Wouldn't that be a gift for *you*?" Raising one eyebrow, I added, "I am, after all, yours now."

She looked shocked for a moment, before her mouth widened in an evil grin. "You're *mine*?"

I tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "Yes, Bella. As long as you want me, I'm yours."



"Gah! That's so fucking cool! I've never owned someone before. Can I make you dress like a woman? *Now* can I see you tuck? Does that mean I own your things, too? Like your wind-up Godzilla? It breathes actual *fire*, how fucking cool is that?"

"Shut it, Swan. Oh, and nice shirt."

I hadn't noticed Bella's nightshirt earlier, but couldn't see anything else now. She was wearing what had to be the oldest, rattiest shirt still in use. It looked like several generations of moths had fed from it. Once pink, it was now a mottled pale apricot and off-white. On the front was a picture of Pacman walking in to find Mrs. Pacman blowing one of the blue ghost guys.

She looked down at it. "Yeah, I always did think she was a back-stabbing bitch."

Laughing, I took one of Bella's hands in mine, loving the soft warmth of her skin. "So, you think I'm cute, huh?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, are we back to the Edward show?" She sighed. "Well, it is one of my favorite programs. And yes, you are cute. Frighteningly so. You really didn't know?"

"Well, I do hear it all the time. I pretty much get mobbed in the street by screaming girls. But I've never heard it from you, so I guess it never mattered before."

"Oh, I see how it is." She pulled back a little, inspecting me. "Aren't *you* all cocky today? What happened to my shy retiring little Nerdward? You know, I take full credit for the boost to your ego. I've done wonders for you."

Bella then, literally, patted herself on the back, exposing a hole in the armpit of her shirt.

Pulling her down to lay beside me, I whispered conspiratorially, "The thing is, Bella, I've actually never had a confidence problem when it comes to 'the ladies,'" I air quoted for emphasis, "it's just you. You're like, my ladykiller Kryptonite."

She snorted—not quietly either. "Ladykiller! Ha! In what virtual world are you a 'ladykiller' Cullen?"

"Oh, *whatever* Swan, you know the bitches love me." Ignoring her disbelieving laughter, I continued, "But right now I need to go brush my teeth, before I kill *my* lady with morning breath."

"I'm your lady?" She asked, looking a little pleased.

"Are you offering?"

"I think we already covered that, oh Clueless One."

"Then yes, you're my lady."

In that moment, she looked awfully like the Cheshire Cat, and I had a very, very hard time not kissing the smile widening her face.

But I had morning breath. *Ack!*

After brushing my teeth, and a few other morning necessities, I walked back into the bedroom to find Bella standing in the middle of the room staring at the bed thoughtfully. Wrapping an arm around her shoulder, I stood, staring at the bed with her, wondering what we were looking for. After a moment I gave up.

"Bella? What are we looking for?"

"My squickiness."

"Your...*squickness*?"

"Yes, Edward, we appear to have misplaced it. I was worried that at some point, last night, I would have run into some of my emo-drama squickiness about the whole 'sharing a bed' thing. But not a one. I slept like a log. Not a squicky in sight. It was awesome."

"Squickies are...bad...I take it?"

She sighed, frustrated at what was clearly my kindergarten-level comprehension.

"Yes, Edward. Squickies are bad. You, however, are not. I am happy to report, that sharing a bed with you was nothing but pleasant." Turning to face me, she put her arms around my waist.

I had kissed Bella exactly once so far. Fewer times than I had told her I loved her. That just seemed wrong.

Before I could even act, Bella's lips were on mine, a soft whisper of a kiss. One of her hands snaking up my chest, then wrapping around the back of my neck. That touch alone felt amazing. That touch alone would have made my day.

I kissed her back, careful to keep things going very slowly, hoping to avoid a repeat of how our last kiss ended. Repeatedly kissing her mouth—the corners first, then the middle of her full lips—her mouth opened, inviting. She was so warm, so soft. She felt...indescribable. Like Ben and Jerry's New York Superfudge Chunk, Super Mario Kart, and Weird Science all rolled into one. Oh, and porn. There was definitely some porn in there.

Trying to hold back here...shut the fuck up about porn!

Bella, apparently, was not as concerned, because she let out a little sound that was either excitement or frustration—I couldn't really tell—and a moment later her tongue found its way between our lips, exploring. Her hand gripped the back of my head tightly.

My good intentions very quickly flew out the window, and the kiss became the burning, sensual, amazing kiss I had always imagined having with Bella. It took all the strength I could muster to not pull her tightly against me, but I managed it. I wasn't sure how much I could control my...ahem...*reaction*...to her. I didn't want to risk her getting upset.

Bella's hand was gripping my hair in a wonderfully painful way, while her other arm wrapped further around my waist, pulling me against her. Her lips were soft and firm at the same time, and just fucking perfect.

Crap! So much for my good intentions!

In her effort to get closer to me, Bella stood on her tip-toes. My hands were clasped firmly on her hips to steady her. I couldn't help but notice that her new height made us...*match up*...in physical ways. I tried desperately to ignore that thought.

As the kiss deepened, Bella let out what had to be the most sensual moan I'd ever heard in my life. The sound went straight to my—

"Shit!"

Bella broke the kiss with an exclamation, and stepped back a little, one hand locked in her hair, the other still on me. The look of panic was back in her eyes.

*Shit* is right.

"Crap, Bella, I'm sorry! I—"

Bella put a finger on my lips to interrupt me. "Stop, Edward. Please?" Her voice was quiet, pleading.

I nodded, waiting for her to continue. It took her a minute, but eventually she did, speaking quietly.

"Edward, you can't—*can't*—apologize every time I freak out. It's *my* problem. You're not doing anything wrong."

She sighed, thoughtful.

"I *will* get over it, or through it. Whatever. I promise I'll be able to do this without freaking out...eventually.

"Edward, I *want* to do this." Her eyes lit a little as she continued, and I was surprised to see a hint of a smile on her lips. "I really, *really* want to do this."

Pulling her finger from my mouth, and kissing it gently, I shook my head, trying to switch gears as quickly as she had.

"Bella, this isn't *your* problem. It's *our* problem. It doesn't matter if I'm doing something wrong or not. What matters is that you're uncomfortable. Don't push yourself. I don't need anything more than just *you*. If what just happened now is the most we ever do, that's OK with me."

Bella stepped back, folding her arms over her chest. Defensive Bella was back. I met this one last night.

"*Edward*." She was definitely irritated now. "That's not reasonable. It's just not. You can't possibly be OK with just...what...kissing me?...hugging me? in the long-term, I mean. Hell, *I'm* not OK with it. I want you, Edward. I do. I just don't know...*how*...to..." she drifted off, pensive.

"Bella, in the long-term, all I want you, in any way I can have you. What that means—the details—will get figured out. Right now, the only thing you *need* to do is try a little harder to stop putting so much fucking pressure on yourself." A quiet sigh of frustration escaped me, before I continued. "If you want me to kiss you, tell me. If you want me to stop, tell me. It's as simple as that."

Wrapping my arms around her, pulling her gently to me, I said quietly, "I will *always* stop, Bella. *Always*. Please know that."

She kissed me then, gentle and sweet, before pulling away to meet my eye. "I know you will. I do. Honestly." Closing her eyes, she said, "Now kiss me, please, before we lose ourselves in emo-land?"

I did as she asked, and this time, there was no freaking out.

~oOo~

An hour later, we were back in my room, ready to head down and join the wedding masses. Bella had retreated to her own room to get ready, while I spent half an hour checking my email, and synching my iPhone.

When she wandered back in, I had to take a minute to catch my breath. Bella had said she was wearing shorts to the ceremony, like I'd said to, but I hadn't expected quite...*this*. She looked amazing. Bella was always beautiful, but I was so used to her jeans-and-hoodie outfit, seeing her now was like looking at a new person.

She was wearing tan shorts that were...well...*short*, making her legs look a mile long, and a dark blue muslin top that gathered around her ribs, and nicely showed off Bella's amazing...assets. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, a wise move given that we'd be on the beach. I loved it when her hair was pulled back though. I loved being able to see her face, and the curve of her neck.

Watching my reaction, she smiled sardonically.

"What? You miss the hoodie? I can go change if you want. I brought my zombies."

"Bella?"

"Ye-e-s..." she teased.

"Don't change a thing," I growled quietly.

Her grin in response bought an answering one from me. It was so awesome to see her happy. Her normally light-hearted demeanor seemed to be slowly returning after last night.

Walking out of the room, Bella turned when she reached the hallway, catching me staring at her ass.

"You're right about one thing, Edward."

"What's that?"

"I totally own you."

Laughing, I put my arm around her, leading her towards the stairs. "You have for a very long time, Bella."

Suddenly, a look of horror crossed her face. "Oh Jesus! Jasper's going to be out of control with the smugitude today. You know he thinks this," she indicated the space between us, "is all his doing."

"Yeah, well, I can quite honestly say he was nowhere near my thoughts a single time I professed my love for you."

She laughed softly, her voice growing tender. "You really love me?"

I sighed in mock exasperation. "Dear God, woman, have I not *said* so?"

~oOo~

We made a quick breakfast in the kitchen and headed out to explore the grounds a little before the ceremony began in the early afternoon.

Choosing a path leading around the other side of the lake—not wanting to revisit the location of last night's conversation—I saw two figures sitting on a low wall surrounding a raised garden. Bella perked up immediately, cocking her head with interest.

"Is that Jasper?"

Peering more closely at the two figures, one indeed appeared to be my brother. The other was a woman. They had their heads together, in animated conversation. They looked up as we drew closer. Jasper's eyes widened with speculation as he recognized us, his smile broadening as he saw our joined hands.

"Hey kids." His greeting was warm, but held a note of question. For some reason it surprised me to remember he had no idea what Bella and I had talked about last night. My world had shifted so completely in that one conversation, that it seemed odd to remember everyone else's hadn't.

Jasper jumped down from the wall, walking over to us, pulling Bella into a warm hug, whispering something into her ear. When he let go she was smiling, bright-eyed.

Then he waved us toward the pretty, petite brunette still sitting on the wall.

"Edward, Bella, this is Alice Whitlock. She used to teach with Rosalie. She lives in Vancouver now—B.C., not Washington," he clarified.

Alice said hello, waving daintily at both of us from her perch. As I stepped closer to her, intending to shake her hand, I stopped cold.

"Holy crap! You look—"

"Uncanny, isn't it?" Jasper interrupted.

"She's not—"

"Nope!" Jasper interrupted again.

Then looking at her I tried again. "But you look—"

"*I know*, I know! I get that all the time, like seriously I get that four or five times a day." She giggled, her laughter like a wind chime, her speech like a speeding bullet. "I used to tell people I'm *not* her but then I just got bored with that so now I sign autographs for them, like probably ten a week or so, it's crazy. I could probably sell them." She cocked an eyebrow at me. "But you, know, I usually only get it from the girls. The *teenage* ones at that. What was your name again? Edward? You're Jasper's brother? I guess that explains how you recognize me."

"Yeah, well, I pay attention to the entertainment news, you know? Jasper makes sure of that. But really, you're not her?"

"Nope. Wish I were, can you imagine?" I swear she spoke so fast, it was almost a buzzing sound. "Well...except for that whole nudie pics thing. But I wouldn't have been that fucking stupid in the first place. Nudie pics and porn are for other people to make and for me to enjoy. Not the other way around. Not that there's much entertainment in nudie pics. That's really just excitement for the media and the sexually repressed. I mean, really, who gets off on stills anymore? It's all about the 3-D porn these days." Looking at Jasper she continued earnestly,

"Have you seen some of that shit? I mean really? It's fucking amazing—like you're there. I actually ducked at the cumshot once, thinking it was gonna hit me."

I couldn't help but laugh. She spoke a mile a minute, and was telling us of her penchant for porn within a minute of meeting us. Jasper must be peeing himself right now.

Shooting my brother a knowing glance, I pointed at Alice.

"Pea."

Then I pointed at Jasper.

"Pod."

Alice grinned at me, completely unabashed, like she already knew they were kindred spirits. Jasper, however, looked uncharacteristically embarrassed—eyes downcast, brows knitted, pinching the bridge of his nose unconsciously. I wondered for a moment if it was a Cullen thing.

"Can someone please tell me what the *hell* you guys are talking about?" Bella asked, sounding just a little irritated.

Jasper stepped in to elucidate. "You know those new vampire movies? The ones based on that book series all the kids were into?"

"The ones where the vampires fucking *sparkle*?" Bella sounded really annoyed with the "sparkle" part.

Note to self: Take Sparkling Vampire off the Halloween costume list.

Jasper laughed. "Yeah that one. Well, there's an actress in those movies that looks...well...*exactly* like Alice."

I really shouldn't...really. But I couldn't let it go. Remembering our conversation in my kitchen last Saturday, I took the dig.

"Yeah, she sure *does*. Hey Jasper, wasn't that the actress you said you'd like to ta—"

Jasper's strike came lightning fast and fucking *hurt*. He jabbed me in the ribs, glaring at me. Normally so even-tempered, his reaction told me a whole lot about how much he did *not* want to be embarrassed in front of this girl.

As I caught my breath, Bella and Alice were chattering away—something about whether the vampires in those books had "sparkle peens"...whatever the hell those were. Within sixty seconds, it was obvious that Jasper wasn't the only one taken with the little chatterbox. While the women jabbered, Jasper stood next to me.

"So, you guys talked then?" he asked, his voice low so Bella couldn't hear.

I hesitated, knowing that I was walking a fine line in the information-distribution department.

"Yeah, we did."

"Look, Edward, I know that something happened to her. I don't know exactly what, but I can tell that whatever it was, it was pretty fucked up. I don't need to know details, I just wanted to make sure you two were...talking. Like serious 'talking', you know? I mean, you guys are—I shit you not—*perfect* for each other, and I don't want to see you lose out because you can't communicate."

However obnoxious his methods, my brother had been spot-on about us, and had helped more than I had acknowledged.

"I know, I know. Thank you. Seriously."

"Dude, you're more than fucking welcome. Not just 'cos you're my baby brother. I love that woman almost as much as you do. I mean, not in the 'jerking off over her for a goddamn century' way, but...you know what I mean."

"Well, she is retardedly lovable."

"That's good, 'cos you're lovably retarded."

I laughed. It was too true to deny.

"Edward?"

"Yeah?"

"Marry that girl."

I sighed. "Jasper, if I thought she'd say yes, I'd do it tomorrow."

He laughed. "Not today? What is it with you and those delays?"

## **Geek Love Chapter 14: In Which Something Else is Revealed**

"Dude, it's my turn with the Flying Fuck!"

"You'll get it when I'm good and ready to *give* it to you, Jasper, but right now..." I couldn't believe I was going to say it. It was so cheesy. "...*I don't give a Flying Fuck!*"



Jasper groaned, punching me lightly in the arm.

"You can have *my* Flying Fuck, Jasper," Bella offered, handing over the controller for the RC helicopter shaped like the word "FUCK".

"Aw...thanks babe!" Jasper took the controller from her, and began navigating the toy helicopter around the trees across the clearing.

"Bella," I stage whispered to her, "I really wish you wouldn't give my brother a Fuck."

She laughed. "Where do you buy a Flying Fuck anyway?"

"I saw it on nerdapproved dot com, couldn't resist."

"Who could?" Jasper asked, rolling his eyes. "And you bought *two*? One wasn't enough?"

Jasper didn't quite *get* geek toys, but the helicopter was remote-controlled and he has a penis, therefore he wanted to play with it. The helicopter I mean—not his penis. Though I'm sure he plays with that plenty.

"When it comes to Fucks, isn't it better with two?" I asked, raising an eyebrow meaningfully. "Or would you even *know*, Jerksper?"

He punched me. Again.

"Stop hitting my man!" Bella chastised him, walking over to rub my arm.

"He's not a *man*, Bella, he's a *geek*. A little tiny baby boy geek." Jasper pinched my cheek with his free hand, apparently to indicate my baby status. I smacked his hand away.

"That may be so, Jasper, but he's *my* little tiny baby boy geek, and you need to stop beating on him, or I swear to God I'll give you a tuck you can never undo."

I had tuned out their banter, focused on two things now. One was keeping the helicopter airborne; the other was Bella's hand on me. True, she was barely touching me, and there wasn't, in theory, anything particularly erotic about having your upper arm petted, but...the woman got reactions from my body I couldn't explain. OK, I *could* explain them.

She was sexy as hell in a very Geek Grrl way, but by anyone's standards she was just plain beautiful. In fact, when Jasper met up with us in the clearing, I saw him stop when he caught sight of Bella, truly taking in her appearance for the first time that day. He smiled at her, then looked toward me with an eyebrow raised, a half-smirk on his face.

His look said, "Hot *damn*, Eddie, you lucky son of a bitch!"

I hated it when his look called me Eddie.

"Are you guys done? Wanna go get a drink before the show starts?" Bella asked, stopping her arm-stroking and breaking my horny reverie.

"Lead on MacDuff!" Jasper misquoted, crash landing his helicopter so he could gather it up.

Flying mine closer to us, I caught it mid-air with a triumphant look thrown in Jasper's direction. Bella rolled her eyes at me and turned, leading us toward the bar someone had set up on the larger of the lodge's ocean-facing wooden decks.

The lodge was probably 7,500 square feet—about ten bedrooms plus a few rec rooms, a dining room, and large living room. If the weather was wet, the backup plan was to have the ceremony in front of a fireplace in the large living room. Ideally they were going to have it on the beach.

The day was beautiful though—warm enough for shorts, but not hot. Definitely a beach wedding day. That was what Rosalie truly wanted, so I was happy for her.

Emmett had pushed for a nearby lake as the venue, but it was a longer walk for the guests so Rose vetoed him. Emmett didn't push, since he really only wanted the lake because he thought it would be cool if they said their vows from the rope swing, then jumped into the water—fully clothed—after their I do's.

I had to agree—that would have been pretty fucking cool.

Jasper made some killer mojitos, which we sat down to enjoy in the sun.

About an hour later my mother walked around the grounds of the lodge gathering everyone up before the ceremony. She found Bella, Jasper and I hanging out lazily on the larger wooden deck, enjoying an afternoon mojito while Bella and I debated our latest project at work.

Well...it wasn't really much of a debate, because she was so *totally* wrong.

"AJAX is the only way to accomplish what we need. Otherwise we're pinging the servers way the fuck too many times—we'll have to reload the whole page on *any* user action."

I totally had her, and we both knew it. A tad childishly, I threw in, "Suck on *that*, UX woman! Bow before me, for I am Dev."

She completely ignored my last comment.

"Yeah, but Edward, think of the old people. They get confused when things happen inline on a page. If the demographics on this site are skewed over fifty—which they are, so you can kiss my ass—you can't have it be too tech savvy. I know you wanna rub your AJAX all over the site, but seriously, you'll lose people. This isn't Facebook, you gino-nerd."

She gave me a sideways look before adding, "Bow before *me*, for I am Experience. User Experience." Bella then sliced the air with her iPhone light saber, just to emphasize her true

geekitude. The effect was a little lost since she had to actually launch the app before she could use it. But I gave her points for effort.

I sighed, about to concede on the AJAX argument, when my mother walked up.

"Jasper, Edward, Bella, we're going to start in a few minutes." Shielding her eyes from the sun behind us, she smiled at Bella with a sweet, welcoming, yet curious expression. They had met briefly at dinner the night before, and Mom had heard me talk about Bella a few times in the past, but that was all she knew about this...this thing. This friendship. This relationship.

It was hard to get anything past my mother. She knew me pretty damn well. Generally dismissive of anyone I dated, she must have sensed something different about Bella, because I could see "is this a potential daughter-in-law?" written all over her face.

"Bella, thank you so much for coming. It's really sweet of you—it was a long trip, I know."

"Oh...um...my pleasure Mrs. Cullen. Really. I—" she looked up at me shyly, then back at my mother, "—I'm happy to be here."

The blush on her face said enough, and Mom looked pointedly at me, which set *me* off blushing, picking at imaginary threads on my shirt hem.

My mother looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, "Bella, dear, please call me Esme," before fluttering away to shoo other groups of people off in the direction of the beach.

Well *that* was a first. She might as well have painted Bella a "welcome to the family" sign.

Not that Bella had to know that.

Jasper, however, didn't miss it, and made no effort to hide his grin from me as we walked toward the beach. I took Bella's hand, responding to his grin with my own. He knew how I felt, there was no need to pretend I wasn't fucking crazy about her.

She smiled up at me, giving my hand a squeeze, and electricity shot through me. I realized then, that we were facing a really difficult situation. She really made me want to do things I had promised to be OK *not* doing—forever if need be—and as much as I knew I would do anything to be with her, the more I touched her, or she touched me, the harder that promise would be to keep.

~oOo~

The ceremony was short and sweet. My sister looked, as usual, stunning, in a dress that was perfect for a beach wedding. It was one of those deceptively simple things—where the cost of the outfit was inversely proportionate to the amount of material.

Emmett, for his part, was glowing. A glowing groom is not the norm, I'm aware, but in his case there was no other word. The happy couple had been down a long and bumpy road to get to this point, and I was so happy for them to finally be here.

*Wow, when did I become such a fucking sap?* Apparently falling in love makes my estrogen count rise. I swear I felt my imaginary ovaries quiver just a little when the couple clasped hands in front of the officiant.

After the shortest, yet sweetest, vow exchange ever, (yup, definitely need to get my ovaries checked!) the guests were invited to hit one of the two self-service bars set up on the decks, or grab food from the mountain of barbeque grub piled on a few tables. My dad, in an utterly bizarre moment for me to witness, was manning the grill, drinking beer with Emmett's father Doug.

My dad drinking beer? Working a grill? Already, Rose and Emmett's marriage had changed us as a family, and I was pretty fucking happy about it. My normally staid, image-conscious parents had really let go on this occasion.

Mom had expected Rosalie's wedding to be a huge affair, complete with large church, opera singers, and the Governor in attendance. When the happy couple had insisted on a "barefoot on the beach" wedding, with Emmett's cousin Frank acting as the internet-certified celebrant, it had taken awhile for Mom to adjust, but she had done it well.

My father, Chief of Surgery at Swedish Medical Center, was used to the nicer things in life. I had never, not once, seen him *cook*, let alone man an outdoor grill complete with smoke and barbeque sauce splatters.

Bella and I piled food on our plates and settled on a bench seat pulled up against one of the many wooden picnic tables. Bella, true to form, had enough food on her plate for three people. How a girl that small ate so damn much was beyond me.

Jasper walked by with Emmett a few minutes into our meal, tipping his hand back against his mouth in the universal "you want a drink?" gesture. I nodded and nudged Bella, my mouth too full to speak. She looked up, saw Jasper, and nodded also.

A few minutes later, Jasper and Emmett returned, bearing their own plates of food, four beers, and two big-ass grins.

"Hey kids!" Emmett boomed.

"Ah, the blushing bride. Congratulations Emmett, welcome to the family."

"Thanks, Edward-not-Eddie. But I want to make it clear that today you did not gain a brother; you lost a sister."

"And it's that attitude that *makes* you one of the family. None of us are in it by choice, so you'll fit right in. I do have to warn you though, it's a life sentence." I grabbed one of the beers for myself, and handed one to Bella.

"Where *is* our former sister?" Jasper asked, looking around the lawn and deck.

"Saying hi to some people she used to work with."

Hearing that, Jasper's entire body shifted, and his head shot up at full attention, intent on Emmett now.

"*Who?* Who is she...is it..."

Realizing he was being rather *obvious*, he tried to cover his intense curiosity by taking a pull from his beer and leaning back, studiously casual.

"So...um...*who* is Rose talking to?"

Bella chuckled quietly. "Why so curious, Jasper?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" He was playing dumb.

"Bella wants to know why you're suddenly so interested in who Rose is talking to. I'm a little confused too." I feigned puzzlement. "I wasn't aware of any previous interest in her teaching career, and yet you seem...*fascinated*...now. Why is that, Jasper?" My eyes widened with exaggerated innocence.

I almost dropped my fork when, for the first time ever—literally, *ever*—I saw Jasper blush. He actually blushed, deep freakin' crimson. Like a goddamned radish—the *outside* part.

"OK, *who* are we talking about?" Emmett broke in, confused.

"Alice." Bella paused to finish her bite of hotdog-with-everything before continuing. "Alice used to teach with Rosalie. She and Jasper have some—" another pause to clear her throat pointedly, "*—common interests.*"

Emmett tapped the table with one hand, chewing thoughtfully as he tried to put a name to a face.

"Alice...Alice...*Oh! Alice!* Little dark haired thing? Like three-foot-nothin'? Shortish hair?"

"Yeah, that's her," I agreed.

"Little 'spinner' chick..." Emmett added, as an afterthought.

Jasper's reaction was immediate. He slammed his beer down on the table, face reddening with anger. "That's not fucking cool, Emmett! Don't be so goddamn disrespectful, you don't even know her."

Emmett, surprise written across his features, put both hands up in a conciliatory gesture.

"Hey man, I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by it. I didn't know you two were..."

"We're *not*! It's just..." Jasper was calming down now, but still clearly upset.

"...Naw, it's cool man, I get it. Sorry. I didn't mean anything, OK?" Emmett was watching Jasper carefully, his body conveying every kind of calm. He was a professional when it came to standoffs and calming upset people—OK, they were normally *criminals*, but still—he was using his skills on Jasper rather effectively.

Jasper sat down, gaze aimed directly at his food.

"It's OK. Sorry," he mumbled.

Emmett gave Jasper—or rather, the top of Jasper's head—a curious glance, then looked at me, questioningly. I shrugged once, indicating I didn't know any more than he did. Not really, at least. Although, I suspected a fair amount *now*.

We continued to eat in silence, the tension slowly leaving the air. After a minute or two I felt something on my knee, and almost knocked it away instinctively until I realized it was Bella's hand. Her touch was still unfamiliar to me, and once I realized it was her, I reacted, shall we say, *strongly*, to it.

*Baby bunnies bathed in blood, dead kittens, plane crash, Grandma...*

~oOo~

A little while, and a few beers later, Rosalie came in search of her new husband. While I would never exactly describe my sister as "hot"—since I'm not a creep-cestuous weirdo—she and Emmett had a certain charm as a couple, and together on a day like this they fairly glowed with love, contentment, and..."let's get freaky" hormones.

Rose sat on Emmett's lap, greeting everyone at the table. I probably wasn't the only one to notice her grinding her ass into his cockular region as she did so. In fact, I was pretty sure I saw Jasper dry heave for a moment, before turning away.

Bella and Rose had met briefly at dinner the night before, but hadn't spoken at any length. Rose watched Bella carefully, now, an assessing gleam in her eye.

Bella smiled shyly in response, saying, "Rosalie, you looked really beautiful. You guys seem so happy. It was an awesome ceremony."

Rosalie smiled at Bella, murmuring a "thank you" to her, turning to kiss Emmett.

My sister is one of the most loving people on the planet. But she's fiercely protective of her friends and family—especially her younger siblings. Previous girlfriends had endured some serious ear-lashings from my adder-tongued sister, who was convinced every girl was just out to use me. I worried that she would subject Bella to the same, despite how very far off-base the idea that she was using me might be.

I put my arm around Bella's shoulder, leaning in to kiss her cheek, contemplating how to communicate to my sister that this was different—Bella was different—before she stuck her nose in it.

My thoughts on Rose didn't last long once my lips met Bella's cheek. Every time I touched that woman my whole body responded. She was amazingly soft, sweet, delicious...

*Stop!*

Every part of my body wanted to do much, much more than kiss her cheek, but I couldn't. I reminded myself over and over of my promise to be OK with just kissing, forever, if that's what she wanted. And I *could* be OK with that. Really.

Probably.

I'd just make a fuck-ton of shower babies, have a truckload of tissue offspring, and need to subscribe to the Jergens of the Month Club.

But what's new? I'm a Master-Bater any way. Been an expert going on fourteen years now.

*OK, Edward, you really, really shouldn't be proud of that.*

*True, but I am damn good at it.*

Soon we accumulated a few more people at our table. My dad came to sit near us, seeming awfully quiet and introspective until I realized that he was, in fact, *toasted*.

He sat studiously contemplating his drink—some concoction called a "Canton Negroni." It looked like a girly-fufu drink to me, but I would never say that to my dad. The man wielded a scalpel for a living. You don't fuck with people that wield knives for a living. Or guns. Which meant Emmett was safe from me too. That probably explained why I messed with Jasper all the time. What's he gonna do, fucking *counsel* me to death?

A few minutes later, Alice and another friend of Rose's whose name I didn't know came over. Alice sat down near Jasper. At the sudden proximity to the object of his newfound affections—or at least the object of his deviant masturbatory acts—Jasper became inexplicably shy, blushing furiously whenever she spoke to him. He even, at one point knocked over his beer when trying to answer a question about his work.

"So clumsy tonight Jasper. What's up with that?" Bella teased him.

I couldn't help it, I had to join in.

"Did you wear sunscreen today Jasper? You look awfully red, I think you must have gotten some serious sun."

Bella looked at Jasper carefully, examining him with a concerned expression. "Wow, Jasper, he's right. You might have sunstroke."

Jasper's mouth hung open a moment, trying to decide what to say to shut us the hell up. It closed after a few seconds, but still no retort came forth from my normally flawlessly witty brother.

"Are you OK, Jasper? You *do* look a little flushed." Alice, unlike the rest of us, was genuinely concerned, making Jasper turn even more beet-like.

"Ah...um...no. I'm good. Really. I'm fine," he managed to choke out as Alice put her hand against his cheek and forehead to check for a fever.

Bella, in the mean time, was torturing me. By torture I mean, she was petting me. No, not like you pet a cat. Like you pet a *man*. A man that you want to touch, but you're in public so you really can't, so instead you run your hand up the inside of his fucking thigh until his balls are blue, painful, and absolutely useless.

"Hey, Pervella! Quit groping my baby brother over there," Jasper called out playfully, having regained some of his composure.

"Jasper!" Emmett berated him, "You worked so hard to get those two together, then you give her shit for feeling him up? The girl's just tryin'a make you proud."

Jasper looked shocked. "Oh my God, Emmett, you're totally right! What was I thinking? I should be encouraging them to dry hump each other in front of everyone like two newlyweds..." He looked pointedly at Rose's ass, still ground firmly into Emmett's crotch.

"Oh *snap!*" my very drunk dad threw in.

I had to laugh. My dad tried so hard to be "with it" sometimes. It was always 100% pure unpasteurized fail.

I whispered to Bella, "SELECT \* FROM Dads WHERE Name = 'Carlisle' and Cool = True"

She whispered back, "RESULTS RETURNED: 0"

We laughed, partly at our wit, partly at how ridiculously stupid we were for even finding that funny.



I couldn't resist. Bella's mouth was still drawn in a smile when I covered it with my lips, kissing her soundly. A startled squeak came from her, before she snaked her arm around my neck, pulling me closer. We kissed for a moment, then, I pulled away, aware we had an audience.

Emmett rolled his eyes, while Rose ignored the other people bantering around us. She looked from Bella to me, and back again. I shifted in my seat, uncomfortable. As much as I loved my sister, I knew instinctively that she was going to test Bella in some way, to prove her feelings for me. No-one I'd been with yet had passed the test. On the other hand, I hadn't cared much whether anyone else did. Bella was a first for me.

"So, Bella...what do you do? You know, for a living?"

"I'm a UX expert." Seeing Rosalie's puzzled expression she clarified, "UX is User Experience. I consult with the different web teams on how the user experience should be for a particular product. You know, how people experience a web site, and what they would instinctively do."

"Huh," Rose responded thoughtfully, "and your parents?"

"Well, my mom lives in Florida with my step-dad. I grew up in Forks. My dad, Charlie, is still there. He's Chief of Police."

"I *see*." Rose chewed her lip thoughtfully. "I don't remember hearing much about you, Bella. How long have you guys been dating?" She glanced from Bella to me and back again.

Bella flushed a little, the newness of our relationship still making us both a little squicky when it came to talking about it openly.

"Um...well...just recently. Really recently."

"Like...what? A week? A month?"

"Rose," I said quietly, warning her off, "cut it out."

Bella looked at me, confused, while Rose didn't even blink.

"No, like the last day or two. We've worked together for a long time, but—"

"I met Bella last weekend, Rosalie, when she came to Edward's place for the first time. They've been really good friends for awhile, they just needed some...pushing," Jasper interjected. He knew where Rose was headed as well as I did.

"So you didn't get together with him until you saw Edward's apartment? Met some of his family and realized—"

"Rose, cut it the fuck out. Now!"

"Shut up, Edward," she didn't even look my way, her eyes never leaving Bella.

"Rose, you're way off base this time. Seriously. Listen to Edward," Jasper jumped in again.

I turned toward Bella, hoping to somehow defuse this—maybe ask Bella to leave with me, to give me a chance to explain Rose's fear to her. But I was too late. I heard Bella speak before I got a chance to.

"What's the deal, Rosalie? Why the attitude? You don't know me. Why am I suddenly dirt on the bottom of your Jimmy Choo's?"

Emmett whispered something in Rose's ear, and she rolled her eyes at him. Turning to Bella she said exactly what I feared most.

"It's not you, Bella, honestly. You seem...nice...I guess. But understand that I love my brother, and need to know you're not just with him because of his bank account and his Vanquish."

"*Rosalie!* Fucking stop it. Now." I understood Rosalie's need to protect me—she was very maternal with all of us—but she could have been a helluva lot more diplomatic. I put up with a lot from my family, but insulting Bella, who had done nothing to deserve it, wasn't something I would stand for.

"Edward," her silken voice was condescending even to my tolerant ears, "you need to ask these questions. It's not like you and Jasper didn't give Emmett the third degree when I met him."

She was right. But still, this wasn't a conversation I wanted to have right now. Or right here.

I said the only thing I could that would possibly shut Rose up for awhile.

"Rosalie, she doesn't *know*, OK? She doesn't even know, so it can't be about that. She loves me. Get it? *Loves* me. And I love her."

Rose looked momentarily abashed. I doubt in my twenty-six years she'd ever heard me say I was in love with a girl. Ever. She was, on the whole, right about the girls I dated. Right now, though, she was very, very wrong. I was terrified that her attitude might drive Bella away. Despite how strongly I knew we both felt, things still seemed very fragile between us.

Bella's eyebrows knitted together in confusion, and she looked at me.

"What's a Vanquish?"

"What's a...?" Rosalie's voice drifted off in disbelief. She was clearly taken off guard by the question. My normal girlfriends would possibly have feigned ignorance of my *having* a quarter-million dollar car. They would have said, "Edward has a Vanquish?" and batted their eyelashes innocently.

Bella, however, not only didn't know I had one, she had no idea what it was. That was crystal clear in her response. The girl had no guile.

Rosalie looked from Bella to me. "She really doesn't know?"

"No. It never came up."

Her eyebrows rose in surprise.

"*What is a Vanquish?*" Bella asked again, confused and exasperated.

"Edward has an Aston Martin Vanquish." Jasper filled in.

"It's *car*, Bella. Just a car," I added, hoping to shorten this conversation as much as possible.

"Edward has a *car*?" She looked at Jasper and Rosalie, then glanced back at me, confused. "Why didn't I know that?"

Her face grew more anxious as she processed what Rosalie had said. "And what sort of 'bank account' is she talking about, Edward?" She put air quotes around "bank account."

I had really hoped she hadn't caught that part. I don't like to talk about my investments, net worth, or anything 'money' at all, really. I was hoping that conversation between Bella and I could wait until we were on more solid footing in our relationship.

Unfortunately my silence told her too much. She spoke quietly, looking directly at me.

"I take it it's not a *normal* bank account like mine, with next months' rent and just enough for some Top Ramen in it?"

I shook my head.

"Then why do you take the bus every day?" Her frown deepened as she thought it through more. "And why the hell did you *rent* a car to get us here?"

I shrugged. "Um...the Vanquish isn't really something you take on ferries to islands with unpaved roads, if you know what I mean." Exhaling a hollow little laugh, hoping against hope to rescue this conversation from the dark side, I continued. "Plus it isn't exactly a *passenger* car. Not a lot of trunk room."

Emmett and Rosalie laughed at the absurdity of taking the Vanquish on vacation to an island.

"So it's expensive."

Pausing as long as I could, eventually I had to nod. I wasn't happy about having this conversation in front of everyone, but the upside was it was painfully obvious Bella had no idea about my car or my money. Even Rose would see that now.

"Oh my God!" Bella looked mortified as something occurred to her. "Do you *own* that apartment?"

Grimacing, I nodded again, unhappy for once that she was so quick.

"What the *hell*, Edward? How did I not know any of this about you? I've known you for *how* long?"

"I didn't know you had a cat." I pointed out, rather unhelpfully, it turned out. Yeah, I could definitely see where Jasper's "socially retarded" assessment came from.

She sighed, exasperatedly. "Edward, you not knowing about my stupid cat isn't quite on the same scale as this."

I didn't really know what to say. She was right—*again*—but there was no good reason I hadn't told her. So I said the first dumbass thing that popped into my head.

"You know, until very recently there were some pretty big things I didn't know about *you*."

As soon as I said it, I wanted to stick a white-hot poker down my own throat. And pull it out my ass. The look on Bella's face said she would clearly help me do it, if I could find one. She watched me for a second, hurt and anger flashing across her features, then stood, walking away.

"Bella!" I flew from my chair, and grabbed her arm. "Please, don't go. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

She stopped, turning towards me, not hiding an ounce of the pain from her face.

"Bella, really, I'm a complete fuckhead."

I paused a moment, trying to figure out what to say next, but she beat me to it.

"If you're waiting for me to disagree, you're goanna wait a long goddamned time."

I let out a frustrated breath, hoping against hope that what I had to say next would help at all. The knot in my stomach was fucking huge, and my palms were sweaty. I couldn't stand the thought of her being upset with me. Even more, I couldn't stand the thought that I actually deserved it.

"Bella, I know, *I know*. I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry. *Fuck*, I'm sorry, you have no idea." I pointed at my chest. "Wrong. Retarded. Fuckhead."

Scrubbing my hands through my already unkempt hair, I braved on. "Bella, even though we've known each other for a long time, there are going to be things that we don't know about each other. Most of them won't be a big deal, but some might be. And some might seem important, but really aren't. Do you know what I mean?"

Bella was quiet a moment, then spoke, slowly, deliberately, "Edward, how...*how* is that not important? In what world is a detail like that not important?"

"In *my* world, Bella. Think about it—really think about it—is it important to you? Truly? Does it make a difference to how you feel about me? Will you choose to be with me—or not—because of it?"

"No, of course not."

A knot in my stomach—just one of them—loosened when she said that. She sounded so confident.

"Then it's *not* important. I don't *want* it to be important. I don't ever want have to wonder about it, and with *you*, I don't. Bella, you're the first girl I've never, *not once*, spent a moment wondering about that."

"Only because I didn't know."

"No, because I *know* you. I don't know every detail of your life, but I know *you*. I know you well enough to know you weren't going to want me because of that."

Scrubbing my hand through my hair, again, I paused before adding, "I don't talk about it at work. It's just something I've gotten used to not mentioning, so it never came up." Pausing again, "I'm sorry. Really."

She looked at me thoughtfully. "And you don't want it to be important."

"No," I breathed out, relieved that she didn't seem pissed anymore.

Putting a hand on my cheek, she leaned in towards me, her eyes closing. Her forehead lined up perfectly with my chin, and I kissed it, softly.

"Then, it *doesn't* matter, Edward." Her voice was quiet, calm. "I just don't get why you didn't tell me. I want to know everything about you. Good and bad."

Overwhelmed with relief I wrapped my arms around Bella and hugged her tightly to me. She clung just as fiercely to me, sending a thrill through me.

"Wanna go for a walk?" I asked her quietly, not pulling away.

"That would mean us letting go of each other," she said into my neck. I could feel her lips curl into a smile against me.

"No it wouldn't. I'll carry you," I said—only half joking.

She snorted—rather insultingly, I thought.

~oOo~

An hour or so later we had walked around a good part of the lake and back again, and were heading back up to the lodge. It was getting pretty late, and we were both really tired.

Again, I wasn't sure what the plan was, but I wanted to be with Bella—wanted to sleep next to her, desperately. Unfortunately, my *penis* wanted it too. The two of us—my penis and I—had a very quick and very stern talk about it. I let him know in no uncertain terms that he was not allowed to do anything to make Bella uncomfortable.

He—reluctantly—agreed.

As we reached the top of the stairs, Bella stopped. Putting her arms around my neck, standing on tip-toes, she offered me a kiss. As always, I melted into her, falling helplessly into her warm, soft lips, pulling her to me a little less cautiously this time. We were getting better at this, bit by bit.

After a moment she pulled away, just a little, looking me in the eye.

"Edward, I need to take a shower. Will you...um—" She looked painfully embarrassed. "—I'd like...can we..."

I laughed softly against her cheek. "Whatever it is, the answer is yes. Just spit it out, woman."

She chuckled ruefully. "I want to spend the night with you." She was blushing a little already, and it deepened when she added, "Again."

"Bella," I growled quietly near her ear, "any time. You don't even have to ask."

She sighed, a content, sexy sound. "You, me, my room, twenty minutes."

Twenty minutes—on the nose—later, I was showered, changed into lounging-around clothes, and tapping quietly on Bella's bedroom door.

"Come in," her soft voice came through the door.

I walked in, and was knocked breathless by the sight before me. Bella was, as always, beautiful. Her face was all soft curves and high cheekbones, with large expressive eyes. Her hair was long and an amazing auburn, chestnut color—and there was a ton of it, too.

She was sitting on the bed, wearing—

I stopped dead at what she was wearing.

Bella stood there in a tight little black cotton tank top and low-slung boxer shorts. She looked beyond sexy in the "completely unaware I'm sexy" sort of way that drives men nuts.

Fuck. Me.

Of course, we couldn't, which sort of made it all worse, because, my penis, he's a bad, bad boy. For some reason being cock-blocked made him much more interested. And looking at Bella, he and I both were *definitely* interested.

"Bella..." I breathed out. Her answering blush told me that my point had gotten across.

Suddenly, somewhat randomly, Bella stood and turned, giggling. She wagging her butt at me.

"You like?" she teased.

I was confused for a moment, then laughed with her as I saw what she was showing me. Her ass had a picture of a zombie on it. He was dressed like the scarecrow in The Wizard of Oz, and the lyric "If I only had a brain" was written across the top.

"Bella, I don't know what I love more...your ass, or your obsession with zombies."

She chuckled. "Well, in this case it's a two-fer. Zombies on my ass." Walking over to me, she wrapped her arms around my neck as she had earlier, again tip-toeing to kiss me. This time I kissed her back more deeply, slowly exploring her lips, and then her tongue.

I pulled her to me, wrapping my arms tightly around her. Our mouths fit perfectly together. As her tongue began to explore mine, jolts of pleasure ran through me. My desire for her was overwhelming, but it was fuelled by knowing she wanted me too. Feeling her hands on me, her arms around me, her mouth on mine; knowing she was *with* me—despite everything—that gave me more pleasure than just being able to touch her.

My mind was mostly mush but as we kissed, and it began to turn towards the hot'n'heavy side, I had just enough intelligence left to wonder whether this was going to be too much for Bella.

Thinking about Bella and what had happened to her was pretty much a constant in my brain at the moment. Every time I saw her I was struck with incredulity that someone had wanted to hurt her. Every time I touched her, I felt what a gift it was to be able to have this woman give herself in *any* way to me. And I was overwhelmed with unparalleled anger that someone would take her trust, her love, the gift of herself, and stomp on it like it was garbage, and leave her broken like that.

But those feelings; those thoughts; the outstanding questions I had about it all—they had to wait. I refused to let them cloud what we had right now. I refused to let them into the trust, the love, the gift she was giving me right now. Some day soon I would ask her. But not now. He wouldn't take this time from us. He wasn't getting an ounce of it.

So, I tamped down those feelings, put away those thoughts, and focused on the amazing woman who was kissing me with such wonderful passion, and returned to my original question. Was this going to be too much for Bella?

Then I realized that so far this evening she had called the shots—had made the decisions leading here—and I would trust her to know where her own limits were.

I pulled away a little—just enough to speak.

"Bella?" I asked, a little breathless.

"Mmmmm...?" She was glassy-eyed, with flushed cheeks. So fucking beautiful.

"I wanna make a deal."

"OK?..." She looked confused, and possibly a little irritated that I had stopped kissing her. That made me smile.

"I don't know where the line is. You may not either, but you'll know when we're there. The deal is this: For my part, I'll stop the second you tell me to. For your part, you tell me the second—and I mean *the second*—you feel a twinge of any doubt."

She paused, thinking about what I said before answering quietly, "OK." Then she pulled me in for another long, burning kiss.

As we kissed, she pressed herself against me, hard. I could feel her breasts pressed against my chest, soft yet firm. Her body molded itself to mine all the way down, and I worried for a moment that she would panic once she felt...ahem...the effect she was having on me.

Yes, in case it wasn't clear, I'm talking about my penis.

Again.

And felt it, she most definitely did, though panic, she did not. In fact, on making direct contact with Little Eddie (yes, he's allowed to have a nickname), Bella inhaled sharply then let out the tiniest groan.

It was the sexiest sound I'd ever heard.

She began pulling on me, leading me back towards the bed. She hit it first, and was about to lay down—apparently without breaking our kiss—when I realized that would put me on top of her.



Quickly deciding that was a bad idea, I turned us, lowering myself to the bed, and pulled her on top of me.

Her knees straddled either side of my hips, and she leaned down to resume our kiss. Her hands ran through my hair, gripping it in a fist then letting go. Reaching up, I used one hand to pull back the curtain of hair now covering both of us, and the other snaked down to cup her ass.

Oh God, her ass. It was round, soft, firm, lovely, and everything anyone could ever want. Truly a superior posterior. Placing my hand flat on her ass cheek, I pushed her down gently, letting her know she could put her weight on me. In fact, I would very much love her weight on me, in that exact spot.

Her response was immediate. She pressed into me, the heat of her body blanketing me. The pressure from her body weight tormenting me.

So fucking sexy.

Her tongue came out to trace the shape of my lips, forcing a quiet moan from me.

"God Bella..." whatever I was going to say was muffled by her kisses. I didn't know what wanted to say, really, but it involved telling her how fucking sexy she was.

Her hands were working through my hair, grasping, clutching as she kissed me, grinding herself slowly against me, her breathing ragged.

She rolled then, pulling me with her so we lay side by side. One hand was trapped under me, so I moved, freeing it. Her other hand roamed down my side, then up my chest, before moving down to find its way under my t-shirt.

The feel of her skin on mine, her hand under my clothing, made me almost frantic for her. I wanted her more than I could have thought possible. Needed her. Needed to be close to her.

Our kiss resumed, more desperate now. My hands, like hers, were beginning to explore, though I don't remember ordering them to. While one hand was occupied propping up my head, the other that left her ass and was roaming upwards. I could only guess as to my hand's goal, but I think it was her breast.

Why, yes. Yes, it was.

Hesitantly, my hand found the hem of her tank top, and inched under. Bella moaned in response to my touch, pulling me closer to her. I took that as a sign of encouragement and kept going, exploring her silky smooth skin, touching and caressing as I went.

Reaching her rib cage, just under her breast, I stopped, breaking our kiss.

"Bella?" I asked quietly, asking permission.

"Please," she whispered against me, eyes closed, cheeks flushed.

"Are you sure?"

She snorted and opened her eyes, raising an eyebrow sardonically. "Do you make all the girls beg, Edward?"

I kissed her then, slowly, deeply, before pulling away to answer her. "Only the ones I'm utterly in love with."

"So that's a yes?"

"Bella?"

"What?"

"Can I feel you up now? I'd really like to get to second base."

She laughed. "I already said 'please', what more do you want?"

"That's good enough," I growled into her ear, moving my hand to cup her bare breast under her shirt.

The shock that went through me as I touched her was almost too much to take. Her flesh was smooth and soft, round and firm, with a perfect hard nipple. I touched her gently, knowing this was newer to her than to me. Knowing she could, at any moment, become overwhelmed by it all.

Right now, she didn't seem overwhelmed. In fact, she wanted more. Arching her back, she pressed herself to me, thrusting herself harder into my hand.

"*Edward...*" she whined.

I cut her off with a kiss, slipping my tongue between her lips, as my thumb slowly stroked across her nipple. Bella let out a moan in response, and her hips pressed harder into mine. I did it again, loving her response.

Unable to stop myself, I kissed down her neck, and across her collarbone, before dipping my head lower, wrapping my lips around the shirt-covered nub. Squeezing it gently with my lips, running my tongue over the sensitive tip, she gasped, clutching the back of my head, pulling me closer to her—if that were possible.

Then I heard it. It was mixed with her moans of pleasure, almost inaudible, but there.

A tiny sob.

Looking up I saw Bella, an erotic little angel, face flushed with desire, hair in complete disarray, eyes closed as she enjoyed the sensations my touch created. She looked absolutely beautiful. But there was, glinting in the corner of her eye, the hint of a tear.

It could be a happy tear, I acknowledged to myself. Or it could be something else. The possibilities were many. She may not even know herself. Sex is emotional even when you don't have all the baggage Bella has.

I knew in that moment there was only one thing I could do.

Continuing to palm her breast, teasing her nipple, I moved my head back up toward hers. She writhed under me a little, a pleasure-filled squirm. As our faces grew close, she opened her eyes, meeting my gaze.

"Edward," she breathed, "God that feels good."

I smiled at her. "You feel amazing." Kissing her, never stopping the contact between us, I thought through what I needed to say.

When I was ready, I began.

"Bella?" I asked, pulling away from our kiss.

"Mmmm?"

"You can feel," I pressed our hips together to give her a clear indication of what I mean, "how much I want you, right?"

She pulled back a little more so she could look me in the eye.

"Yes..." her perplexed answer came.

"Bella, I want you more right now than I've ever wanted anyone in my entire life. Put together. You are everything I could ever want. So beautiful, sweet, sexy, smart. Everything. The way you make me feel—the things you make me want—it's driving me completely insane."

"I know Edward. You're doing the same to me."

"Good," I replied, smiling. "Because I'm going to stop now."

Bella's expression grew clouded with her confusion.

"What?"

"I'm going to stop." True to my word I pulled my hand from her shirt, and drew back just enough that we weren't pressed intimately against each other.

It was one of the harder things I'd ever had to do.

"I'd like to spend the night with you, if that's still OK. But we need to stop the hanky panky now."

"Why?" She looked confused, maybe hurt. "Did I do something wrong?"

I laughed quietly, trying to reassure her. "Bella, you were, and always have been, just perfect. It's just that you and I both—but especially you—need to know that no matter how hot things get, no matter how into this we are, I will always, always, be able to stop. If I can stop now, with the things you've just done to me, I can stop any time."

Her eyes closed a moment as she processed what I'd said.

"You don't need to prove that to me Edward. I know you wouldn't hurt me." She spoke the words with certainty, but there was a note of...something...in her voice. Doubt? Relief? I knew that even if I was wrong, stopping to prove this one thing couldn't hurt. At worst, I get blue balls for a night. At best, I prove an important point to her.

"I know, Bella. But I feel like for both our sakes I need to prove it. Please don't be mad."

She laughed. "So, you're leaving me hanging at second base to prove a point, and I'm supposed to be happy about it?"

"No, but it would help if you understood what I'm trying to do."

"I think I do. I think you need to learn to trust me too, though."

"What do you mean?"

"You made me promise to tell you when and if I got uncomfortable. You need to trust I will."

That took me off guard. She was totally right. I didn't trust her to tell me. At least, not until afterwards.

"Bella, it's a harder thing for you to do. I'm worried you won't know it's upsetting until it's happened. And then it's too late."

She shook her head slowly, but I couldn't tell if it was in disagreement with me, or a general frustration with our situation.

I stood up off the bed, pulling Bella with me, just long enough to pull back the covers.

"May I spend the night?"

She rolled her eyes at me. "What's with the formality? Duh! Didn't I already ask?"

"Well, that was before I decided to play hard to get," I smirked at her.

"Shut it, Cullen, and get in bed!"

"Oooh...I like Bossy Bella. Can she come back another time?"

Rolling her eyes, again, we climbed into bed.

We lay sporking while I mentally lectured my hands to not fondle her boobies. After a few minutes I began to drift off—around the same time my erection finally began to wane. A minute or two later, Bella spoke, her voice also sleepy.

"Edward?"

"Mmmm...?"

"'Hanky panky'? What, is this 1954?"

"Bite me, Swan," I mumbled.

She chuckled quietly.

A few moments later: "Edward?"

"Mmmm...?"

"Are you...like...*stinking* rich?"

"Mmmm...I guess so," I answered sleepily.

"So...why do you work? Why do *all* of you work? I mean, kindergarten teaching? That's hard stuff. And your dad...surgery? That takes drive, you know?"

I yawned, rubbing my eyes before speaking. "Well, I guess if we had been working all our lives, and then suddenly got a ton of money, we'd want to quit our jobs and do all the things we couldn't do before. But we grew up with, well...*everything*...really, so there's no joy in not working. That's not new or fun. There's no personal satisfaction in twiddling your thumbs all day. Plus, I guess we were just raised to place value on contribution."

"Edward?"

"Yes, Bella." She was like a four year old with the questions, it was adorable. But I wanted to sleep.

"I love you."

I smiled, burying my nose into her neck. Hearing her say that made me go sort of gushy inside...like the blue goo we threw at each other at work. Or like butterflies and hearts and ladybugs. And rainbows. Definitely rainbows.

Wow, there go my ovaries again. Maybe I'm pregnant...

"You too. Very much."

If she said anything else after that I missed it, because I fell fast asleep, content just having her in my arms.

## **Geek Love Chapter 15: In Which There is an Elevator Ride**

**Monday, 8:45 a.m.**

The stupid transmogrifier had somehow turned my one-page functional overview into a fourteen page, collated...*something*.

I'm a smart guy. Seriously. I helped my previous company—a search-based startup whose name rhymes with "Foogole"—create their spatial data mining system. I currently create complex stored procedures that dynamically generate our web content every day. Yet when it comes to printers, photocopiers, and fax machines, I quake in fear.

*That's because they're out to get me.*

I had put in one double-sided sheet, hoping to get out *two* double-sided sheets. You know, sorta the point of photocopying. You take one, hit the button, *et voila! Deux!*

Or in my case, *et voila! Fail!*

Somehow I ended up with two hundred single-sided sheets, nicely collated and stapled like a small novel.

*Sigh.*

I headed for my cube, planning to cower for a little bit while I screwed up the courage to ask the receptionist Justine for help. I hated asking her for help. She always laughed at me.

*That's because she's out to get me.*

OK, not really. Sometimes my inner dialogue just fucks with me. I'm not actually a paranoid person. I know she doesn't laugh at me because she's out to get me. She laughs at me because I deserve it.

Turning the corner I peered over the half-wall that delineated our cube areas, and my breath stopped.

Bella!

Seeing her, my heart skipped a beat, my stomach clenched, my hands got a little clammy, and I swear to Cap'n Crunch my dick twitched just a little.

*Edward, you are **not** fourteen—you have some control over it.*

Bella was at her desk, working—catching up on email, from the looks of it. It never failed to irritate me that, at least in our department, the work didn't stop just because the office closed. I could leave a completely barren inbox at 6:00 p.m., only to come in to a few hundred emails the next morning. Weekends were worse. It always made Monday mornings suck ass even harder than other days.

*Do people really "suck" ass? I mean, actually "suck"? Really? Ew.*

I shuddered, and tried to turn my mind to more pleasant things. Like my girlfriend, Bella.

*My girlfriend.*

My. Girlfriend.

My—

OK, you get the point. I like that she's my girlfriend.

Our ferry ride and subsequent drive home on Sunday had been very nice. After we awoke and dressed (and kissed), we had breakfast (then kissed), said goodbye to everyone (then kissed), and packed the car for the return trip home (while kissing). At some point on the ferry ride home, we kissed.

I actually had chapped lips.

*I love chapped lips.*

Dropping her off at home on Sunday had been really freakin' hard. I never wanted to let her out of my sight again. If I had my way, we'd take the next six months off work, and just lay in my bed, stark naked, and...

After a quick chat with my peen (a word I learned from Bella over the weekend), I walked up to her, wondering what work would be like for us now.

She was wearing her hair up in a ponytail that spilled down her neck and in between her shoulders. Waves of thick, dark brown hair caressing her back, falling down her...what was that?...ah, yes, her binary t-shirt. The one that says,

**There are 10 types of people in the world.**

**Those who understand binary, and those who don't.**

So fucking beautiful. So...mine.

I thrilled with the knowledge that this woman—this amazing, bright, beautiful, sexy woman had told me she loved me. Had *shown* me she loved me.

So. Fucking. Happy.

Walking up to her, I spun her chair so she was facing me, eliciting a startled expression and a tiny squeak from her. Pulling her up, I grabbed her hip with one hand, and the back of her head with the other. Her eyes widened in surprise as I kissed her soft, delicious mouth. Pressing her hard against me, I deepened the kiss, inviting her tongue to play with mine.

She moaned in response, opening her mouth to let me in, as her right hand glided up my chest and found its way into my hair. She tightened her grip on me as her other hand wound tightly around to my back, landing square on my ass. Pressing herself against me, we were joined in terribly unseemly ways, but I couldn't care less. She ground herself into me, breaking our kiss for a moment to gasp for air, before returning to nip my lower lip.

I turned us, walking backwards until her back hit the side of the bookshelf next to her desk. She grunted a little when I pushed her hard against it, the entire length of my body pressed against hers, never breaking our kiss. As I pressed into her, one hand ghosting over her breast for a fleeting second, she moaned—rather loudly for the workplace—into my mouth.

Bella's kisses became frantic, consuming. Her hands grabbed at me, mouth owned me, breasts pressed hard against me so I could feel the hard buds against my chest, aching to be touched, desperate for my tongue. My breathing was ragged as her mouth left mine to trail kisses down my throat. My breathing nearly stopped as she reached a hand around between us and palmed my rock hard—

"Edward!"

Bella's happy voice broke my reverie, and I found myself standing, looking stupidly dazed in the middle of her cube area. Her hands were nowhere near my—

Nuts! I had fallen down the rabbit hole of workplace Bella sex fantasy without even realizing it!

Again.



I shook my head to clear it a little, and walked over to Bella, smiling at her. She was smiling back, but also looked a little shy, a faint blush staining her cheeks.

"Good morning."

We had already discussed that there could be absolutely no hanky-panky at work. There was no Corporate Hanky Panky Policy that we needed to worry about, but still, Bella said it would be inappropriate to, say, make out in the middle of a meeting.

Whatever.

I will admit, though, that I had secretly considered taking Bella into Mike's office and laying her across his desk to give him a little "neener neener" tonsil-hockey display. But I wasn't sure if I could hold both Bella and me up with just one hand—since I'd be using the other to flip him off.

So, logistics ruled that out.

I tried to argue that we were technically the "Interactive" department, and therefore were only satisfying our job descriptions by being "interactive" with each other, but that just led to a discourse on the etymological differences between "interaction" and "intercourse". All of which I knew, of course, but it was fun as hell to listen to Bella say "intercourse" so many times.

I was just glad that she didn't argue back that if I were right, I should also be "interactive" with our teammate Brett.

Realizing I hadn't responded to her greeting, I scrambled out a hasty, "Good morning."

She raised a single eyebrow at me. I really hoped that didn't mean she knew what I'd been thinking. Bella had the amazing knack of making me feel fourteen, insecure, and slightly sweaty.

Turning to face her screen again, she pulled up a document for me to look over. It was something we had been working on the week before, and she was in the final draft mode before we presented to the account team. I leaned over her shoulder as she pointed out her changes.

"See, I redirected the error page flow to get rid of that one infinite loop. I also added in the client's logo to the comps on each page."

As she spoke, my thumb traced a circular pattern slowly on the back of her neck. I was trying to be subtle, since there *were* three other people sitting in her cube area, but no-one seemed to be paying much attention. Two of them were listening to their iPods, and another was on the phone.

After a minute Bella gave up on the work talk, and looked over her shoulder, saying quietly, "Edward...um...thank you for the weekend. It was awesome. I loved meeting your family—and Emmett's. It was...the whole thing was...perfect."

She smiled ruefully before adding, "Well, except for the horrid story and all the tears. Other than *that* it was just peachy."

I smiled a little, not sure what to say. I didn't want her to make light of telling me her story, but I also didn't want us to have to break down into woe-filled angsty drama every time it came up. If we were together for the long haul, it would come up a lot.

In the absence of anything witty or genius to say, I landed on old faithful.

"Trifecta?"

Her jaw dropped, then snapped shut again, and she giggled a little.

"Edward, it's 9 a.m.!"

I frowned at her, adopting a scolding, paternal expression.

"Isabella Marie Swan, everyone knows that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. The Trifecta contains all your key nutrition for such an important meal."

"Cullen, what the hell sort of crack did you smoke this morning?"

I rolled my eyes. "Think about it. You need protein for breakfast..."

I paused, for effect, and she waited patiently, the hint of a smirk on her face.

"*Hello...peanut butter is protein.*"

She nodded slowly, reluctantly agreeing.

"And you need coffee, obviously. It's not a morning—and certainly not breakfast—without it."

She nodded again, much more readily this time. Bella would never deny the importance of coffee.

"And you need carbs to balance out the protein. The cookie? Pure carbs."

She snorted, clearly seeing the stretch in my logic.

"Yeah, but what about the chocolate, Edward? In what world is chocolate a breakfast food?"

Rolling my eyes in exaggerated frustration—intentionally acting like she was short-bus-slow—I spoke carefully.

"*Helloooo*, Bella. Chocolate comes from Brazil. Brazil is four hours ahead of us. That chocolate thinks it's 1:00 p.m. Bella, in what world is 1:00 too early to be eating chocolate?"

She laughed. "Wow! Your logic is as good as mine when I'm justifying expenditure on wind-up toys." Her eyes moved to the very impressive collection on her shelf—some hundred odd wind-up toys and action figures.

Reaching up to poke at a random UFO toy, I stopped short, seeing her rubberized Gumby and Pokey characters. They were in what can only be described as a very compromising, and definitely not HR-friendly, position. In fact, their position was downright blackmail-worthy.

"Bella?"

"Um...yeah?" She blushed suddenly, looking like a six year old who'd been caught sneaking an extra cookie.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Does Pokey *like* that? I wasn't aware he went that way? Or...should I say 'bent' that way?"

"Edward," she intoned with all the seriousness she could muster, "Pokey is a grown horse, able to make his own decisions about his personal life. It isn't for us to judge."

"OK, you're right. I just wasn't aware that their love was so...public. Or painful."

Her snort was muffled a little as she turned towards her keyboard again.

"I'm just gonna send these docs over to the Account team, then we can go. I need a goddamned caffeine IV this morning."

She opened an email, typed a quick message, and hit send, before standing up to put her zombie hoodie on.

I turned to lead the way to the kitchen when Bella opened the profanity chest.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck! Oh Jesus, you idiot! No!"

Rushing back to Bella's desk, I saw her hunched over the keyboard, head in hands, eyes covered.

"What happened? What is it?" I asked, panicked.

"Fuck! Edward, I'm such a fucking fail. Epic. Fail. I can't believe I did that."

"What?" My panic wasn't lessening at all with her explanation.

"Retards!"

OK, that stopped me.

"Come again?"

"Retards, Edward. R-E-T-A-R-D-S." She spelled it slowly for me.

"Yes, Bella, I know the word. Please explain what the hell you mean."

She turned her monitor a little more in my direction, and maximized the email sitting in her "sent items" folder, before explaining. "I went to double check that I had attached the docs on the email I sent out, and realized that I had mis-typed—" She cut herself off, throwing both hands into her face again. "Gah!...that's so horribly embarrassing! But seriously, 'g' and 't' are really fucking close together on the keyboard."

I read the email:

Attached are the workflow, spec overview,  
and sitemap for job #i9083.

Retards.

Bella Swan

UX/UI Designer

206.555.9283 (d)

206.555.2345 (c)

On the second pass I noticed it.

Retards.

She'd signed her email "Retards" instead of "Regards."

"I didn't even put my name in there. I forgot my own fucking name. At least then it would have looked like I was calling myself a retard—which they would have understood after getting this email—but *noooo*...I have to make it look like I'm calling *them* retards. And even though some of them *are*—"

"—Newton—"

"—Yes, Newton. Even though some of them *are*, the career fairy on my left shoulder is telling me to not actually call them that to their face."

I did the only thing a loving boyfriend could do in this situation. I laughed my ass off. I know, I know, not nice of me. But come *on*! That *was* epic spell-check fail.

~oOo~

**Monday, 9:15 a.m.**

The Trifecta was amazing. So. Amazing.

I love watching Bella eat—wrapping her lips around the chocolate-dipped cookie, licking the crumbs off her bottom lip—it's amazing.

But this, oh, this was far, far better than usual.

I, as is customary, did the cookie-peanut-butter-chocolate part of the Trifecta. Bella handled the caffeine. She is something of a caffeine expert, and even though the Fauxbucks machine doesn't exactly take custom orders, somehow it tasted better when she pressed the buttons.

We sat down, facing our normal 2 p.m. snack (at 9:15), when Bella grabbed my hand, raising it to face-height. Surprised, I started pulling it back when she took one finger and slowly put it in her mouth, licking off a stray smear of chocolate.

I fucking *love* stray smears of chocolate.

Her tongue worked around the tip of my finger, then her lips wrapped around it tightly, sucking softly.

Gah!

*What happened to "no hanky panky?"*

~oOo~

**Monday, 11:34 a.m.**

Round two with the photocopier. The fact that I had testicles prevented me from asking for help using any machinery, so I decided to try again on my own. The stupid thing had finally given me the right number of pages, but only the first side of each page showed up.

Fuck!

I was about to give it another shot when I heard a voice behind me.

"Need some help?"

Bella was standing close behind me, peeking around my right side at the photocopier. She grabbed my one-sided Quasimodo copies and eyeballed them quickly.

"Edward?"

"Yes, Bella?"

"You're pathetic when it comes to machinery. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Bella."

Normally I would be ashamed, or at a minimum feel embarrassed at such a statement, but I really didn't care what Bella called me—as long as her hand stayed on my ass, like it was right now. Her thumb was stroking a slow pattern, hand squeezing gently.

"Bella?"

"Yes, Edward?"

"What happened to 'no hanky panky'?"

She paused, flushing slightly, but grinning nonetheless. "What? Oh, *this*?" she indicated my ass, "this isn't hanky panky, Edward. I do this with everyone here."

I raised a hand to the side of her face, running my fingers from her temple to her cheek. She leaned in to my hand, eyes closing halfway.

"I'm incredibly glad you don't," I said softly. "But you really need to stop that or I'll have to kiss you, and that *would* be frowned upon."

Smiling, she turned around and started to walk away. Unable to resist, I smacked her ass, making her squeal.

*Crap! I never did get help with the photocopier.*

~oOo~

**Monday, 1:23 p.m.**

Bella and I were in a meeting when my Beejive iPhone app buzzed, letting me know someone was IMing me. Surreptitiously looking at the screen under the conference table, I saw it was Bella. She was pure stealth when it came to IMing. She looked sincerely riveted on the presentation in front of us, her iPhone nowhere to be seen.

BS: What are you doing tonight?

EC: No plans. Hoping to see you.

BS: Come over? I'll rent a movie. I have popcorn.

EC: You bet your sweet blueberry muffin I'll be there.

The woman was a fucking messaging ninja! I swear I'd been watching her the whole time, and didn't see her even *look* at her phone, let alone respond to me.

EC: How do you *\*do\** that?

BS: Do what?

EC: Stealth-ninja IM skills.

BS: I'm good with my hands. I'll show you *\*how\** good tonight.

Jesus. Christ. Did she mean...

"Everything OK, Cullen? You need a minute?" Mike asked in his assnasal voice.

Surprised, I realized my phone was no longer under the table. I was openly IMing in the middle of the meeting.

*Dammit.*

~oOo~

**Monday, 2:02 p.m.**

I held back behind the rest of the meeting attendees, letting them all take the first elevator back to our floor while I waited for the next one. I was not alone. Bella had, coincidentally, been at the back of the pack also, and missed the first elevator.

"You really shouldn't IM during meetings. That's just rude, Edward." Her grin was almost unbearably smug. I wanted to kiss the smug right off her.

"I was being led astray by an IMing siren. I couldn't help it."

She laughed, a crystalline sound I would never, ever tire of.

"It wasn't nice of you, you know," I said with mock disappointment.

"What?"

"I'll show you tonight?" I quoted her message back to her.

"How exactly was that not nice?" Her grin said she knew *exactly* how it wasn't nice.

"You're *teasing* me. At *work*."

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Cullen," she said innocently. The elevator dinged and the door slid open quietly. Bella walked into the elevator car looking over her shoulder at me, batting her eyelashes flirtatiously.

I decided then and there to show her *exactly* what I meant.

Following close behind her, I waited for the doors to close before turning to stand directly in front of her. Putting a hand on each of her shoulders I pushed her gently against the wall. Her eyes met mine, growing wide, though the smile remained on her face. My body pressed firmly against hers, the entire length of her melding in with me.

I leaned down, as though to kiss her, her eyes fluttering shut in anticipation. Instead of her lips, my mouth met her neck as I trailed hot kisses up to her ear, sucking gently between kisses. She gasped in response as my tongue outlined the edge of her left ear, and her body pressed harder against me. Her hands came up, one wrapping around my waist, pulling me in closer, one snaking into my hair, putting force on the back of my head that clearly said "more."

I felt myself harden in response, but didn't care. She knew what she did to me. This was about making her suffer too. One of my hands slid down from her shoulder, brushing her upper arm before moving in to trace the outside of her breast. She gasped again—more loudly this time—at the contact.

As slowly as I dared—given that we had about ten more seconds until the elevator stopped—I circled the hard tip of her breast, loving the moan it elicited from Bella. After a moment, I let my thumb pass over her nipple, at the same time my lips met hers, swallowing the squeak that came out of her as I continued to squeeze and caress her.

I felt the elevator slow, mentally counted to three, then let go, turned, and walked out just as the doors opened.

Turning briefly, I called out, "That's what I meant," over my shoulder.

Bella, when I turned, looked fucktastic. Disheveled, flushed, and breathing hard, she was the outward embodiment of what I had felt every day around her for countless months.

Payback, you are one sneaky bitch.

## **Geek Love Chapter 16: In Which There Edward has Another Epiphany**

**Monday, 7:15 p.m.**

Godzilla. Bella had rented *Godzilla* for us to watch at her apartment.

Fuck, I love this woman.



I hadn't been to her apartment before, so I was pretty excited about it. Although I had known Bella a long time, and we had been friends awhile, we really hadn't hung out much outside of work. When we did, it was always at a bar or restaurant. I had never seen her place. I had also never met her family—something else we needed to get to eventually.

That, and I needed to hear the rest of the "Jonathan" story. I didn't want to ask her—didn't want to open the wounds again, when we were still working so hard on just being together—but I needed to know. What the hell happened to him? Was he still available for me to kill? Injure, at least? Take out a hit on? I hadn't priced out hit men before, but I was pretty sure I could afford one.

I met Bella at her place, the takeout I'd promised to bring burning my hand as she let me in. She took the food to the kitchen, gave me a quick kiss, then guided me through a grand tour of her apartment. OK, "grand" is hardly the right word for 450 square feet in a century-old building. But what she had done with it was nice.

The walls were painted a deep red in the living room, with white trim and a black bamboo pattern climbing up one edge of the wall. The floors were hardwood, with a large off-white rug in the center of the living room. Her sofa was a medium charcoal gray. The other furniture was made of stained bamboo. The room felt warm, sumptuous, and honestly, a little masculine. I liked it.

Besides the small living room, there was a bedroom and bathroom. Her bedroom was the polar opposite of the living room. It was almost "girly." She had an off-white bedspread with dark blue flowers, an almost-white-but-really-pink rug, and white furniture that was just missing the prince and princess figurines to make you think it was a ten year old girl's room.

The bathroom was...fuck, it was a bathroom. 'Nuff said.

As I wandered around, poking my nose into things (she had four family pictures up on a bookshelf that also contained thirty non-technical books, fourteen technical references, two jewelry boxes, five small figurines, and what looked to be a small dead hairy animal), Bella plated the take-out and brought it over to the coffee table in front of the sofa, along with two beers.

"Hey Bella?" I asked her after looking around a little more. "Where's Stinkybritches?"

Bella looked surprised for a moment, then smiled. "Oh, um...she lives under my bed when people come over. She hates everyone but me." I wasn't a hundred percent sure, but Bella seemed pretty proud of that when she said it.

We ate and watched Godzilla. Specifically, this was Godzilla vs. Mothra. She sang along loudly when it came to the "Mothra song." Of course, she doesn't actually speak or understand Japanese, so she completely mangled the entire thing, essentially singing gibberish. But it was cute nonetheless.

Until she tried to teach me the words.

Twenty minutes and two beers into the movie, I lay against the back of the couch, pulling Bella down so her back was resting against me. It was unbelievably nice to have her so close to me. Though I'd spent a good fifty percent of my day trying to talk my erection down, it honestly wasn't about that with her. Of course, I wanted her like that—obviously—but that wasn't the end of it. I *loved* her. That meant I could be whatever she needed me to be. She had made it clear that she wanted to "be" with me, physically, but that was an awfully big thing for her to take on. I felt some tight-rope walking was imminent.

I also felt her hand on my thigh.

Our relationship was still new enough that something as simple as her hand on my thigh sent a thrill through me.

Our relationship was still new enough that something as simple as her hand *moving up my thigh* made me instantly hard.

*Gah!*

Her small hand moved up my leg, stopping at the top of my thigh, about two inches from my hyper-aware nuts.

My mouth found the first thing it had access to—her ear. Luckily she had kept the ponytail in, so I had free access. The back of her head pressed into my shoulder as I trailed my tongue around the outside of her ear, then gently sucked.

She gasped, turning her head away to give me better access to her neck, and I took the hint happily, loving the way her hand squeezed me harder when she liked what I was doing. Her other hand reached up and gripped the back of my head, pressing me to her, tugging at my hair. Apparently that was at thing with her. It was quickly becoming a thing with me.

With her leaning back against me, my vantage point was optimal for one thing—looking down her shirt. As I sucked and nipped a trail down her neck, paying close attention to her reaction, gauging what was a win with Bella, I was drawn to the sight of the rounded tops of her firm breasts, visible below the v-neck of her t-shirt.

Bella turned her head so our mouths could meet, and when we kissed this time it was pure fucking passion. For the first time we weren't either post-drama, at work, or in the middle of a family function. Her mouth opened for the kiss, warm breath mixing with mine. Her tongue played with my lower lip before we joined for a truly "get to know you" kiss.

One final squeeze on my thigh and my hand moved on its own, running up her stomach, past her rib cage, and slowly cupping the breast closest to me. Her answering moan let me know this was OK—more than OK—so I began to squeeze, caress, and stroke her, loving the feel of the firm round flesh.

As my forefinger and thumb gently ran across her nipple, she arched her back, moaning into my mouth, hand gripping my thigh more firmly. Then her hand raised up to meet mine, pulling my hand from her body. I was confused for a moment, until she turned her whole body so she was facing me and put my hand squarely back on her breast, resuming our kiss face-to-face this time.

Without breaking away from her mouth, I turned so I was straight on the couch, rather than angled as I had been, and pulled Bella's thigh up, making her straddle me. Her hands cupped my face as we kissed. My hands cupped her ass, pulling her closer to me. Sensing what I wanted, she moved closer, grinding into my almost painful erection, giving me more delicious torment. I could feel the heat from her, driving me insane with desire.

Less cautious now, I put both hands up her shirt, sliding them across her soft, flat stomach, then upwards. I cupped both breasts over her bra, and she moaned at my touch, pressing harder against me.

She pulled away from our kiss just long enough to mumble, "I love you. God I love you. So much," into my mouth before resuming our kiss.

I tried to respond, but she wouldn't give my mouth back long enough to do so.

Fumbling in the back for her bra connector thingy, Bella took matters into her own hands—literally—and pulled her shirt over her head before reaching back to unclasp her bra.

I gasped—actually gasped—at that. She was so trusting with me. Unbelievably so. I knew that not everything would be a drama, but frankly it was more than I expected from her so quickly. I was thrilled, but still a little concerned.

Looking up to meet her eyes, I saw no fear, no hint of uncertainty. There was definitely lust, but nothing else discernible. Still, I had to be sure.

"Are you sure you're OK with this?" I asked quietly.

She merely smiled, nodded slightly, and put her hands on either side of my head, guiding my mouth toward her.

Taking one breast in my hand, I worked my tongue gently over the nipple. Bella writhed in response, driving herself harder into my cock. I sucked harder then, flicking my tongue over the tip of the nub. Bella's hands grabbed my hair almost painfully, as her breath came in short gasps.

"Edward..." she panted out, "Edward...bedroom."

Not needing to be told twice, I stood, her legs wrapped around my waist, and carried her into the bedroom, laying her gently on the bed.

Pulling away just long enough to take my own t-shirt off, I lay next to her, looking over the most beautiful sight I had ever fucking seen. Ever.

Bella was sexy any time, but right now...holy hell. She was bright-eyed, red-cheeked, eyes wild with excitement, and half naked in front of me. Her breasts were stunning, perfect, creamy, beautiful things, with utterly lickable peaks. Each breast was the size of a good handful. No more, no less. Perfect.

Leaning in to kiss her again, she closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of me touching her. And touch her, I did. I touched her everywhere she was unclothed—her face, her neck, her shoulders, her arms, her stomach, and then back to her breasts.

Bella, for her part, touched me too. Tentatively at first, then with more confidence, she ran her hand up my stomach, across my chest, and over my shoulders. She even, for a quick moment, pulled away from our kiss to run her index finger across my bottom lip, dipping it briefly into my mouth to touch my teeth, before resuming our kiss.

Then for the second time in the past hour, I felt Bella's hand on my thigh. This time, though, she did not stop at the top. Just as she had in my errant fantasy earlier in the day, her hand cupped my length, squeezing me through my jeans.

The sound I let out at that can only be described as a whoosh followed by a low growl. Feeling her hand on me, touching me *there*, took my need for her to a whole new level.

"God, Bella..." I groaned, "...you're amazing." I was mumbling into her mouth, not sure she could even understand me, but I felt the need to tell her—to explain to her—what she did to me.

She kept squeezing and rubbing me through my jeans, giving me cause to fear an eruption in the very near future.

Running my hand up her thigh, I imitated her path of ascent, stopping just before reaching her apex.

"Bella?" I asked quietly into her mouth.

Her eyes flew open, breaking our kiss completely.

"Is this OK? Really?"

She paused for a second, thinking, then nodded.

"Are you sure?"

She seemed certain, but I hadn't liked the pause.

"Edward, it's fine."

With that, she took her hand off my shaft and reached up, undoing my jeans, before sliding her hand inside my boxer-briefs.

Oh, holy Ron Jeremy. No she did not.

About ten seconds away from coming on her hand, I slid my hand the rest of the way up, touching her gently, carefully, through her jeans.

She moaned, lifting her hips to press into my hand, her own hand wrapping around me, flesh on flesh. Without thinking, my mouth crashed onto hers, taking her mouth with mine. Somewhere I heard a quiet rumble, then realized it was me. I was making what appeared to be a purring sound.

"Very manly," Bella giggled into my mouth.

"Shut it, Swan," I growled back.

As we continued to kiss, grope, and melt into each other, her hand began moving faster on my cock. Her touches were at first tentative—to be expected given her lack of experience—but quickly became more sure of herself. As she became more sure, I became at serious risk of embarrassing myself all over her hand.

I placed my palm over her wrist, stilling her.

"You need to stop, Bella," I said quietly.

"But...why? What...was it bad?" Typical Bella.

I snorted. "No. Very, very good. Too good."

"Oh," she responded quietly, but the pleased grin on her face bore the unmistakable stamp of pride. "OK then."

Her hand pulled away from my traitorous erection and rested on my chest, experimentally running a finger in a slow circle around my nipple.

I'd never had much sensation there before, but when Bella did it, it felt good. Damn good.

She lifted her face to mine, inviting me to a kiss. My hand continued to touch her tentatively, until her hand joined mine, pulling it up, placing it at the top of her jeans—invitation clear.

Quickly unbuttoning then unzipping her jeans, I resumed our kiss, sliding my hand into her panties slowly. I wanted her to have time to adjust—time to think through and make sure every new step we took was OK with her.

Finally, my fingers brushed past her curls and came into contact with...Bella. She was so hot, so wet, and so fucking amazing.

"*Bella*," I breathed into her mouth, "you're so wet." My finger glided across her clit, causing her to groan and raise her hips again. I repeated the action slowly, over and over, feeling her writhe

beneath me, moaning into my mouth. Moving lower, I began exploring her more thoroughly. Taking baby steps, touching her in new places a quarter inch at a time.

At some point, our kiss stopped, and Bella's eyes closed, her head tilted down a little. I hoped she was concentrating on the pleasure. She gasped as my fingers passed over her clit again, and her legs opened more, an unmistakable invitation.

My fingers dipped lower, slowly exploring, pushing in just a tiny bit. I felt Bella's hand on my arm, squeezing in pleasure.

"Is this OK?" I checked in with her.

"Yes," she whispered in answer, eyes still closed.

I slowly, ever so slowly, slid one finger inside her about half way, before pulling it out again.

"Edward..." Her voice was husky and low, but she said nothing more. I knew exactly how she felt.

I slid the same finger in again, a little further this time, then the next time in, I added a second finger.

Her hand, still on my arm, was gripping very tightly.

Too tightly.

Coming out of my sex-filled haze a little, I looked at Bella more closely, and realized I had been an utter fucking idiot.

She was not tensed with pleasure. She was not gripping me because it felt good, and she was *not* saying my name because she wanted to tell me to keep going.

She was freaking out. Quietly freaking out.

"Bella." I said, rather more sternly than I intended.

She looked up at me, in surprise, a trail of tears visible now that she was no longer looking down.

"*Bella!*" I gasped. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Pulling her into a hug, I wrapped both arms around her tightly. She relaxed in response, accentuating how tense she had been, and began to sob.

And apologize.

Fuck.

Her tear-filled apologies were largely incomprehensible against my chest, but I caught "Sorry" and "Such a loser" and "Too broken" at least once each.

Pulling away from her, I pushed her chin up, forcing her to meet my eyes.

"Bella Swan, what the fuck are you apologizing for? I'm the idiot that didn't see you weren't OK. I'm the idiot that kept going, thinking you *liked* it."

She snuffled, tears still flowing. "I *did* like it. *All* of it. It's just, that last part, it...it...I didn't think...I thought it would be OK. I *said* it was OK. You didn't know. I just, I can't. I'm fucked *up*, Edward. Seriously. How can I tell you what's too much, if I don't *know* what's too much? If I don't know what's going to upset me? How can I? Edward," she gripped my face in her hands, looking at me with utter conviction in her eyes, "you need to find someone who isn't this broken."

Like I said, fuck.

"Bella, I'm *not* finding anyone else. Never. I've said it before, and I'll say it again, as many times as you need to hear it: I'll take whatever part of you I can get. If you never want to do that again, fine. I'm utterly, truly happy being able to watch a movie with you, and kiss you. I *love* you. Love. Don't want anyone else. Ever."

"You want more."

"I want *you*."

"But you want *more*," she said determinedly. Then her voice got quieter, and her hand left my face, sliding down my chest and stomach, resting somewhere near my navel, before she said, "and so do I."

I sighed heavily. She was right. On both counts. Although it appeared I was willing to be more patient with her than she was.

"Bella, whatever we want, it can wait. This is all so new. Give yourself a break, please?"

"I know. You're right. I know. But, it's just...I *want* you, Edward. I see you, and I touch you, and I want you. I want *this*." She indicated our general intertwined posture. "It seems so crystal clear when I want it, then suddenly it's so wrong, and I don't know how it got that way. I don't know what to tell you, because it seems like a good idea, and I tell you to go ahead, and then suddenly it's not, and I'm crying, and you feel like shit, and really it's all my fault."

"It's not your fault, Bella. None of this is your fault."

She sighed, I couldn't tell if it was in acquiescence or dismissal.

"It's not your fault either, Edward, but you beat yourself up just a little every time it happens."

"Bella, I'm the one who was doing what upset you. Even if the reason you got upset isn't my fault, I was still the one triggering it. Yes, I beat myself up just a little." I scrubbed my hair in frustration. I knew she was right, but was completely unwilling to let go of my sense of culpability yet. "So would you, if it were you hurting me."

She looked down then, eyes closed in a pained expression, and a tear rolled down her reddened cheek.

"I *am* hurting you. Right now. Don't you see?"

I didn't. But she obviously saw it that way. Pulling her close to me, I kissed her gently on the lips.

"You're *not* hurting me. I promise. You're not."

She sighed deeply.

~oOo~

The next week went by with an air of uncertainty between us. I had spent an awkward night at Bella's apartment on Monday after our making-out fiasco. Disappointment wafted from Bella—though it was clearly directed at herself—all day Tuesday. Tuesday night I invited her out for dinner, but she declined, saying she felt run down and wanted to go to bed early.

That was a pretty hard thing to hear. I tried desperately to tamp down the feeling that the vultures were circling over our relationship.

Wednesday seemed better. Bella was in a brighter mood, and flirted with me at work, even pinching my nipple through my shirt in the kitchen at one point. She accepted my invitation to watch a movie at my place that night.

In an attempt to contrast her movie choice—and also because I really like it—I put on *The Muppets Take Manhattan* for us to watch.

She groaned at my choice, throwing popcorn at me every time Miss Piggy spoke. Apparently Bella is anti-swine. Or anti-puppet-swine, at least, since I've seen the damage the girl can do to a pulled pork sandwich.

The evening progressed similarly to Monday night, but was a lot more awkward. We were both scared of upsetting her. She was scared of upsetting me.

I asked her to stay the night, which she did. It was nice, but she was still a little distant. She did surprise me, however, by inviting me to spend the weekend at her dad's house in Forks—a visit she had lined up awhile ago.

**Wednesday 10:45 p.m.**



"Have you told him about me?" I asked, surprised, since I knew next to nothing about him, and assumed the reverse was true.

"Yes. Edward, you're my boyfriend. Of course I told him about you."

"You haven't said much about *him*, Bella."

She looked momentarily embarrassed, awkwardness coloring her movements as she got ready for bed.

"Well...I need to talk to you about that. Charlie is..." she paused, looking for the right word, "...protective, of me."

"Understandable, given...everything."

She sighed.

"Edward, I'm not necessarily doing you a favor by asking you to come with me. Charlie is really worried. I couldn't *not* tell him about you, but now that he knows, he's beside himself. He thinks..."

"That I might be another Jonathan?"

"No!" She looked mortified. "No. Well...he just doesn't know you, that's all."

"Did he know Jonathan?"

"Yes."

"So, correct me if I'm wrong, what I'm hearing is that he is worried I may hurt you, so you're going to let us get to know each other to help him be less concerned?"

"Yes."

"But he knew the last guy who *did* hurt you, and it didn't help."

"Yes."

"So, knowing me won't actually help calm his concerns, Bella."

She flopped onto the bed, her baggy pajama bottoms billowing out then flattening again as she landed. Her pajamas had zombies wearing night caps, holding candlesticks, with the words, "Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring...'cos I ate their brains! NOM NOM NOM!" on them.

The woman was a fashion goddess.

"I know. That's why I'm saying I'm not doing you a favor here. My dad will most likely be suspicious, ornery, and rude to you. There will almost certainly be a background check involved. S'all I'm sayin'"

I grinned at her. "Wow, you really know how to sell a romantic weekend away!"

She snorted. "Love me, love my dad. Or, at least, tolerate his overprotective nature."

"Bella?"

"Yes?"

"What happened to Jonathan?"

She stiffened. The question was clearly unexpected.

"He's in prison."

I didn't know what I had been expecting, but that was a relief. "Where?"

"The Washington State Pen, in Walla Walla."

"For how long?"

She sighed, tension radiating off her. "He's eligible for parole in another six years. He has twelve years left of his sentence."

I did the math. "That's a long sentence for rape, Bella." I wasn't displeased by any means, I was just confused, and now I was suspicious that I didn't know everything. When she answered me it was so quiet I couldn't hear her. I asked her to repeat herself, and almost didn't catch it the second time, partly because she was nervously chewing her hair.

"I wasn't the only one."

"What?"

She looked up, chin raised in defiance now—though what she was defiant about I couldn't quite tell.

"I wasn't the only one, Edward. I was number four, actually. Though, we suspect I was number seven. He was tried and convicted of...hurting...four of us."

I had always heard the expression "seeing red" but had never experienced it until this moment. I wondered for a second if my head was actually going to explode from the pressure.

"He...four?...*Fucking bastard.*"

"Yes," she replied quietly. "Exactly."

"How come he didn't get caught before? I mean, if he had, he wouldn't have gotten to you."

"Only two of the four girls came forward at first, and their cases were sort of back-burnered. It's hard to get cops to pay that much attention to date-rapes on college campuses. Really, it took it happening to a police chief's daughter to get some action. Once he was caught, the other girls stepped forward. There were a few other cases that looked like they could have been him, but those girls were long gone, or wouldn't respond when the prosecutor contacted them."

I was speechless. That is, speechless until the next question occurred to me.

"Who caught him?"

"My dad. They set up a task force, and my dad insisted on being part of it—even though technically it's against protocol. He took a leave of absence from his job to work with them. He didn't sleep, barely even ate, for weeks until they found him."

I was really relieved that Bella had a dad who cared that much, and was dogged enough, to defend her like that. It said a lot about what sort of man he was. It also scared me more than a little to be walking into his house as the next boyfriend after...*him*.

"Well, I guess it's nice to know you know where he is for the next six years. But what then?"

*Hunt him down and kill him*, my inner voice said. I bet her dad would help me.

She surprised me by snorting out a laugh.

"He might hurt me physically, but he can't hurt me like...that...again, which is what I would really be worried about."

Confused, I furrowed my brows, inviting explanation.

"Jonathan was injured when he was caught. He ran from the police when they served the warrant at the apartment he was hiding out in. The warning shot fired by the police went astray, injuring him in the process."

She raised an eyebrow significantly. "He was shot in the testicles, causing irreversible damage."

Oh.

"Who fired the warning shot?"

"Billy Black. An officer from SPD who used to work with my Dad in Forks. He had transferred a few years before. Dad wasn't there when they served the warrant—Billy made him stay away in case anything went wrong. He didn't want the arrest tainted."

"Good thing Billy was there," I said quietly, thinking that maybe Bella had more than one person willing to go the extra mile for her.

"Yeah," she said, a hint of satisfaction in her voice, "good thing."

~oOo~

The rest of that night was nice in that I got to hold Bella. She was tense though, and I didn't like that. I knew she was still beating herself up over freaking out on me, which was ridiculous.

To be fair though, I was still beating myself up a little for making her freak out.

I tossed and turned all night, finally waking up at around 6 a.m. with an epiphany.

Past being able to go back to sleep, I got up to make coffee, trying not to wake Bella. It worked brilliantly until I dropped my favorite caffeine molecule coffee mug on the tile floor, smashing it into two billion and twelve shards, and had to sweep, vacuum, *and* mop in order to ever hope to have bare feet in my kitchen again.

Bella came in showered, dressed, and bleary-eyed. Sitting at my breakfast nook in silence, she didn't speak until she had downed half the cup of scalding hot coffee I handed her.

"G'morning," was the best I got from her even then.

"Morning sleepyhead." I loved that she was so non-functional in the mornings.

"G'morning," she repeated. I was pretty sure she forgot she'd already said that.

I gave her another forty minutes before I told her of my epiphany. Pulling her close to me in a hug, I loved the feel of her arms wrapping around me. I would never, ever get tired of her touching me. I just hoped she would continue to do so.

"Bella, I had an epiphany this morning."

"Isn't that normal for a man your age? I mean, to wake up with one?"

"Ha, ha, ha. Seriously though, it's about the elephant in the room."

She looked around the room, pretending to look for an elephant. "Funny, I don't see one."

I rolled my eyes at her.

"Bella, love? Please? I'm serious."

She imitated zipping her mouth shut, and blinked up at me in anticipation. I was truly happy she felt better this morning, and hoped what I had to say didn't rain on her parade too much.

"You've been killing yourself with all this pressure."

She started, about to speak, when I put my fingers over her mouth to stop her.

"Let me finish. You may not see it that way, but from where I'm standing, you're somehow expecting that you can get through this without tears, without having either of us—or both of us—upset at one point or another. That's just not realistic. What happened to you sucks ass. What would suck more would be to let it break us up, because you're not able to forgive yourself the little hurdles along the way. I'm here. I'm in for good. But I feel you pulling away, and it scares me."

She looked down then, examining her hands, but said nothing.

"You can't know what's going to be OK when it comes to me touching you. It's all so new. You think it will be, then I do it, and it's not. You start kicking yourself in every way possible."

She nodded slowly, grudgingly admitting I was right.

"And *I* can't know, because *you* don't know."

She nodded again.

"But you know I want you. You know that, right?"

"Yes, I do," her voice was quiet, almost child-like.

"OK, good. Because I'm going to act like I don't. I'm going to stop trying to touch you."

She looked up, startled.

"What?" her mouth hung open just a little as she tried to make sense of what I'd said.

"In a way it always was up to you, but now I mean it quite literally. I'll hug you, and kiss you, but that's it. Anything else, you gotta do it."

She looked kinda sorta pissed off. No, not kinda sorta. Really.

"What the fuck, Cullen? You're saying I need to stop freaking out or you won't touch me?"

"No! God no, that's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is this: You and I touch. Sometimes that's gonna freak you out, there is no getting around that. It's not your fault, and it's not my fault. But part of what's freaking you out right now is that you *think* I want to do something, or you're *worried* that I want to do something, or I *do* do something, and you say it's OK, because you're not sure either way, then when it turns out to be *not* OK, instead of focusing on the fact that it's *OK* that it's not OK, you're focusing on the fact that you made me feel bad for telling me it *was*

OK then freaking out on me. Or focusing on the fact that you might be disappointing me, or one of the other dozen things you're putting on yourself."

Putting my hands on her shoulders, resting my forehead against hers for a moment, I gasped for breath after that hellishly long and confusing explanation, before jumping in again.

"So, I'm saying that the only way to get through this is to take the things we *can* control off your plate. You won't worry about making the wrong choice when I ask to touch you, because I won't be asking. You won't have to worry about me beating myself up, because I won't be, because I didn't do anything. You won't have to worry about freaking out so much, because you're calling all the shots. No reaction to something you didn't expect, because it's all coming from you. You may still freak out, true, but the pressure you're putting on yourself over me, and my reaction, and all of that crap will be gone. It'll just be about you, your boundaries, and what you want to do next."

"And if I upset myself?"

"That sucks, but it's gonna happen. It just will, no matter what. That's why I'm not taking hugs or kisses off the table. I will hug you, hold you, and listen to you if you want a sounding board for what might work better next time."

She looked confused still, but now also a little scared.

"I don't get what you're saying, Edward. What am I supposed to do? I mean, are you saying that any...hanky-panky...is all me? I have to do it all? By myself?"

I smiled at her then. "God, I hope you're not going to do it by yourself. I'd like to *be* there. I mean, if you're anything like me, you've had *plenty* of doing it by yourself."

She snorted, but didn't deny it.

"It's about you taking the lead. If you want to touch me, touch me. If you want me to touch you, you need to put me where you want me."

"But I...I put your hand...there, and it still upset me."

"No, Bella, you put my hand *near*, I did the rest. I took over and you were going along with it. That's where it broke down. It was being done *to* you. That's not going to happen now. From now on, if you want me to do it, you guide me, and you go with me. You're in control."

Something flickered in her eyes then, a spark of understanding. I had done a spectacularly bad job of explaining my epiphany, of explaining what I mean for us to do, but I think in the end she got my point.

I hope she did.

## Geek Love Chapter 17: In Which There is a Road Trip

Thursday 6:15 p.m.

The doorbell rang, and I sprang towards it, unable to suppress my eagerness to see Bella again. I was being a bit ridiculous, since I had just seen her in our 3:00 status meeting, but for me, Bella was a little like people describe crack—as soon I ran out of Bella, all I could think of was how to score just one more hit. I was trying my best to tone down those feelings; to tamp down the stalkertude I worried about giving off, but it was hard.

Throwing the door open, I cautioned myself not to actually *lick* her when she walked in, no matter how much I felt like a retriever whose master had come home. With the opening of the door came an influx of fresh air, damp and cool from the fall breeze. I spread my arms to welcome Bella, only to stop mid-embrace when I realized it wasn't, in fact, my beautiful girlfriend standing there.

Feeling warm arms wrapping around me was a little surprising, but not nearly as much as the kiss planted squarely on my lips.

"Hey there, hotmuffin," the husky, sex-laden voice caressed my ear.

I shuddered in response, choking back the hint of bile that rose in my throat, and stepped back, rounding a punch directly on Jasper's bicep.

"You are a sick, sick, gaycestuous freak, Jasper."

He laughed, sauntering into my living room, settling on the couch. "Admit it, you liked it just a little bit, didn't you, Edward?"

I made a gagging noise, clutching my stomach for emphasis.

"You're lucky it *was* me and not Bella. *Jesus*, Edward, ever heard of a game face?"

I groaned. He was totally right. I needed to chill out or I'd scare her off faster than throwing porn at a Mormon.

"So, what's up Jasper? I didn't realize you'd be in the city tonight."

"Can I crash here? I have tomorrow off, and need to do some things in town. I don't really want to drive home then back again."

"Sure, but you'll have to limit the porn watching, Bella will be here all evening."

He snorted in response. "I hate to ask, but have you *met* your girlfriend? Or as I like to call her, the star pupil of my Porn 101 class." He waggled his eyebrows licentiously at me. "Just call me Professor Cullen."

Rolling my eyes at the memory of my brother curled up on the couch with my girlfriend, instructing her in the fine art of fisting, I walked to the kitchen to grab a couple of beers.

He called out across the room, "So, how are things going? You guys seemed...cozy...when you left last weekend."

Returning, I handed Jasper his beer and took a long drink from mine before answering, taking a minute to think through how to put it.

"Things are great. Awesome. Mostly. I mean—" How the hell do you sum up what had happened over the past week? "—Bella and I are fantastic. I can't...wow. Um...she's amazing. I mean, *you've* seen her, *you* know..."

He chuckled. "Allow me?"

I nodded.

"You're head over heels in love with the girl, and finally can see yourself with someone for the rest of your life. You're ecstatic that she told you whatever it was she was freaking out about, but now you have to deal with it and that scares the shit out of you because if she can't get past it, you may lose the only person who has really, truly mattered to you."

I just stared at him.

He shrugged, a half-grin dimpling one cheek. "I got the communication genes for the both of us. Don't feel bad though, you got my share of the geek genes."

Snorting—in agreement more than anything—I settled in the armchair, kicking my feet up onto the coffee table. Just then I remembered what I had meant to ask him all week.

"So...speaking of *loooove*...you heard from Alice?"

There was something utterly satisfying about my brother—the master of emotions, the king of cool—going beet-fucking-red at the mention of this woman. I laughed, probably more loudly than was kind.

My brother said nothing.

"Jasper...allow me?"

He nodded, looking more than a little abashed.



"You were blown away by the amazing woman you met over the weekend, and want nothing more than to find out if the two of you have as much potential as you think. But, you get all sweaty and clammy every time you're around her, and all your ability to communicate like a coherent human being flies out the window. So, instead of talking to her like you would anyone else, you run like hell because you don't want to look like a retarded fish with a sweaty face and your mouth hanging open."

He didn't move, but the look on his face—which ironically *did* resemble a retarded fish—said enough. I was spot-fucking-on.

"Oh, and it doesn't help that every time she's within ten feet of you, you become a gold medalist in Olympic tent pitching."

His eyes grew frighteningly wide. "You could *see* that?" He sounded mortified.

"No, Jasper...*Jesus!* I figured since that's what happens whenever Bella's around me, you might have the same problem."

Whatever he was going to respond with was cut off by the doorbell.

~oOo~

The cold, dead remains of the pizza Bella had brought sat discarded in the box in the middle of my floor, along with the bottle of ketchup. I probably shouldn't have been surprised that my crazy-ass girlfriend eats her pizza with ketchup, but I was. It was fucking disgusting, and yet, somehow, it just made her all the more adorable. I guess I have a thing for "quirky".

Bella and Jasper were trying their best to have an argument, but were failing utterly because they were laughing too hard.

"It is *not* one word, Bella, you can't play it! It's clearly two separate words." Jasper insisted for the dozenth time.

"Prove it," Bella countered yet again.

"Bella," I interrupted, deciding it was time to end the argument, "you know I love you, right?"

She continued chuckling quietly, but nodded, taking a pull from her beer. I squeezed her foot, which had been resting in my lap.

"Well, in spite of that, I have to say you're a hundred and ten percent wrong. There is no way in hell 'anal probe' is one word. You can't play it."

We were playing Scrabble™. She was trying to play "anarp" before the "robe" Jasper laid down earlier to make a single word 'anarp'. Jasper had, rightly, called bullshit. Bella, rather characteristically, argued the point, citing a Southpark blog as her source.

Huffing, but with a grin still on her face, she removed the offending play, and laid the letters out to make "napalm" using the "m" from my "marry".

*That* particular play of mine had gotten a huge eyebrow-raised grin from Jasper, and answering blush from Bella.

Jasper rose to get another round of beers, handing us each a long-neck bottle of Green Lakes Organic Ale. He put on his best "Mom" voice. "Don't drink too much, you kids have work in the morning."

"Actually, we don't. We both took the day off."

Jasper looked at me questioningly, so I elaborated.

"Bella wanted to visit her dad for the weekend, and we thought it would be nice to not have to rush up after work. We get to sleep in and mosey on up to Forks leisurely-like."

"You're meeting the dad?" Jasper looked amused. "The police chief dad?" He snorted, then looked from an uncomfortable Bella back to me. "I have a cup you can borrow, but it's not bulletproof."

Bella and I both winced at his comment, Bella looking away for a moment, but I knew Jasper had no idea about Jonathan. He looked at me quizzically, and despite everything, I couldn't help the smile covering my face. I was excited about spending another weekend with Bella—even if it *was* at the business end of a shotgun manned by Chief Swan. I just hoped it wouldn't be pointed directly at my testicles the *whole* time.

"What are you doing tomorrow, Jasper?" Bella asked curiously. "Don't you work on Fridays?"

"Normally I do, but I took the day off. I had some...people I wanted to see."

Bella was intuitive enough to realize that Jasper was being intentionally vague. She let it go, nodding understandingly. Brothers, however, are not as understanding.

"Who are you seeing? What are you doing? C'mon Jasper, what are you hiding?"

"Shut up, Edward. I just have some things to do. Some...appointments."

"Hookers?"

"No!"

"Drug dealers?"

"No!...Well...do you count my pot guy?"

"No."

"Then no."

"A giirrrrl?..."

Silence.

"Jasper? Are you meeting a *girl*?" I sing-songed in a teasing voice.

"Fuck off, Eddie." He was looking down at his beer, glowering, cheeks turning distinctly more red.

"Oooh..." Bella whispered to me, "you got 'Eddied'...this must be serious."

"Jasper?" I asked, my voice oozing concern and brotherly love. "What happened with Alice over the weekend?"

He looked up at me, a look of pained embarrassment on his face.

"Nothing."

"Come on, Jasper, you can tell us. What happened?"

"I *am* telling you. *Nothing* happened. I couldn't even fucking *talk* to her. I tried, but I...Jesus, I was like you two...you know...*before*." He looked from Bella to me. "How did you *live* like that?"

Bella chuckled. "It sucks. But Edward makes up for it with his adorable face, fuckhot body, and monkey-humpin' hair."

"Ew," Jasper scowled, before taking another drink.

"So, back to you, what happened with Alice? C'mon, spill."

He sighed loudly. "Nothing happened. When we first met, the morning of the wedding, she was—" His eyes glazed over a little. "—awesome. So funny. So cool. So...hot."

I swear there were stars circling his irises. He shook his head, as if clearing it of a fog.

"But then after that I couldn't talk to her, I got all fucking *shy* or something, I don't know. It sucked. She lives in Canada for fuck's sake, but it's only—"

"It's only a two and a half hour drive, Jasper," Bella pointed out.

"I *know*. I was going to ask her if she would hang out with me if I drove up some time, but she beat me to it."

"That's *good*, right?" I was failing to see the problem here.

"*No*. She told me that she thought—no, she *knew*—that there was something big between us, but even though she wanted to, she couldn't go out with me right now. She wanted to get my phone number so she could call me sometime."

"Oh," was all I could manage. Women never failed to confuse me.

"Interesting," Bella responded thoughtfully, taking a pull from her beer.

I looked at her curiously, but she was staring at Jasper.

"So, Jasper, you're seeing her tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"So she called you?"

He sighed. "Yes. But it didn't sound much like a date. She asked if we could talk. I mean, what the fuck, I barely *know* her, so I don't think that's a good thing, ya know?"

"*Interesting*," Bella repeated, her brow furrowed in thought.

This time Jasper looked at her, my curiosity mirrored in his expression.

Bella looked at me, an evil grin on her face. She then sat her beer bottle firmly on the table, before wiggling it back and forth to walk it across the table to mine."

"Oh, haaai Jasper!" Bella said in a high pitched squeaky voice, moving her bottle as if it were speaking.

I laughed out loud, realizing where she was going with this. I can't even say how much I love payback. Particularly fraternal payback.

Jasper groaned, holding his head in his hands, elbows on the coffee table.

I walked my beer bottle up to Bella's, and put on a completely stupid, IQ-deficient voice.

"Durr...hi, Alice." I let my mouth hang open, drool threatening to spill over as I did so. I was *very* into my character.

Then a moment of genius struck me. Turning, I grabbed the Heinz ketchup bottle from the floor next to the pizza box, and quickly swapped my beer for the bright red bottle.

Bella giggled, wiggling her "Alice" beer bottle closer to the ketchup, bumping up against it seductively. Her voice, while still squeaky, took on a seductive quality—sounding exactly like Kathleen Turner on helium.

"Hai, Jasper, you ominominomy boy...Mmmm...wanna watch some porn with me? I love the three dee porn, it's so fuckawesome, it's like you're throwing come at me. Oh, wait, why don't we skip the porn part, and you just throw *actual* come at me?"

I wiggled the ketchup bottle so it stepped away from her a bit, then knocked it over, making gurgling noises interspersed with "Duuurrrrr..." sounds.

Bella then made the bottle turn sharply, as if looking behind it, and gasped loudly before continuing in a panicked squeaky voice.

"Oh, wait! You can't do that Jasper. Please, no, we can't do this. It's wrong. I'll call you later, OK? What's your phone number?"

"Omi, nomi, harmi, nom, nom, nom, duurrrr..." I spoke for the Jasper ketchup bottle.

Jasper was laughing quietly by now, elbows on the coffee table, hands planted firmly in his hair on either side of his head. He looked both amused and tormented. His face matched the ketchup bottle color almost exactly.

"Jasper?" Squeaky Alice bottle asked.

"Whaaaa?" Dumb Jasper ketchup bottle answered.

"*Jasper*." Suddenly Bella's voice was back to normal, though she was still talking for the bottle, as if she were Alice. "I can't date you because I have a *boyfriend*, you big fucking idjit. But I don't like him as much as I like you, so I'm gonna break up with him then date you. But I don't want to *tell* you that, because then you'll think I'm a big heartbreaking, cheating slut. So I'm gonna ask you if I can call you later in the week, once I've gotten rid of Mr. Not Right Anymore."

Bottles forgotten, Jasper and I both stared at Bella, matching looks of disbelief on our faces.

"What makes you think—" Jasper started.

"Are you sure—" I interjected.

Bella held up a hand, silencing us. "No, I'm not sure, but it's a pretty good guess given the circumstances. Jasper." She sighed, looking up at him. "If she weren't interested she wouldn't have asked for your number, let alone asked you to get together. What's she gonna do, drive to Seattle just to tell you she doesn't like you? And if she were interested and *single*, she wouldn't have had to wait a week to talk to you, and you probably would be off together watching German women in black leather catsuits whipping Japanese businessmen already."

She paused, looking from Jasper to me, and back again. "'Interested but not single' is the only plausible answer."

Jasper remained completely silent, but as he sat, head in hands, his color began to return to normal, the red being slowly replaced by a smile, then a grin, breaking across his face.

~oOo~

**Friday 11:47 a.m.**

Bella's hands were softly stroking the smooth, cool, slightly iridescent finish on my car. OK, she's not just a car. She's an Aston Martin Vanquish. She cost more than half the average house in King County, and is everything I ever wanted in a piece of machinery. And now she was being stroked by my fucking amazingly sexy, sweet, wonderful girlfriend, and it was the hottest thing I had ever seen.

Bella walked around my car slowly, taking it in. When she got to the rear she stopped, read the license plate aloud, and burst out laughing.

"Jesus, Cullen, you *are* a geek!"

My license plate was, "003366". The hexadecimal color value of my paint job.

"Bella," I smiled at her, unable to help the rush of warmth that came over me whenever she laughed, "need I point out that you understood it? I say 'pot, meet kettle'."

A few minutes later we were on the road, and Bella was looking at me in utter confusion.

"So, you're saying that it's going to take us an hour *longer* than usual because you have this awesomely fast car..."

I rolled my eyes. "Bella, she's my *baby*. I can't let the douchewads on the ferry get that close to her—come on!"

"Fine, we'll drive around," she huffed, a little exasperated. Going north and taking the ferry was both the quicker, and prettier way to get to Forks. Driving south to stay on roads and avoid the ferry was the longer, uglier way to go. My car and I were OK with ugly if it meant keeping her off the ferry.

I smiled, knowing what Bella did not. Although in theory it took an extra hour to get to Forks avoiding the ferry, I drove a *tad* on the fast side, generally making up for any additional time.

Twenty minutes in, I discovered that Bella, unlike any other woman I had ever had in my car, was something of a speed junkie.

"Stats! I want stats, Cullen!" she nearly yelled at me, as I broke 100 mph on a clear stretch of I-5.

I laughed, ecstatic that this was *my* girl.

"Four hundred and sixty horse power. She goes zero to sixty in four seconds, and has a six-speed clutchless—"

"Not *those* stats! Jesus Dale Earnhardt Junior, Cullen, who do you think I am, Emmett? No, I want to know how *fast* you've gone in this thing!"

"Oh. Um...one-twenty on the open road. One-fifty on a closed track."

She whistled appreciatively. "How much is a ticket for doing one-twenty? Jesus, I can't imagine."

"Well, you don't just get a *ticket* for doing one-twenty. They take your license away and make you go to *court* for doing one-twenty. But I couldn't tell you how much it would be. I've never gotten a ticket in my life."

"Never...seriously? Never?"

"Nope."

"How did you manage that?"

I winked and made a crude gesture involving my hand, my mouth, and a repressed gag reflex.

She laughed. "Ew, Edward, no you didn't." Looking at me appraisingly, she added, "But you *are* pretty enough to even make the straight guys to go for you. Has anyone ever told you how pretty you are?"

I smiled. "Bella, only you could make a man happy by telling him he's pretty."

A hundred and ninety-two minutes, two games of "counting cows" and three rounds of twenty-questions later, Bella became quiet, watching out the window with a thoughtful expression. I focused on the road, enjoying the feel of having her next to me, knowing she was the only thing on the planet that could make my car look even better.

After a few minutes she turned to me, her cheeks flushed slightly, mouth curved in a tentative smile.

"So, how exactly does this...*thing*...work?"

Chuckling quietly, I took her hand in mine, leaving the other to steer. "Any chance you could be more specific, Bella?"

If I thought she was pink before, her face turned flat-out red now.

"This...*thing*. The rule. You know, the 'you don't touch me' rule."

I sighed. It had been incredibly hard to keep my hands off her in anything but the most casual way. We had hugged and kissed, and I had even given her a foot massage, but I had remained true to my word and done nothing else.

Talking about it was not going to help my self-control.

"Well...the short story is, you're in control. Complete control."

"Can I tell you if I *want* you to touch me?"

"No. You have to make it happen."

"Hmmm..."

Can I even begin to express how much I wanted her to make something happen? The idea of just having Bella in my car made me hard. The idea of touching her—or her touching me—in my car was an unbelievable turn-on. But I would not bend the rules. I knew that, as hard as it would be on Bella to be the sexual aggressor between us, she needed to experience this. She needed to know that whatever she said went—as long as it didn't cross any of my lines.

Like, say, shoving a flashlight up my ass.

*Although...*

No. No flashlights up the ass.

Bella looked down at our joined hands, contemplating for a moment, before placing my hand tenderly on her thigh, pulling hers away.

Her hands moved up to her shirt, slowly unbuttoning the top four buttons, stopping just below her diaphragm. She carefully spread the blue cotton apart, exposing her left breast, clad in a mauve bra. The mound of her breast pushed up enticingly, just asking to be played with.

Without looking at me, she took my hand, bringing it slowly to her face, running my fingers down her temple, across her cheek, to her mouth. She kissed it gently, sucking on the end of one finger for just a second, before pulling it out from between her warm lips.

My entire body was tense with anticipation. Anticipation, and *concentration*. It was incredibly hard to not move, not act. Having the woman you love seducing you is pretty kick-ass, but it does go against the grain a bit to sit there like a dead fish while she does all the work.

I knew she wasn't looking at me because she felt awkward; embarrassed. It would go against the purpose of our agreement if I told her almost anything. I couldn't ask, couldn't encourage,



couldn't even tell her I liked it. She would act to please me, and this needed to be about her. But I desperately needed to let her know she wasn't alone in this.

My voice was a little gravelly when I spoke.

"You're beautiful. God, you're so beautiful."

That was all I could say without violating the spirit of what we were trying to achieve.

It was enough. She looked up at me then, meeting my gaze briefly before I had to return my eyes to the road. A smile played on her lips, and I could see the battle between desire, excitement, and embarrassment diminishing on her face, being replaced by a more determined expression.

Her hand guided mine down her throat, slowly trailing my fingers across her collarbone, and down to her soft mound of flesh so recently exposed. Briefly I gave myself a mental high-five on choosing the dark window tinting. This particular activity had not been my reason for getting it, but I was damn glad I did.

Bella placed my hand so it cupped around her breast from the top. It was awkward to touch her from this angle, but it was the best we could do given our location. Massaging my fingers in, she used my hand to squeeze her milky flesh, eyes closing briefly at the contact. My own body reacted, and I noticed that not only was I tense, I was rock-fucking-hard.

Bella's head rolled back a little to lie against the headrest, eyes shut. Her hand rose lazily up to mine, stroking the outside of my fingers as they lay against her flesh. She then, slowly, pulled down the bra cup, exposing the tempting rose-colored nipple cresting her breast.

I had to physically stop myself from reaching for it. I knew she wanted me to touch her. I wanted to touch her. But us mastering this history of hers, us gaining back what had been taken from her, was more important than satisfying my desire right now—no matter how insane I was for her.

In any event, I didn't have to wait long. Our eyes met, and she watched me as I took as long a look as I dared; taking in her beauty, her hair playing in waves around her heart-shaped face, wide lust-filled eyes, stunning creamy skin curving into the most beautiful breast I had ever seen.

"Jesus, Bella," I breathed, before returning my eyes to the road.

She smiled then, and moved my hand so it was directly over her nipple, using the tip of one finger to tease the nub, rolling back and forth across it. Bella's mouth opened slightly at that, head rolling back again, eyes closing once more. She held my fingers, placing them so they were cupping the breast, with thumb and forefinger on either side of her nipple. She squeezed my fingers together, making them pinch her slowly, softly rolling the hardened flesh.

Her eyes were still closed, head thrown back, and she looked so fucking beautiful. A quiet moan escaped her as she continued to squeeze and caress herself with my hand.

My lucky fucking hand.

It was taking every bit of control I had to both keep driving, and not throw her down and take her. I wanted this woman more than anything I'd ever wanted in my life. She was...everything.

After a few minutes, my gaze alternating between Bella and the road, her eyes opened and she looked at me, a hazy cloud of lust clogging the air between us. She pulled my hand away and turned in her seat, facing me as well as she could, given the seat belt constraint.

Placing my hand on her thigh, she leaned toward me, stretching to kiss along my ear, her hand drifting down my chest and abdomen, settling on my thigh. I turned, briefly, so she could kiss me, before returning my focus to the road.

My hand was resting on her thigh, the warmth of her skin coming through her dark jeans. I wanted nothing more than to squeeze her, caress her, and let my hand wander upwards—to make her feel good.

But I couldn't. I wouldn't.

Her hand, however, had no such limitations, and within a minute of finding my thigh, she moved it up, tentatively stroking me through my jeans. I was painfully hard, and her touch was both relief, and renewed torture.

"Is that OK?" she whispered, mouth near my ear.

I nodded, throat clogged with lust and uncertainty about what I could—or couldn't—say.

Her hand moved up, unbuttoning my jeans, working to free me—in all my embarrassingly turgid glory—from the constraint of clothing. I was so insanely turned on that not only did she want to touch me like this, she was doing it in my car. I almost came then and there at the thought.

Turning to kiss her once more—since it was one of the only things I was allowed to do—I made extremely quick work of a brief but passionate kiss, before focusing on my actual task at hand—driving.

"I love you," I whispered. In answer, her hand surrounded me, slowly stroking down, then up, running her fingers across the head, as her hand came up. Down, then up again, slowly, stroking, exploring, driving me insane. My entire body was tense; libido on fire; cock ready for anything she wanted to give it. My mind was almost blank, the mantra "keep driving, don't touch her" playing in my head.

Her touch felt unbelievably good, and I was turned on beyond measure. Then she started speaking to me, whispering, her mouth near my ear.

"I love you, Edward. God, you feel good. I want you to feel like I do when I'm around you. I've spent over a year thinking about making you come, and what that would be like. And having you touch me like that."

Then she picked up her pace, stroking a little faster, a little more firmly, and with a lot more confidence. I felt my testicles contract, and barely had time to choke out, "Bella..." before the wave of climax crashed over me and I pulsed my release into her waiting hand.

I had never had an orgasm like that before. Though, functionally, they were more or less all the same, this one was the first I had experienced at the hands of the woman I loved. Add to that the faith and confidence Bella had shown to do it, and the fact that it was in my car...fuck me, I was a goner. Dead and gone.

Throwing my head back, closing my eyes for just a second, I whispered, "Wow."

Looking at Bella, she was watching me with a slightly anxious expression. My concern for her was immediate, a rush of guilt washing through me as I feared things had gone too...what?...Quickly? Too far? Too...

But then she spoke, sounding amused. "I need a tissue, Edward." Looking at her, I could see that more than amused, she looked rather pleased with herself.

I laughed. She was anxious because of the mess. The fact that I hadn't been showed only how distracted I was. Come stains on my clothing? Probably not a good thing when meeting Chief Swan. Come stains in my car? Not a good thing—ever.

Reaching around behind the driver's seat, I grabbed a box of tissues stashed there. Handing her some I returned my focus to the road, just in time to see the red and blue lights of a police cruiser turn on in my rear-view mirror.

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## **Geek Love Chapter 18: In Which We Meet Charlie**

"Shit," I groaned as the rolling lights reflected in the rear-view mirror.

Bella's head pivoted quickly around, then back again. "Oh, Jesus, Edward, that's a cop!"

Despite the situation, I laughed. "Thank you, Captain fucking Obvious."

Rather than putting herself back together, Bella began, rather adorably, an attempt to reassemble *my* clothing, hastily tucking my instantly flaccid boy-bits back into my underwear before catching them painfully on the zipper of my jeans. Biting back a less than manly whimper I gently but firmly put her hands away from my body, and asked her to tuck in her *own* private parts while I took care of mine.

That was not an easy task as I was also pulling over, and doing the mental inventory one always does in these circumstances.

*Registration? Check. License? Check. Proof of insurance? Check. Dark tinted windows? Check.*

Thank-fucking-God.

Getting myself tucked and zipped while not driving into a ditch was difficult, but I managed it decently. Bella had reassembled herself for the most part, though she was flushed, with a bright spot of color high on each cheek, and her hair more disarrayed than usual.

The Vanquish came to a complete stop on the side of the road as Bella fastened her last button. Taking her hand, I gave it a reassuring squeeze.

Bella turned, craning her neck to check out the car pulled in behind us.

"I can't tell if it's my dad," she whispered, as if he might hear us.

Her dad? *Her dad?* I groaned. While I had been aware we weren't technically in the town of Forks, the Forks P.D. it only just occurred to me that her dad probably had jurisdiction over much of the surrounding area too.

If that was her dad I was totally fucked. But the look of panic on Bella's face brought out the protective side of me, so I tried to hide my panic, turning to tell her not to worry in either case. I noticed that her shirt was buttoned unevenly. I was about to point this out when I was startled by a quick rap at the window. The dark tinting, normally a blessing, had prevented me from noticing the officer's approach.

I rolled down my window to catch the less-than-friendly look of an officer of the City of Forks Police Department. Dark eyes met mine, unyielding in their gaze.

"Dad!" Bella exclaimed, the color flaming her cheeks grew more intense.

Holy cum on a blue dress! I'm so totally fucked. I'm more than fucked. I'm so fucked it's coming back around to fuck me the other direction. I'm fucked **backwards**.

Sweet Jesus, I'm dekcuf.

I turned to look at Bella when she spoke, but the man outside my window never broke the stare directed at me.

"Bells," he intoned evenly by way of greeting, eyes still on me.

"Dad, what are you *doing*?"

Ignoring his daughter, Chief Swan leaned down, hands resting on open window, eyeing me levelly.

"You must be Edward." His voice was cool, calm, assessing.

"Yes, Sir. Edward Cullen."

He grunted, a quiet sound that landed somewhere between acknowledgement and disbelief.

"Mr. Cullen, can I see your license and registration please?"

"*Dad!*" Bella chided, sounding both angry and embarrassed. "Seriously, what the hell?"

"Bells, this is police business." His tone was neutral, business-like.

Totally deckuf.

As I leaned toward the glove compartment, reaching for the small wallet that held my registration and proof of insurance, I saw Bella look as if she were in the beginning stages of hyperventilation. Squeezing her knee, I gave her a brief reassuring grin, hoping that my deckufery didn't show.

Handing the registration and proof of insurance over, I began to dig in my wallet for my license. Looking up, I saw he wasn't reviewing my paperwork—rather, he was eyeing me speculatively.

Passing the license through the open window I gave him a subtle once-over, running my eyes up and down his uniform-clad figure, careful to maintain a neutral, if not pleasant look. Whatever Bella's dad had to throw at me this weekend, I was determined not to let him see me squirm. I loved Bella. I would never hurt her. That's all he needed to know. That's all I needed to remember.

Right now though, it seemed Chief Swan was trying to send me a message: He had the long arm of the law on his side, and would use it against me if necessary.

Then in a flash he handed me back the documents. He hadn't even looked at them.

Bella, silent for the minute or so this had taken, burst out again. "Dad! How fast we were going? Jesus, are you going to give Edward a *ticket*?"

"Bella," he said somewhat sharply, before stopping to let out an exasperated sigh. "I'm not going to give *Edward* a ticket." He said my name as if it were in some bizarre alien tongue. "There's no minimum speed limit in this area."

"Minimum?" Bella and I both said at once, glancing at each other then back at Chief Swan.

"Yes, son, the speed limit is sixty. You were doing forty-eight. Or hadn't you noticed?" He glared at me briefly, before settling his visage into a more neutral expression. "I pulled you over for two reasons. Firstly, you were driving erratically. Officially you were pulled over on suspicion of driving under the influence. I see now that you are not, in fact, intoxicated, so I don't feel compelled to administer any further tests."

"Thank you," I responded as levelly as I could manage, face beginning to flame despite my attempt at a cool exterior. I resented the implication that I was driving poorly, but then blushed more deeply remembering the cause of it.

"Secondly," I thought I caught a glint of amusement in his eye a moment before he said, "I just wanted to say hi."

"You wanted to..." Bella trailed off before picking up again angrily. "Dad, you couldn't have just waited till we got to the house? I thought you had the day off, anyway. Why are you patrolling?"

Now it was Chief Swan's turn to look flustered. He was slightly more adept at keeping his feelings hidden than Bella was, but not much. Looking down at the ground as he answered, he kicked the toe of his shoe in the ground like a teenager explaining why he was home past curfew.

"I was waiting for you guys to get here." He then looked up accusingly. "But I wasn't expecting you this way. How come you didn't come in from the ferry? I was just patrolling until the ferry was due to come in. It was lucky I spotted you."

Bella's glance turned to me and she shrugged, disavowing any responsibility for our route.

"It's my car, Sir...I don't take her on the ferry if I can avoid it. Too many cars packed in together it...well...it makes me nervous."

Chief Swan's lips pressed tightly together as he stepped back a moment, eyeballing my car, gaze running slowly from headlights to tail lights slowly, then back again. The expression on his face was one I had never quite seen before—equal parts lust and disgust.

"Mmm," was all he said.

I knew the look of a man eyeballing quality machinery and liking it. He liked my car. A lot. But just as clearly, he hated that it was his daughter's boyfriend's car. A lot.

Stepping back a few paces, he looked only at Bella, saying, "See you at home, Bells," before turning back to the cruiser.

As we pulled on to the road after Chief Swan, Bella was silent, hands clasped tightly together in her lap, a look of panic in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Edward, I'm so sorry...I *told* you he..."

"Bella," I interrupted, trying my best to comfort her, "don't worry about it. It's OK. Really. It's not *your* fault I was driving erratically."

She looked at me, mouth slightly agape, and, realizing the absurdity of my statement I burst out laughing.

"OK, it's *totally* your fault I was driving erratically." Reaching a hand over to stroke her face, brushing her hair back, I added quietly, "But it's a trade I'd take any time. You are *amazing*."

She blushed furiously then. "But...my dad—"

"Don't worry about your dad, Bella. We'll take it as it comes, OK? It'll be *fine*." I reached over and squeezed her hand, warmth spreading through me as I recalled just where that hand had been recently.

*Best fucking hand job ever.*

We continued to drive in silence, thinking through what had just happened. About five minutes in, something occurred to me.

"*It was lucky I spotted you.*" Charlie had said.

He had known which car we were in.

He had been looking into me.

~oOo~

It took us another twenty minutes or so to get to Bella's father's house. Pulling up, I was struck by how little of the house or its surroundings felt like *Bella*. The outside was tidy, but sparse. The décor—what little there was—was utilitarian. It shouted "single man lives here". The house sat on a slightly sloped plot of land, creating a half-daylight basement below two above-ground levels. There were five steps leading up to a porch, which had a cooler, two Adirondack chairs, and a pile of what looked like fishing poles, reels, and spools of fishing line.

Bella and I had each brought just a single small bag, which I pulled from the Vanquish's miniscule trunk, carrying them in behind Bella, who walked straight up the steps and through the front door.

I knock when I visit my parents' house. It is no longer my home—it's theirs. That Bella can walk right in spoke volumes to me about how close she and her dad still were.

Chief Swan had arrived a few minutes before us, and was leaning against the kitchen counter riffling through a stack of mail when we came in.

Wiping my feet on the mat before coming in, I wasn't sure where to place the bags, so I set them down just inside the front door. Bella walked straight over to her father and hugged him tightly against her, kissing him on the cheek before releasing him.

"Bells, your room is ready for you. I washed the sheets and everything." His look of pride was cute, but you wouldn't have caught me smiling at it for all the tea in China.

"You'll be sleeping on the couch, Edward." Chief Swan's tone brooked no disagreement, and I had no plans to offer any.

Bella flushed slightly, but said nothing, gathering up her things. She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek—standing on tiptoes to do so—and whispered, "I'd show you my room, but he might have a heart attack."

She turned and ran up the steep wooden stairs with her coat, bag, and purse in hand.

An uncomfortable air enveloped us as soon as Bella left.

"Nice place," I threw out, making a lame-ass attempt at conversation. I had thought through how to deal with almost any attitude Chief Swan might throw at me, but conversation was never my strong suit.

Apparently it wasn't his either. "Mmm," was all I got in response. Chief Swan looked relaxed, leaning against the kitchen counter, arms folded. He was watching me, that assessing look from earlier had returned.

*So dekcuf.*

Looking around the room for possible conversational points, I landed on a picture of Bella's father, uniformed, standing in front of a police cruiser. His hands were resting on the shoulders of a girl of about five years of age. Her hair was up in high pigtails, and she was wearing a skirt that had mud stains up one side. Her knees were skinned—visible even in the faded color of the photo. She was smiling though, a look of pure adoration on her face as she looked up at her father. He was smiling into the camera.

"She was so clumsy then." Charlie's voice came through the kitchen.

I snorted. "Some things never change."

"*She's* changed," he said quietly. "In other ways."

Looking at the photo again, I could see what he meant. Bella at five looked happy in the purest sense. She glowed with the sort of contentment that can only come from ignorance of the truly bad things in life.

"She was young." I pointed out.



"Mmm."

Turning to look at a small corner cabinet filled with framed photographs, hoping to find more of young Bella, I stopped mid-stride when my eyes caught sight of the kitchen table. It was covered in photocopies, photographs, faxes, and manila folders. A good number of them bore my name.

Research. About me.

My head turned automatically toward Bella's father, feeling, somewhat irrationally, like I had been caught with my hand in the cookie jar. I reminded myself that I had caught *him* snooping. Worried he might get defensive, or angry, I was surprised that instead, he met my startled look levelly, issuing a silent challenge to call him on it; to raise the issue; to defend myself.

I didn't give him the satisfaction.

Instead, I walked to the table and began examining his research. I wanted to know what he had been looking into. I had nothing to hide, but felt at a disadvantage if I didn't know how deep his knowledge of me went. I knew next to nothing about him, and was navigating this decidedly awkward situation pretty much blind.

What I saw shocked me. *Beyond* shocked me. There was everything I had expected—background check, credit report, driving record. There were some things I should have expected but hadn't—college transcripts, high school attendance and discipline records, even some performance reports from my time as a minor swimming star during high school and college.

But it was the other things that truly surprised—and dismayed—me. Articles dating back decades involving my parents, an internal police department missive on Emmett, and the entire court transcript of a malpractice suit filed against my father some eighteen years ago.

The man was thorough—*strategically* thorough. He was using his access to information, and his authority as a law enforcement agent, to warn me.

*Fuck with my daughter and I can touch you in ways you haven't even thought of yet.*

This was how he knew about my car. By my car alone he must, then, know that we had money. I hoped that wouldn't be an issue with him. With the exception of some women I'd dated, most people either didn't care, or made a huge production over it—their resentment at their own circumstances coloring their view of me.

I hoped like hell Chief Swan wasn't one of those. But if he was, there was sweet fuck all I could do about it. I refused to pretend to be someone I wasn't. Bella and I had briefly talked about renting a car for this weekend also, but she was adamant that we be ourselves from the outset, or it would just complicate things. Seeing this now, I couldn't agree more. He would have thought I was trying to hide something. Turning to face Chief Swan, I swallowed my nervousness as much as possible before speaking.

"Well, on the upside, it'll make the whole 'tell me about yourself' conversation a helluva lot shorter." I attempted a grin, but was pretty sure it looked wobbly and pathetic.

Charlie watched me quietly for a moment, arms resting on the counter, then said quietly, "Seems fair you should know. I'm not going to apologize for it, but it doesn't feel right to hide it either."

Just then Bella came down the stairs, looking anxiously between her father and me. Walking over toward the table, she smiled, but it didn't ring true. Her mouth was a little too tight, her eyes questioning. Luckily they were focused on me and not the table. I felt pretty certain that Bella's reaction would be quite different from mine, were she to see the depth of her father's investigation.

I smiled in response to hers, but didn't touch her. I wanted to pull her into a hug, to tell her that as long as I had her at the end of the day, anything was worth it, but I knew that we were walking a tightrope with her father, and didn't want to put any unnecessary strain on it with superfluous touching.

~oOo~

A few hours of distinctly uncomfortable non-conversation later—Chief Swan could never be accused of being "chatty"—we decided dinner was in order. Bella wanted to visit her favorite restaurant in Forks, and neither her father nor I felt inclined to argue.

"We'll take my car," Charlie said on our way out the door, then looked at me and added, "Since you can apparently only afford one with *two* seats."

Bella rolled her eyes, behind his back, following him out. I had to smile, because I could so clearly see the ornery fourteen-year-old she would once have been.

At the restaurant, we were seated in a booth. Charlie sat next to Bella, presumably to stop any hanky-panky. You know, because I'm such a dumbass I'm gonna grope my girlfriend in a restaurant, right in front of her police chief father.

*You did drive right by him while getting a handjob from his daughter, you hypocritardical idiot.*

The server came by to take drink orders, and Bella, apparently feeling the need for social lubricant under the tense atmosphere, ordered a lemon drop. I picked a local microbrew, and Chief Swan chose a Miller Light.

The man may have excellent taste in cars and guns, but he had shit taste in beer.

"So, tell me about your dad," Charlie began after we'd placed our entrée orders. "I mean, when he's not getting sued for malpractice."

"Dad!" Bella hissed.

Charlie raised his hands in the air in a "What did I do?" gesture, a look of innocence on his face.

Trying to tamp down the instinctive defensiveness I always had about my family—trying not to let him get to me—I cleared my throat before answering.

"Well, Sir, in between being sued—fewer times than any other surgeon in his hospital—he's saving people's lives as a trauma surgeon. Other than that, he keeps busy helping my mother with her charity work, or working with the Doctors for the Homeless foundation he helped get off the ground."

There...I had "He's a good person" covered.

"On a more personal level, though he's loving, kind, generous, and not nearly as funny as he thinks he is. He's the master of groaner knock-knock jokes, and thinks listening to DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince makes him 'hip with the kids'."

Meeting Chief Swan's gaze directly, I added with all the sincerity in the world, "He's amazing. He's my personal hero. Well...except for the jokes. They're really, really awful."

"Mmm."

Charlie looked thoughtful, though not embarrassed about his question as I would have expected. Bella, however, looked mortified enough for the two of them. She had her elbows propped on the table, face buried in her hands.

"What about this new brother in law of yours—"

"Emmett?"

"Emmett? You say that like it's a question. What, did your brother marry a guy too? Or are you not sure *who* your sister married?"

"Jesus, Dad. Fucking *stop* it!" Bella whispered loudly to her dad, turning even redder than she had been.

Chief Swan looked unconcerned and smiled down at her. "I see your language is improving with your new circle of friends."

Her mouth fell open, then snapped shut again, eyes turning to mine, pained and pleading for understanding, before signaling the server for another drink.

I knew he was being intentionally incendiary, but there was a part of me that couldn't help responding anyway.

"Since you ask, Emmett—yes, that is my sister's husband—is a SWAT officer. An instructor." Pausing a moment, I added, "But you knew that. Why are you asking?"

Bella's father looked at me with a slight grin, eyes wide and innocent. "Oh, nothing. Just trying to get a sense of where you came from; who your people are. This Emmett sounded like my sorta guy."

I snorted, and before I could stop myself blurted out, "*Your sorta guy?* So, you date men too?"

Oh, I *so* shouldn't have. I really, really shouldn't have. And the fact that the last swallow of Bella's drink came shooting straight out her nose told me I truly *shouldn't* have.

Chief Swan ignored my comment in favor of vigorously pounding his daughter on the back. What that was supposed to accomplish, I wasn't sure.

He was involving me in some weird dance—a dance involving shit-talking, testosterone, and possibly weapons. Generally my ammo was tipped with suction cups, and Emmett had openly compared my shit-talking to Kermit the Frog. Testosterone I had plenty of, but it was generally reserved for use in pounding keyboards, abusing anything created by Microsoft, rapid-fire awesomeness on the lever of a Hungry Hungry Hippos game, or punching Jasper. *Not* the father of the love of my life.

I needed to jump in and put this evening on my terms. As our entrées arrived, I looked at Bella's dad directly and took a deep breath before beginning.

"Look, I understand where this is coming from. Really. I would be the same. You have to know that I'm not like...well...that I'm a decent person. I get it. You have my OK to dig away at me. But my family, that's different. They're good people, that's all you need to know. No-one's in prison, no-one's into anything sick. The worst thing you'll find in my family is the occasional penchant for porn or pot."

Charlie eyed me thoughtfully, chewing his braised beef, before washing it down with a swig of beer, his eyes never leaving my face.

"So, which one are *you* into, then?"

My gaze didn't waver from his as I responded, "Well, I don't smoke *pot*."

I swear there was a flicker in his eye, and a twitch of his mouth—just the very corner—that said he was amused by my answer. But it was gone in a flash as Bella's martini glass clanked on the table. She set it down a little too hard, trying desperately to swallow the drink in her mouth without having it come out her nose again.

I can imagine lemon drop through the nostrils would be rather painful.

As dinner wore on, Chief Swan grilled me more—why I do what I do for a living, why I'm the only one that doesn't have a career devoted to helping people, what I plan to do with my trust fund, how I could justify spending that much money on a car, and so on—and Bella became increasingly stressed.

Around the time of dessert—which Chief Swan insisted we stay for—Bella looked at him, eyes shining, pleading, and said quietly, "Dad, please *stop*. You're going to freak him out. Please don't do this to me."

My heart broke for her, realizing how hard our thinly concealed cage match had been affecting Bella.

I took her hand across the table, not caring how Chief Swan might feel about me touching his daughter. "Bella," my voice was quiet, intentionally firm and confident. "Bella, love, I will *not* get freaked out. I'm sorry. We're not being fair to you. But you *know* I love you, I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

For the first time since we arrived, her father had the good grace to look abashed. Looking down at her, the color rising a little in his cheeks, he mumbled, "Sorry, Bells. You're right. I'll back off."

Bella ordered another drink for dessert.

Forty minutes later we were back at the house, a quiet truce between Bella's father and myself making conversation stunted at best.

Walking up the steps to the door, Bella tripped, banging her shin painfully on the third stair. She cursed while I helped her up, placing her on what I realized were increasingly unsteady feet. Counting back through the meal, I realized she had had three—possibly four—lemon drops during the ninety minute meal.

Entering the house, Bella hung her coat on the rack by the door, taking mine also. As she turned, her eyes landed on the kitchen table. Walking over to it, she began looking through the printouts, picking up a photograph of my car, then another of my parents. Her father, who had left the room momentarily, returned to find her staring blankly at the court documents in her hand. I knew beyond a doubt that she wouldn't take her dad's research as well as I had, but before I could say anything to her, she turned on him.

The ensuing scene was pretty damn ugly. She yelled, but he said nothing, eyes glued to the floor. She accused him of taking his investigation into me to a level that bordered on the criminal, and involved people who, in reality, she hadn't even met yet. He said nothing. She accused him of not wanting her to be happy—of threatening the first happiness she had found in a very long time—and again, he said nothing.

I could tell she was panicking not because she expected any less from her dad, but because she was scared it would drive me away. I couldn't fix the former, but I could try to fix the latter.

"Bella," I said quietly, taking her hand in mine, putting my other arm around her, pulling her close. "It's OK. *Really*." I leaned back to meet her tear-filled eyes. "Do I feel invaded? *Yes*. Do I understand why it's necessary? *Abso-fucking-lutely*. Please don't worry about it. I have nothing to

hide—you know that. My family doesn't either, and I can promise you they will sure-as-shit think the same thing I do—this is all more than a fair price to pay for having you around."

Looking up at Charlie, I met his surprised look with a grin and added, "While we're on the subject of me, I swear a lot. Fucktons, actually. I thought you should know." Waving at the piles of paper on the table I added, "I doubt your research told you that."

"Mmm," he grunted in reply, a hint of a smile playing around the corner of his mouth. "Actually it did."

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## Geek Love Chapter 19: In Which Edward Smells Smoke

Bella, while somewhat consoled by our talk, was still stressed. She had known it would be like this, and yet, found herself more affected by it than expected. Given her one past experience, I supposed it was only natural for her to worry that I might bail when things weren't all Disney and shit.

Bella walked to the kitchen, tripping then catching her footing again as she passed from the carpeted area to the linoleum. Her dad was sitting at the table, having just cleared it of the scattered papers, looking chagrined. I sat across from him wondering where the rest of the evening was going, when he pulled out a deck of cards. Bella came with three beers in hand, and passed them out before sitting down. She reached across to her father and squeezed his arm briefly, indicating some level of forgiveness, or at least truce, between them.

Chief Swan cleared his throat, then gave Bella a tentative smile, before addressing me. "There are some advantages to having a rich boy in love with my daughter," he said seriously. "Hundred buy-in; Hold 'em."

Fuck. We were gonna play poker. I totally suck *ass* at poker.

Ten minutes later I discovered Bella did *not* suck ass at poker. Nor did her father. Three beers later I was down all my cash, and owed a Bella a few favors I *really* didn't want to pay up on. Though the expression on her face when she realized I owed her a month of litterbox cleaning was pretty fucking adorable.

Standing up, I stretched, eyes closed, only to have several sharp fingernails jab me hard in the stomach, almost knocking the wind out of me. Doubling over with an "Ow!" I looked at Bella, who was giggling in her seat, her father watching her with an expression of suppressed amusement on his face.

"What the hell was *that* for, Swan?"

Her expression grew more serious, though she was still stifling a giggle. "Iws *ticklng* you, Edwrd. Hasnnanyone ever tickled you before?"

She was slurring her speech. Drunkella was back.

"Not like *that*, Jesus, woman, am I bleeding? If you want my liver you can have it, but let's get a surgeon to do it. Don't rip it out with your bare fucking hands."

"Aw... poor wittle bebe..." Bella channeled Elmer Fudd as she spoke, standing to put her hands on either side of my face, making little kissing noises in what I assumed was supposed to be sympathy.

About two beers past caring that her dad was there, I shut her up with a kiss on her lips. Her hands wrapped around my neck, beginning their usual ascent into my hair, when I broke the kiss before things went any further in front of her dad. Grinning down at her, Bella looked so beautiful. Beautiful and...blurry. I realized she was blurry because she was incapable of standing upright without weaving back and forth. At last count she was six or seven drinks in for the evening.

"You're drunk," I said, amused.

"You're pretty," she shot back, tapping the end of my nose with her finger.

A loud throat clearing drew my attention.

"Hate to play the dad, but since I *am* the dad, it's time for bed, kids." He gave us each, in turn, the hairy eyeball before saying firmly, "Separately."

Pointing at the couch, he leveled me a "Don't fuck with me" look, before directing Bella upstairs.

"*Daaad*," Bella half whined, half slurred, sounding every bit as drunk as she was. "Wernot sevnteen! *Jeeesus*, Dad, I sleep at Edwrd's all th'time."

Charlie shuddered visibly.

Hiding my own smile, both at her drunkspeak and her lack of tact around her dad, I put a hand gently on her shoulder, leaning in to rest my forehead on hers. "Bella, I doubt telling him that is going to help our case. I'll see you in the morning, OK?"

"But *Ed-ward*..." she tried again.

"Bella," I whispered in her ear, "do this for your dad, please? Besides, his house, his rules."

She gave me a thoughtful look, eyes narrowing in the way they do only when she's quite drunk. I would never admit it out loud, but I actually adored drunk Bella. Aw, who the fuck was I kidding. I adored any kind of Bella.

~oOo~

**Saturday 12:23 a.m.**

Bella and her dad had gone to their respective rooms upstairs, leaving me on the sofa with two pillows and a worn blanket. It was still fairly decent weather—for Washington, that is—so I wasn't particularly cold. But for some reason it was hard to sleep. Everything felt topsy-turvy. I was worried about Bella. This had been harder on her than she had expected, I was pretty sure. I wasn't so much concerned about Charlie though. I knew, in my heart, that he would come around.

He wanted Bella to be happy—and safe. I would do everything in my power to make her happy, and would never, ever hurt her, so I figured it was only a matter of time before he recognized that. Maybe not today, or this week, or this month even, but eventually, time would tell him all he needed to know.

My head was more than occupied running through everything that had happened that day, when I heard a creaking sound followed by a dull thump, then a quiet giggle.

*Bella.*

Tip-toeing as effectively as a small elephant might, Bella snuck into the living room, planting herself on the floor next to me, shaking my arm hard enough to wake the dead.

"Edward!" she stage-whispered loud enough to wake the dead who hadn't already awoken from the shaking.

I guess she hadn't noticed my eyes were open already.

"Bella," I said, smiling. "What are you doing?" Rather than wait for her answer, I pulled her towards me, planting a firm kiss on her soft, warm lips. Warmth spread through me as I tasted her, loving the feel of her so close to me. She whimpered against my mouth, tugging my head closer to her. She smelled of toothpaste, dryer sheets, and beer. Sounds weird, I know, but it was actually quite pleasant. At least, my penis thought so. It rose to attention pathetically quickly as her tongue grazed my lower lip followed by a gentle nipping from her teeth.

She moaned again, or, at least, I *thought* it was her, until she actually did moan, then I realized it was *me* making the noise.

Rising slowly rose from the floor, she climbed on top of me, straddling me on the couch. Our lips were locked together, my hands firmly on either side of her face. *Her* hand, rather than staying safely in my hair, roamed everywhere. She touched my face, my neck, my shoulders, then ran slowly down my clavicle and across to my nipples, teasing them through my cotton t-shirt. Overwhelming desire shot through me then, radiating from her touch through my entire body.



Gasping for breath from the heat of our kiss, I broke away for a moment.

"*Bella*," I whispered, "what are you—"

She cut me off with another kiss, slowly pressing herself onto me, gently moving her hips first up, then down, the motion echoing what my body was screaming at me to do. Taking my hands from her face, she pulled them down her body, landing them firmly on the rounded flesh beneath her shirt and used my fingers to tease herself as she had earlier in the car.

It felt so good. So fucking *good*. She was warm, and soft, and sexy. My *Bella*. My beautiful, sweet, adorable, strange *Bella*. I wanted her more than anything I'd ever wanted. I wanted to take her, to make her mine; to possess her body and soul; to climb in to her and never, ever come out again.

But it wasn't right. There were more reasons than my testosterone-addled brain could count why this wasn't right.

"*Bella*, we have to stop. Your dad—"

"My dad is asleep, Cullen, so shut it. You said it was my choice when things happen, and it's my choice now. I love you. I want this. Now."

As she spoke, she moved down my body, kissing her way past my neck, nipping gently at my collarbone, her warm breath drifting across my skin, making my entire body light on fire. Then she was lifting my shirt to kiss my navel—

*Fuck*, she was kissing my navel! That was just one step above my...

Simultaneously I was hit by two thoughts: First, I really, really, *really* wanted *Bella's* mouth there; and second, I really, really, *really* couldn't let that happen.

"*Bella*, *stop*. Please."

She looked up, confused. "Why?"

"*Bella*, *please*, not...now. Not like this." I could barely speak, my brain fighting against the rest of my body—my traitorous lust-crazed body.

"Don't you want..." she started, confused. "You don't *want* this?" Her voice was quiet, almost sad.

Throwing back my head in frustration, I groaned.

"*Jesus*, *Bella*, of course I do, but...this isn't right. It's not—I didn't realize you meant you want it to happen *now*. This can't be what you want for our first—"

"So, now you're telling me what I want?"

*Shit. Now I'm double dekcufed.*

"No! But come on, Bella, your dad's upstairs, we're on a *couch*, you're—"

"I'm *what*, Edward?"

She had moved from seductive to angry in the blink of an eye. Even a social retard like me could see how pissed she was. I ran my hands through my hair, trying to think how Jasper might talk her through it. Bella scrambled off me, curling around her knees at the end of the couch. I sat up, straightening my shirt.

"Bella, that's not what I meant, and you know it. It's just after everything today it doesn't feel like it's just—"

"Fuck!" she groaned, covering her face with her hands. "I knew it. I knew he would drive you away. Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"Bella, no-one drove me away, I just don't want to—"

"I *know*, Edward. I fucking get it, OK? You don't want to." Her voice choked off into a sob, "Enough said."

*Oh, holy mother of Zeus. Seriously? I mean, **seriously**?*

"Bella," My tone was sharp, almost rude, as I decided to try to change tactics to get her attention—to get her reasoning like a normal person again. OK, 'normal' had probably never applied to Bella.

She looked up at me, defiant, angry, but tell-tale tears threatening regardless.

"Bella, for fuck's sake, you wonderful, amazing, utterly retarded woman, I *want* you. I want you more than life itself. Bella, you *are* my life now. You are everything to me. I want your mind; I want your spirit; I want your body. God knows, I want your body. But not at the expense of *us*. There are so many reasons that now is the wrong time, but not a single one has *anything* to do with me not wanting you, or your dad driving me away. Not one."

Bella's eyes were huge, wet, saucers as she listened to me, unblinking. I scooted across the couch so we faced each other, knees touching. Cautiously I took one of her hands in mine, squeezing the fingertips gently.

Clearing her throat, she spoke, her voice broken. "Edward, you said...you said it was up to *me*. You said I was going to make the decision. Now you're telling me that's not true. I don't get to say, after all."

She had a point. I could totally get how she'd see it like that. Sighing, I thought through my answer carefully, hoping like hell I didn't make things worse.

"Bella, it *is* up to you. It *is* your decision to say when you're ready for anything, and *what* you're ready for. But you taking the lead, you deciding when and if you're ready for each step, assumes that I'm *also* comfortable with it. Sex needs to feel right to *both* of us, and this—" I indicated the two of us, the couch, and the house in general, "—this doesn't feel right to me. Not for our first time, anyway.

"Bella, love, I want it to happen, but I need it to be about *us*. Not about you reacting to your dad, or trying to prove something to me. And not, certainly not, while you've been drinking"

She snorted. "You think I wanna have sex with you because I'm drunk?"

"No, Bella, but I think that it's *easier* for you to have sex with me when you're drunk. That's why it feels wrong. I don't want you to be able to do this drunk, but not sober. I'm worried you'll wake up in the morning and regret it—"

The idea of that, of her regretting being with me, possibly risking her running away from everything we had begun to build, made me stop talking for a moment, needing to clear the lump from my throat.

"—Bella, I couldn't take that. I couldn't take you regretting it."

"I wouldn't regret it, Edward," she said quietly. "I *want* you. I...I'm ready, that's all this is."

Part of me soared at hearing this, ecstatic that she finally felt ready, but just as big a part of me hated the fact that she was finally ready and I had to say no—had to disappoint her.

"Bella," I sighed. "I'm so, so, fucking happy you're ready. I really hope you are, *God knows*. I can't wait—can't fucking *wait*—to take you up on that. When we can take our time, and not when your dad is around. It's not right, sweetheart. I can't imagine having our first time together spent worrying if he might come down the stairs at any moment. Or having to explain to him why we ignored his rules."

Bella listened, nodding slowly.

Her hand squeezed mine then, as her chin lowered to rest on her knees.

"Edward? Edward, what if...what if being drunk is the only way I can get the...thoughts...out of my head? What if, being together sometimes feels like there's three of us there, and as much as I don't want to, I keep bringing that third person in, and I can't do anything about it?"

There are times I wish I had my brother with me. This was one of them. He, of all people, would know what to say. Would know the answer to this. I didn't know, so I just said what sounded right.

"Bella, I can't say for sure, but I think that we're going to have to just live with that third person being there—at least at first. Love," I took her other hand in mine, both hand resting just above our feet, toes touching, "what happened to you, as fucking awful and grotesque as it was, is a part of you now. There's no way to expect to forget it. It won't suddenly disappear. Hell, just *knowing* it happened to you has made it become a part of *me*. I don't think it's a matter of waiting until it's gone from you completely. That might *never* happen."

She choked out a little sob then, her eyes held firmly shut, but nodded thoughtfully.

"I think it's a matter of us learning to live with it, learning how to survive as a couple despite the presence of that third person. And maybe, after awhile, we won't notice them anymore."

Quiet filled the room as I stopped talking. The sound of our breathing, and some quiet traffic sounds outside were all that filled the air.

I began to wonder if I'd said something wrong, when Bella's head leaned forward, falling on my shoulder. My arms automatically wrapped around her, loving the feel of having her so close. Her voice, when she spoke, was muffled by my shirt, but I could understand her nonetheless.

"I am so pissed, Edward. I'm so—" she choked a little, a sob escaping her throat, "—so fucking mad. He had no *right* to do this to me. He had no right to burden me with this. It's not fucking fair that *you* have to deal with this, that *I* have to deal with this, or my dad. Just because he wasn't *man* enough to...because he wasn't man enough. That's it, really." With that she broke down in tears, body wracked with sobs.

"Shhh...Bella...shhh..." I whispered, not really meaning for her to be quiet, just for something to say as a comfort. I kept my arms wrapped firmly around her, stroking her back with one hand, her hair with the other as she cried in my arms, letting out all her frustration and anger.

~oOo~

About fifteen minutes after Bella's head hit my shoulder, sobbing, her breathing evened out, eventually leveling off into a now-familiar sleep pattern. Starting to get a cramp in my leg, I lowered her onto the couch to let her sleep awhile before moving her upstairs.

As slowly as I could, I rested Bella's head against one of the pillows, pulling the blanket up over her, before leaving the room. There really wasn't anywhere to go, but I was too wound up to just lay down next to her. Besides, I *really* didn't want Chief Swan to find us snuggled up together in what I'm sure he would assume was post-coital bliss.

Wandering into the kitchen, I got a glass of water, drank half of it, then realized I needed something a tad stronger. I grabbed a beer out of the fridge, deciding to drink it on the porch, and do some traffic watching.

OK, it was like 1:30 in the morning—there wouldn't be any traffic in Forks. *Maybe I'd spot a Yeti.*

Opening the front door as quietly as I could, I padded out in my bare feet, wearing my plaid pajama bottoms, t-shirt, and a pullover hoodie. It wasn't until I had pulled the front door closed behind me that I smelled the unmistakable odor of a cigarette nearby. Turning, I almost jumped to see Chief Swan sitting in one of the Adirondack chairs, beer in one hand, cigarette in the other, darkness obscuring him.

"Shit, sorry. I didn't know you were out here," I mumbled, frantically scouring my brain to figure out how he'd gotten out here and what he might have heard on his way out the front door.

Turning to go back inside, his voice stopped me.

"Edward, will you stay for a minute?"

I looked at him, surprised, trying to gauge his mood. He seemed...thoughtful. A bit pensive, even.

Choosing, as I would have done normally, to sit on the top step, rather than in the available chair, I sat facing the street, taking a long nerve-steadying pull from the beer. It was shit beer, but I wasn't exactly drinking it for the flavor.

Finally after a few nerve-wracking minutes of silence, I asked the one thing I really needed to know.

"How much did you hear?"

Bella's father sighed, then the darkness lit up briefly with the glow of red, which faded as he exhaled the pungent smoke.

"Enough."

More silence, more beer, more smoke and tension clogged the night air. Then, after what felt like a half hour, but was probably all of two solid minutes, he cleared his throat, and spoke.

"I'm sorry."

I looked up, startled. "What for?"

"For being a dickhead."

"Chief Swan, I—"

"Edward," he interrupted, "for fuck's sake, call me Charlie."

That threw me for a moment, but I took it for the conciliatory gesture it was. Nodding to him, I continued.

"Charlie, I...it's fine. With me, that is. Bella may feel differently, but *I* get it. Do you think I'd be any different if...that...had happened to *my* daughter?"

He was quiet a moment, considering, then spoke. "Well, in that case rather than apologize, I'll thank you for your understanding. Not every man would give it so freely."

Not knowing what to say I merely nodded, draining a quarter of my beer in one long gulp.

"Edward?"

"Yes?"

"You don't *have* a daughter, do you? I didn't miss a love-child somewhere?"

Not expecting that, I chuckled. "No, Sir, I don't." Sobering, I continued, "But, I can only imagine that your desire to keep Bella safe—to make sure she isn't hurt like that again—is at least as strong as mine. Probably more. Which means...well...it means I understand. That's all."

"I'm glad, Edward. Really. But I wasn't really apologizing for looking into you. I would pull a background check on *anyone* Bella dated and I will not apologize for that."

"Then what—"

"For your family. You were right. That was out of line. I ran the histories on them just for information about you—at least that's what I told myself—but ribbing you about them...well...Edward, I did that to see if you'd stand up for them; to see if you were as close as you guys looked on paper. The truth is, your family looks really fucking good on paper. I wanted to see how much heart there was behind that. But it was a shitty thing for me to do. I'm man enough to admit when I've fucked up, and to apologize for it."

I took this in, shocked at how calculated his jabs had been. It made me angry, in a way, but I was also glad that he was not truly under any misapprehensions about the people closest to me.

"That was really shitty," I said in response, but there was no fire in it. Again, I understood his motivation. It seemed that I could forgive almost anything if the goal was to help or protect Bella.

"I know," he said quietly. "Do you think we can get past it?"

I looked down at my beer bottle, peeling a piece of the label off, rolling it between my fingers, thinking before answering.

"Yeah, I do. Fact is Chief...*Charlie*...I have some bigger things on my mind than your background checks."

"Yeah, so I hear."

"More than that though, and maybe I'll kick myself for saying this tomorrow, but I'm really glad Bella has people in her life willing to put themselves out there for her. I'm not just blowing smoke up her ass—or yours—when I say I'd do *anything* for her. If that means putting up with shit from people who love her, and want to keep her safe, I will."

Charlie was quiet for a moment, then responded with his trademark, "Mmm."

We sat in silence for another five or ten minutes. Just long enough for my beer to empty. I stood, planning to go in and get Bella upstairs, when Charlie reached down into a small cooler sitting beside his chair, and pulled out another bottle, handing it to me silently.

I took it, giving him a nod of thanks before sitting back down and twisting off the cap, setting the empty one beside me.

After another few minutes I asked quietly, "Was there something else you wanted to talk about?"

Charlie sighed, looking at the bottle in his hand for half a minute or so before raising his eyes to meet mine.

"Yeah, there is." Pausing a moment to look out over the yard, he seemed lost in thought, but continued suddenly. "I have...well...two things. Firstly, I wanted to say thank you."

My eyes shot up in surprise, waiting for him to continue.

"What happens between you and Bella, well, honestly it's not my business. As long as what happens between you two is...consensual."

At this point I was glad for the darkness, because I was sure my face was flaming, knowing that he had most likely heard some portion of what Bella and I had discussed, or...God forbid...*done*.

"Correct me if I'm wrong here, but you two haven't...um..."

"No," I interjected, saving him from having to vocalize what neither of us wanted said out loud.

"But she sleeps with you."

"Yes, we have."

"That's what I want to thank you for."

I was a little confused, to say the least. "You're thanking me for sleeping with your daughter?" I asked, incredulous.

He chuckled then, an unexpected sound in the charged atmosphere.

"No, son, I'm thanking you for being someone she can *trust* enough to sleep with. She hasn't...well...as far as I know, she's been unable to fall asleep with anyone but me near her. Can't say as I blame her after...everything."

We were quiet then, contemplating what had been said. It seemed this was the nexus through which our future relationship would be formed, and we both needed to think our way through it.

After another few minutes, or half a beer, if we're counting that way, I reminded him, "You said there were two things."

He looked up at me then, a remarkably uncomfortable look on his face. Whatever his second point was, he didn't really want to talk about it. That fact alone made me instantly uncomfortable too.

"Bella was...at least she said...No, she *was*..." He looked like a man lost at sea, desperate for a life raft that wasn't going to come. "She was a...virgin...when she met *him*."

"Yes."

"And what happened to her, the..." his voice drifted off, pained.

"The rape?"

"Yes, the rape," he reiterated with the sigh of man resigned to his fate. "After that she never...she didn't get...*close*...to anyone."

"OK..." I encouraged, wondering where he was going with this.

"So, I guess I'm telling you, I'm sorry that I've been so thick-headed about it all. I was only worrying about keeping her *safe*. I never stopped to consider if she was *happy*, if she needed someone to teach her how to be...close...to anyone again. I never stopped to think about the fact that my daughter is effectively a twenty-six year old virgin, and how fucked up that was. I've handled everything really fucking badly."

I sat in shock, taking in what he was saying, unable to offer any words in return as my mind reeled.

"I just wish I had realized earlier; done *more*," he added quietly.

After another minute or two of silence, I began. Speaking slowly, thinking each word through before saying it.

"Charlie, the thing is, what happened to Bella didn't just happen to *Bella*. Everything that was taken from her was taken from everyone who loves her—in a way."

Charlie looked curious, but unconvinced, as I spoke.



"What that fuckhead did took so much from her—from all of us. The more we sit around questioning ourselves—doubting ourselves or criticizing each other—the more power we're giving what he did."

A sigh escaped me before I continued, "None of us knows how to handle this—not you, not me, and certainly not Bella—but all we can do is react as best we can, and forgive ourselves if the reaction we have isn't the perfect one. After all, *Jonathan* is responsible for all of it. He is the cause of every link in the chain originating from his cowardly fucking act, and we have to remember that. You can't blame yourself for not reacting perfectly to someone else's crime"

Charlie looked thoughtful, if not a little doubtful, as he took a swig from his beer. Lighting up a new cigarette, he puffed away in silence for another minute or two before speaking again.

"You're right. Damn right."

I snorted in acknowledgement, not sure exactly how right I was, but hoping I had made some sense.

"Can I give *you* a piece of advice now, Edward?"

Surprised, I nodded.

"That tinting on your windows? It's not as dark as you think. You may want to think twice before repeating that particular...*road trip game*."

As I realized what he was saying, that he meant he had seen...Oh, God!...embarrassment claimed me. I groaned, my head falling into my palms, mortified. Then I heard Charlie chuckle quietly.

"One more question?" he asked.

Nodding, head still in hands, I cringed, waiting for whatever might come next.

"You love Bella."

It wasn't a question, but I looked up and nodded anyway.

"I can see *that*—hell, son, a blind fruit bat could see that."

"And?" I asked, wondering where he was going with this.

"I guess, since I am the father and all, I'm wondering where it's gone, in your head."

I laughed then, realizing what he was getting at. "You want to know what my intentions are with your daughter?"

He chuckled with me then, "Yeah, I guess I do, Edward."

I sighed, relieved. "Thank God for the easy questions." Taking a moment to formulate my phrasing, I kept it short and sweet.

"Bella and I both have a lot to get through with all of this, but she is...everything to me. She's my future, Charlie. It's that simple. If she'll have me, I'm hers."

Charlie watched me closely for a few seconds before lowering his eyes to his beer bottle, inspecting it. After a moment, he sighed, though this time it was not an unhappy sound, and said, "Mmm."

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## **Geek Love Chapter 20: In Which There is Lasagna**

We spent Saturday hanging out in Forks. Breakfast was at Charlie's favorite diner, where Bella spent half the time bitching about hangovers and weak coffee—the woman takes her coffee seriously—and looking speculatively between Charlie and me. The change in dynamic between her father and me was making her curious, but not enough to broach the subject.

For our part, Charlie and I were still trying to feel each other out. Despite the accord reached the night before, we were pretty much strangers, and were getting to know each other.

"You like guns, Edward?"

No point in lying. "Nope." I shrugged apologetically. "Sorry, I know you're a gun guy. Just not my thing."

"You're pro gun control?"

"Yeah. I mean, I know the adage, 'Guns don't kill people, people kill people', but still, without a gun it's a helluva lot harder."

Charlie shrugged, "Yeah, whatever. Let's talk when you have a daughter. You'll be singin' a different song." Then he looked up grinning at me. "Besides, I hate computers, so I 'spose we're even."

I laughed before digging into my veggie scramble—another thing that had raised the older Swan's eyebrows. Apparently he was of the opinion that men eat meat over anything else, and hadn't yet met a man who ate vegetables by choice.

I should probably avoid the topic of my penchant for caviar or truffles then...

"Speaking of computers." Charlie looked up from his plate, wiping the corner of his mouth with a napkin, eyes narrowing. "What the hell does your shirt say, Bells?"

Her shirt read:

*roses are #FF0000*

*violets are #0000FF*

*all my base*

*are belong to you*

I had ordered it for her, presenting it as a gift on Thursday night after Jasper left. She had cried. *Cried*. Not only was she insanely smart, sexy, and all-around fuckawesome, but my kick-ass girlfriend was easy to please. I chalked myself up as the luckiest guy on the planet.

Bella, looking down at the shirt, read it out loud to Charlie, speaking slowly. He listened with an air of exaggerated patience.

"Yeah, Bells, the thing is, I may not be some computer genius, but I'm not a short-bus-special either. I can *read*. But what the hell does it mean?"

Bella, by way of answer, blushed furiously, looking down to pick at her napkin. I stepped in for the interpretation.

"It's a poem. You know the classic 'Roses are Red' poem, but in geek-speak. It says: 'Roses are red, Violets are blue, All that is mine, Belongs to you.'"

I reached over and took her hand, squeezing it gently. I knew that she was feeling shy about displaying our relationship in front of Charlie. But for some reason—probably because she was so amazing—I had no embarrassment or shyness when it came to talking about how I felt about her. I loved her. Like Charlie had said, *anyone* could see that.

Glancing up from my little Disney birds-circling-my-head gaze at Bella, I saw her dad watching me, a familiar look on his face. I had seen that look on Jasper's face, as well as Emmett's and even my dad's. They had all worn that same look when they saw me with Bella.

It said: *Dude, you're totally fucked.*

I met Charlie's expression with a shit-eating grin.

It said: *Fucked and loving it.*

Finally after Bella's eleventy-seventh curious look at the two of us, she finally spat out, "Which one did they replace? Or was it both of you?"

Charlie and I looked at each other, but seeing that neither of us understood the question we both turned back to her. She was drinking her watered-down diner coffee, scowling at us both.

Setting her cup down she blurted out, "Aliens!"

"Aliens...?" I asked slowly.

She sighed impatiently. "Yes, Edward. Aliens. Clearly last night you were both abducted by aliens and replaced with two people who get along with each other. I'm really fucking confused." Looking at her dad she continued, "The last thing I see yesterday, you're channeling DeNiro, acting out some messed up 'Meet the Swans' shit, and then boom! Here you both are all Chatty Kathy and...and..." She paused, taking a big gulp of coffee, placing the cup—a little too hard—on the table before finishing. "...and it's really creeping me out. What the hell happened?"

Charlie chuckled quietly. "S'OK Bells. After you fell asleep on the *couch*—" he raised an eyebrow at her significantly, "—we had a...chat. You could say we came to an understanding."

I snorted, swallowing my bite of egg, and added, "We hugged it out."

"*Figuratively*," Charlie corrected.

Bella looked thoughtful, chewing her lip and looking from Charlie to me then back again.

"You hugged it out...*figuratively*..." she mused. "Hmmpf. I still say aliens. And if they used anal probes, I *don't* want to hear about it. OK?"

That reminded me of something.

"Oh my God, Jasper told me about this movie he saw, where the girl totally—" I stopped, realizing I was about to share a porn anal probe story with Bella in front of her father. Turning bright red, I stammered on, "—um, yeah, well, maybe better tell that one some other time."

Bella, a grin splitting her face ear to ear, encouraged me to continue, but I politely declined.

Her dad, on the other hand, said, "Jasper...that would be your brother? So, I take it he's on your side of the 'porn or pot' question?"

Blushing even more furiously than I thought possible, I was wondering exactly how to answer that when Bella chimed in, addressing her father—air quoting where necessary for emphasis.

"I'm gonna tell '*my Dad*' that Jasper's quite happy getting his green on *while* he watches some quality porn. I'm gonna tell '*Chief Swan*' that Jasper's a fine upstanding citizen and does nothing of the sort." She narrowed her eyes at Charlie, adding, "We *like* Jasper. Got it?"

Returning his eyes to his pile of breakfast meat, he mumbled a "Mmm" before taking a bite and chewing slowly.

Just then my iPhone chimed the text message tone. Coincidentally, it was from that very same green-toking porn-loving sibling. He was terrible with technology, so I was happy to see him texting, though his technique left a lot to be desired.

Cum to MI tmorrwo. Brign B.

Despite only being a fifteen minute drive from my apartment, it had been quite awhile since I'd attended one of the family's Sunday bunches at my parent's house on Mercer Island. Jasper, for some reason wanted me—and Bella—at this one. Since Charlie was working Sunday anyway, Bella agreed to leave Forks earlier than planned the next morning, so we could hang out with my family for a few hours. I shot Jasper back a correctly spelled and grammatically perfect text with the news.

After breakfast we dropped Charlie at the station to deal with a few quick errands, and used his car to drive around Forks. Bella wanted to give me the grand tour—"grand" being a relative term in Forks—and at my request showed me some of her childhood hangouts.

The town was...well, it wasn't much...and I could see why Bella had left as quickly as she had, but in a way it fit her. I could see her starting out here. What I couldn't see was how someone with a passion for technology had ever gotten a taste for it given the shocking lack of modern technology in the schools.

Showing me her high school, we looked around the grounds, and Bella showed me where she had hidden in the hedge to smoke cigarettes during her rebellious phase, and where she had been punched in the face by a girl who mistakenly thought she had stolen her boyfriend.

When we got to the area behind the storage shed where she'd had her first and only high school kiss, we re-enacted the scene with much gusto, leaving both of us keyed up and antsy.

As we walked from the storage shed back toward the main building, Bella took my hand. A moment later she said quietly, "Edward, I wouldn't regret it. I wouldn't have last night, either. But I do know what you meant."

I squeezed her hand, happy that she understood, happier that she was feeling so sure of everything.

"Bella, I have no idea what I'm doing, but I know that I love you, and if I fuck this up it'll be the worst mistake I've ever made in my life. So, if I seem too...cautious...that's where it's coming from."

She smiled, eyes focused somewhere around her shoes. "I know." We kept walking, her eyes trained on the ground, expression lost in thought. I was lost in my own thoughts, glad to have them to myself. She would undoubtedly be more than a little freaked out could she hear them. My brain was currently screaming obscenities at my heart, who was in turn telling my brain to keep the fucking noise down while it contemplated whether Bella would prefer my grandmother's engagement ring, or a more modern setting.

*Hold the carriage there, Prince Charming. You only just got the dad to put the shotgun down.*

Lost in my thoughts, I almost missed what Bella said to me.

"So...um...will you tell me something?" she asked hesitantly. She sounded so uncertain, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Bella, I'd tell you *anything*. What is it?"

"Tell me about your first time."

Oh.

"Having sex."

I snorted. "Yeah, I got it." Removing my hand from hers as we walked, I wrapped my arm around her shoulder, pulling her close.

"I'll tell you anything you want, love, but...why? You really want to hear about me being with someone else?"

She swallowed—hard enough for me to hear it—before answering.

"I just...I think if I knew as much about you, as you know about me, it would help me. Right now I feel like you know all of this stuff about me, and I don't know the first thing about any of your history. Well...except for that *Jessica* person."

I loved the way she said Jessica's name. Like she would happily accidentally drop a hair dryer in Jessica's Jacuzzi tub.

"Jealous, much?" I chuckled.

Her brow furrowed like she was annoyed, but I could tell it was really embarrassment. She chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully.

"No. Maybe. A *little*."

"I thought you were all cool with Jessica. Didn't you say you something about us not being in a sitcom and you knew I wouldn't run off with her?"

"Yes, Edward," she sighed, exasperatedly, "but that doesn't mean that I don't want to stab her in the left eyeball for *trying*. She touched you. I didn't like it."

I raised an eyebrow at her. "*Left* eyeball? That's so specific."

She shrugged. "I'm right-handed."

"Bella." I was trying very hard to sound consoling, but this was fucking awesome. Jealous Bella was made of pure win, and I was loving every second of it. "She touched my *arm*. Nothing else."

"Irrelevant." She waved her hand dismissively in the air. "She had seedy thoughts. About you." Looking up at me with an earnest grin she added, "I could take her, you know."

"I don't doubt it," I chuckled, "but now you want me to tell you about having *sex* with someone. When you can't even handle a girl touching my *arm*."

She sighed, her mood instantly more dour. "I didn't say I'd *like* it, I just think I should know."

We'd reached an area in the school grounds that was obviously used for outdoor assemblies. There were a few stacked benches under a covered area. I walked Bella to one of the open benches pulling her down next to me to her legs lay perpendicular across mine. After a moment, I began.

"Her name was Jane. We were seventeen. I thought I was in love with her."

"Why?"

The question surprised me. "Why what?"

"Why did you think you were in love with her?"

It took me a minute to think that through. I'd never really had to answer that question before. I had just always known how it ended. It had been enough for me to know that I *hadn't* really been in love.

"Well, she was the first girl I really wanted to be around. Ever since I was about fourteen I had girls—" I stopped, realizing how I was about to sound, but knew I couldn't avoid it, "—I had girls around me. They didn't like *me*, necessarily, but they acted like they did. Because of my family. Jasper and Rosalie had the same thing. We were popular for no good reason."

Surprisingly, Bella didn't seem upset. In fact, she laughed, reaching up to run a hand through my hair, pushing the wayward strands out of my eyes.

"Edward, you guys are rich, smart, and totally fuckable. *That's* why you were popular."

I ducked my head, embarrassed for a moment that she saw me that way.

"Well, at any rate, she was the first girl I actually felt a connection with. You know, the old teenage angsty routine—she understood me, got my pain, sympathized when my parents mistreated me horribly, etcetera, ad infinitum. To top it off, I was friends with her twin brother, Alec, so we all got to hang out together. It was...I don't know...*easy*, I guess.

"So, after a few months of being a couple—this was senior year of high school—we were at my parent's house alone one day and...it happened. She asked me if I would...you know...and—" I hated to say it, but it was the truth, "—I was seventeen, horny, and thought I loved her. So...yeah, I did it."

Bella looked thoughtful, chewing her lip as she watched the trees in the distance. I was contemplating whether she was waiting for more details when she spoke, quietly, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"And she was OK? Afterwards, I mean?"

Her tone wasn't accusatory, but I fought hard not to react as if it were. She seemed to be wanting to live through my experience to see what was normal. At least, that's what I hoped it was about.

"Yes. She was *fine*. Happy." Taking Bella's hand I lifted her chin so our eyes met. "Please believe me, Bella, it was totally consensual, and she was more than OK afterwards."

Nodding, she was silent for a minute or two before asking, "Edward, you keep saying you 'thought' you were in love with her. What makes you think you weren't?"

I wasn't sure how she'd take my answer, but I promised to tell her anything, so I would.

"You."

She looked up, surprised. "Me?"

Sighing, I continued, "Yeah. Um...see things didn't work out so well with us. Jane and I broke up a few months later and, honestly, I didn't care all that much when it happened. I wasn't really sad or anything. So I suspected that it probably hadn't really been love.

"No-one else I dated after her ever made me even *wonder* if I was in love. I liked them, sure, and *wanted* to love a few, but just...didn't. Then I met you. I had a huge crush on you within the first week, and spent the last year and a half telling myself that's all it was. But that crush, what I felt for you in that first week alone, was more than anything I'd ever felt for anyone else, including Jane. I knew then that I'd never truly loved anyone before."

Taking her firmly in my arms, I pulled her onto my lap so she straddled me, our faces just inches apart.

"Bella, I've been yours since that first week. I just didn't have the balls to tell you."

Her eyes closed, squeezing shut, cheeks pinkening a little in the cold. Wrapping her arms around my neck, she nestled closer to me, pressing her forehead to mine.

"I couldn't tell you, because I couldn't handle you not loving me back."



She nodded. "But I do," she whispered. "So much."

And again, I gave what felt like the most honest response.

"Thank you."

~oOo~

A little while later, on our way back to the car, we peeked into the window of the computer lab. I did a double-take, momentarily shocked by the age of the hardware in that room.

"Sweet Silicon Valley, Batgirl, what the fuck are those things running?"

"Well...The Macs all came from the school district—they're strictly Apple—and are too old to run OSX. The PCs are a little newer because they're donated by families who have upgraded at home. They're generally XP machines, but barely able to do anything. There's no PC IT support, so the Windows machines barely work because no-one defrags them or maintains them in any way."

One of the things I would never understand is how we, as a nation, could put so much money into fighting wars on drugs, wars for oil, and wars on immigration, but failed to support our own kids' education. It seemed stupid to not invest in our own future.

Taking Bella's hand I blurted out, "Let's help them."

"What?"

"Let's help them. Bella, we can *help*. I know it'll only be good for a couple of years at best, but if it helps all these kids for even two years, it's worth it."

"What do you mean by 'help', Edward?"

"Money? Time? I have lots of both. I'd like to use them for something worthwhile."

She gaped at me for a moment, then her mouth closed slowly, and a grin spread across her beautiful face.

"You would buy my old high school new computers for their computer lab? Then we come set them up?"

"Yeah. And you come visit your father pretty regularly, right? We can come run system updates then if they'll let us in the building. What do you think?"

Her brow furrowed as she processed what I had said.

"You'll come with me? To visit my dad, and do that? We're talking a weekend a month."

"If you'll let me," I said, smiling down at her, stroking her cheek with one thumb.

"Seriously? You'd do that?"

I laughed, her disbelief cracking me up. "Yes, Bella. Why wouldn't I? Unless...you don't *want* me to."

"Wha—you think I'm gonna say no?" Her eyebrows shot up at me, a grin slowly replacing her concerned expression. "You *are* retarded sometimes, Edward."

She laughed a loud, happy sound, as she threw herself onto me for a hug.

Dead kittens, plane crash, zombies...not, fuck, she has zombie underwear...um...dead bunnies...

~oOo~

We picked up Charlie from the station, then went on to the grocery store to get ingredients for Bella's famous Mama Mia Lasagna.

I found out approximately an hour later that the etymology of the name came not from any Italian heritage, but to Bella's requirement that she listen to ABBA while she makes it.

Charlie, apparently aware of this fact, wisely chose this time to escape, saying he needed to meet some of the guys for a drink or two, but would be back by seven.

I started helping Bella with the food preparations, but was quickly demoted from Sous Chef to Head Cheese Grater once she realized the extent of my culinary skills.

I blamed the music—which she had turned up to eleven—saying ABBA was intellectual kryptonite, draining me of the ability to perform even the most menial of tasks. She kissed me then, running an insinuating—and only slightly garlicky—hand down my arm, countering that I would change my mind if I knew what ABBA made *her* want to 'perform'.

*Sweet Jesus, really? Note to self: Buy the complete works of ABBA off iTunes.*

I figured she was kidding, but I was willing to go along with it just in case.

An hour later the lasagna was in the oven, and Bella turned to me, grimacing at the splashes of red sauce decorating her clothing where the apron hadn't covered.

Telling her she should go change while I cleaned the kitchen, I walked to the sink giving her a brief kiss as I passed. She returned my kiss with more fervor than I expected, catching my lower lip between her teeth for a second, causing me to inhale sharply as my poor overwrought hormones raced wildly.

She smiled then, and turned to walk up the stairs, headed for her bedroom. But she paused, foot resting on the bottom step, hand stopped mid-grab on the hand-rail.

Turning, she looked at me. Her eyes seemed darker than usual, and there was a slight flush on her cheeks as she walked back towards me, a look of contemplation on her face. No, contemplation wasn't the right word. It was the look of a...

...a *hunter*. She was coming for me.

*Maybe she wasn't kidding about the ABBA thing...*

I did a mental check on her dad's location—still out for at least another hour—and let her come at me.

And she did.

I was leaning back against the sink. She walked up, all sinewy and seductive and snaked both her hands up, clutching them behind my head. Letting her take the lead, I simply obeyed as she pulled my head down towards hers, her body lining up against mine, pressing into me.

Instantly I was on fire. Every fiber of me wanted her, and my entire being sprang to life at her touch, at her proximity, at the soft, warm, sensuous feel of her body pressed against mine.

Her lips felt like home. Her tongue, wet and sexy as hell, teased mine as our mouths joined, fitting so perfectly together.

I struggled with maintaining control over my hands—having long since given up control over my...other bits. Trying to place my hands somewhere as safe as possible, I wrapped them around her waist. Unfortunately the traitorous little fuckers used that to their advantage, pulling her closer. She was now pressed hard up against my—

"Edward," Bella breathed out huskily, breaking our kiss. She stood up on her tiptoes then, so we were more, um, appropriately aligned, and pressed herself against me harder.

*Don't jizz in your pants, Edward. It wasn't cool when you were fourteen and it's sure as hell not cool now*, I reminded myself. Well, if I *did*, at least Jasper wouldn't see it this time. I had only just started to live down the "Jizzward" incident.

Then she murmured my name again, in that sex-riddled voice that made me want to explode.

"Fuck, I love it when you say my name like that," I whispered against her lips

She pressed against me again, eliciting a groan from my equally traitorous mouth. Her hands roamed up to embed themselves in my hair pulling me—rather authoritatively—to her again, beginning an even more frenzied kiss.

It was the hardest thing in the world to just stand there and let her do all the work. But I knew that as much as this seemed perfect, and as much as there was no hesitation—no doubt at all—coming from Bella, her controlling the situation was possibly the only reason for that.

"Edward," she panted again, tongue exploring my ear, causing my dick to twitch against her so hard she gasped. "Edward, will you—"

The sound of the front door opening made us both jump, moving apart, straightening clothes, like two teenagers caught out by parents. Which was fairly accurate, except for the "teenager" part.

Charlie came in, eyeballing us as he walked into the kitchen, placing his holstered service weapon ostentatiously on the counter. "Got back early," he said shortly, then opened the fridge, took out a cold beer, and walked to the living room. Turning at the doorway, he said, "Don't burn the damn lasagna," before leaving us alone once more.

The sound of football roared from the living room then, and Bella turned to me, clearing her throat, face beet-red.

"Yeah, well, um...let's get the salad going, huh?"

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## **Geek Love Chapter 21: In Which There is a Dare (or two)**

**Sunday 7:15 a.m.**

Charlie gave Bella a long hug as I loaded our bags into the Vanquish, and surprised all of us—himself included from the expression on his face—by hugging *me* also, laughing at the height adjustment he had to make going from Bella to myself.

As we drove I held her hand, stroking the soft pad of skin below her thumb, enjoying the warm comforting feeling I always got from just touching her. Trying to ignore the warm *throbbing* feeling I always got from just touching her.

On the way back towards Seattle we played a game. Bella called it "Coughfessional". Pretty much it involved me revealing my darkest and most humiliating personal secrets, in the form of a cough. She claimed it was a real game, with an official rulebook. I, however, was pretty damn sure Bella had made it up.

"You...*cough*...?"

"Yes, Edward." She sighed, frustrated with my lack of comprehension. "You *cough*."

"But why don't I just *say* it?"

She rolled her eyes, laughing. "Jesus, it's a good thing you're cute, 'cos you're dumber than a bag of hammers, you know that?"

I snorted. "Well, it's a good thing you have nice tits, because you have as much charm as the Frankenstein love-child of Simon Cowell and Cruella De Vil."

"Thank you," she replied, an oddly pleased expression on her face.

"*Thank you?* I just called you offensive and mean—amongst other things."

"Yes," she said with an air of satisfaction, "but you said I have nice tits."

"That you do, my love. That you do," I laughed.

She busied herself typing something on her iPhone, before handing me the screen. Glancing quickly at it before turning my eyes back to the road, I saw she had typed out:

\*coughbullshitcough\*

"Like that," she stated with finality.

"Yeah, thanks. I get it. It's just stupid."

"Chicken."

"I'm not *chicken*."

Bella began to cluck, tucking her hands under her armpits and thrusting her chin out in what was clearly meant to be a chicken-like motion. After letting her continue for about half a minute, I finally gave in.

"Fine! I'll cough. I'll answer your questions, and cough...whatever the hell it is you want me to do."

"Good!" She looked pleased as punch. "OK, Cullen, since your teeny little programmer brain clearly can't understand the rules, I'll let you ask the first question. Ask me anything—something you want to know about me. I cough out my answer. If you can't understand my answer, you get to ask another question that I must answer in Uncough. Then the asker has to answer the same question they just asked the askee. Then it's the askee's turn."

"Bella? Um...what's 'Uncough'?"

"*Edward*." She spoke my name like I was a three year old. "Keep up, please. *Uncough*. There are two languages for the purpose of this game. Cough, and Uncough. Uncough is what we speak every day."

"So...Uncough is *English*."

Rolling her eyes, she adopted an expression of martyred patience. "Yes, Edward. But so is Cough. It's just a matter of pronunciation. Cough is said while coughing. Uncough is said while not."

"OK, so I choose whether to answer the question in somewhat clear 'Cough', versus utterly unclear 'Cough', depending on whether I think that question is better or worse than a subsequent question I'll have to answer in 'Uncough', irregardless of my desire to answer said subsequent question?"

Without hesitation she turned and punched me in the arm. Hard.

I tried to yell, "Ouch!" but it came out as more of a snurfle, since I was laughing so hard. One of Bella's all-time pet peeves was people using "irregardless" instead of "regardless". I had used it on purpose, and pretty much got the reaction I expected.

"God, you're such a fucknugget. I swear, Cullen, you're going to understand very soon why we shouldn't be a couple. It just gives me access to more parts of your body to bruise."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, like you could take me, Swan. You're, what, eighty-three pounds soaking wet? I could easily fit your body in a thirty gallon trash bag, and wouldn't even have to double-bag you." I eyeballed her frame conspicuously. "I'm pretty sure you'd even fit in *my* trunk."

She turned, eyeing the rear of my vehicle thoughtfully. "Hmmm...you'd have to dismember me first."

"Yeah. I had to last time."

She snorted. "And I'm *not* eighty-three pounds, thank you very much. I broke the hundred mark in sixth grade, and haven't gotten any smaller, if you know what I mean."

"Should I make that my first question?"

"No!" She looked panicked. "Um...no. You should ask something more...interesting."

"OK, so I start?"

"Yes, Edward."

I sifted through the myriad of things I wanted to know about Bella. I knew an awful lot about her, but there were some pretty big holes. Not wanting to jump straight into the things my pervy little mind wanted to know, I sifted through the G-rated questions.

"Favorite band of all time."

She groaned. "*Booooring*."

"Just answer the damn question, woman."

"Fine." She ostentatiously prepared to cough, putting a fisted hand up against her mouth.  
"Coughthepolicecough."

"The Police?" I eyed her skeptically. "How old are you again?"

"Shut it, Cullen. Just answer the damn question," she mimicked.

"OK, fine." I felt really fucking stupid doing this, but what the hell, it was making her happy.  
"Coughkingsofleoncough."

She groaned. "Jesus, Cullen. At least I picked a *good* band. Can you say 'overrated'?"

"Hey, let's not get all judgey-pants there, Miss Dancing Queen."

Bella raised her thumbs together, pointing her index fingers out to form a "W", before continuing. "OK, my turn. What's your favorite band you don't *admit* to liking? Your super-secret music love?"

Oh shit. I had just given her grief for ABBA, but in all honesty my secret music love wasn't any better. But if I didn't answer clearly, I knew her follow-up question would be infinitely more painful. Groaning, I fessed up. ". "

"KC and the...*Disco*?" Her disbelief turned to unadulterated joy as the mock-quotient became clear. "You like *disco*?"

"No...not *all* disco. Just KC and the Sunshine Band. I like...a few songs."

"Which ones?"

"It's not your turn for a question. I believe you have yet to answer, then it's my turn again."

"Fine," she huffed, crossing her arms in a fake pout, before coughing out,  
"Coughdefleppardcough. But only the old stuff! Like, their first two albums!"

"You like the Lep?" I almost jumped out of my seat. "Oh my God, that's awesome. Fucking awesome. You're a closet hair-metalhead!"

"Shut it, Cullen. You couldn't possibly understand."

We continued asking questions over the next hour. I found out that while Bella claimed Happy Hour as her favorite social activity, it was actually drunken karaoke. She, in turn, discovered that my claim to Cullen family gatherings being my favorite was really a cover-up for a penchant for

monster truck rallies. Her *actual* favorite movie—not the one she claimed to like because it was artsy and 'interesting' was The Hangover. Mine was The Last Unicorn.

*Yeah, I know.*

Her first kiss was at seventeen. His name was Steve. Mine was at eight. Her name was Sophie. Bella immediately disliked Sophie, on the grounds that she was a poor example for me, being an "older woman". Sophie had been nine.

After about fifteen stupid questions, she finally hit one I had to object to.

"That's not fair!" I called her out. "You can't ask me a question you can't answer too!"

"I *can* answer it!"

"How?" I griped. "You don't *get* erections, so how can you tell me what age you got your first at?"

"Well, that's the answer. I haven't yet. But if I ever had gender reassignment surgery, I *could* get one, therefore, the potential still exists and the question is valid."

"No it's not."

"Oh, quit being such a whiney little baby and answer the question, Cullen."

"Fine. First one I noticed was at ten. It freaked me out. I thought I was broken. I went crying to my dad." My cheeks flushed at the memory of his reaction to my tears—barely concealed laughter and a somewhat condescending pat on the head. "He gave me 'the talk', and I can honestly say I left traumatized."

"Oh, baby, that's so sad." She affected an air of dismay and consolation, petting my cheek. "But...sweetie?..."

"Yes?"

"You didn't cough."

"*Jesus*, Bella..."

"Dems the rules, Edward."

"OK, fine. Coughtencough."

She looked satisfied, and gave her own non-answer to the question. When it came to my turn, I decided payback was going to be a bitch. Probably for both of us, but it was worth it.



"Subject of first masturbatory fantasy."

She didn't respond at first, a deep flush coloring her cheeks, as her eyes trained carefully on the floor of my car. Finally she spoke, quietly, a pained tone in her voice.

"I'm a *lady*, Edward. I don't do such things."

"Can it, Swan, and answer the question already."

"Fine. Coughhansonbrotherscough."

My jaw dropped—literally, popped open—at that. "Hanson? Seriously? Um...which one?"

Her response was at best a mumble. Utterly incomprehensible. Clearly an evasion tactic.

"*Bella*? Which one? Answer the question or you get The Uncough Question."

"You can't ask a second question."

"I'm not. I'm asking you to clarify your response to my first question as your initial answer was unclear."

"It wasn't *unclear*," she muttered. "I said *the Hanson brothers*."

Realization dawned. "*All* of them?" I asked, shocked.

"*Maybe*..." She sounded embarrassed. "I don't know..."

"Wow...Bella. You go, girl!"

She was beet red when she grumbled out, "Now you answer the damn question."

"Wait, wait, wait...I gotta ask...did you moan when you touched yourself? Did you just say 'Mmmmm...' or did you add the 'bop' at the end?" I laughed—loudly—while Bella smacked me on the arm.

"That's not funny. You're not supposed to make fun of the answers!"

"Firstly, you never said that was a rule. Secondly, you've officially lost the right to any teasing about my love of disco."

She pouted violently, but I was barely able to control my laughter.

"I thought you didn't *like* disco, it was just KC and his booty shakers," she grumped, and smacked me again.

"I lied!" I gasped, catching my breath from the laughter. "I love *all* disco! When I get a bigger house I'm going to put a disco ball up in the living room with a disco playlist going twenty-four seven. And have a carwash attached to the garage just so we can dance around on skates, wearing tiny shorts, squirting water on each other while Rose Royce colors the airwaves."

Bella stopped hitting me and grew instantly thoughtful, thumb and index finger resting on her chin as she contemplated...something.

"We'd need wigs."

I looked at her curiously.

"For the *afros*, Edward. As monkey-fuck hot as your hair is, brother-monkey-fuck hot it ain't. And you'll need to get lots of lamé."

Like always, spending time with Bella flew by, and before I knew it we were turning off of I-5 to head east on I-90 towards Mercer Island.

~oOo~

Pulling into my parents' house, affectionately called 'The Compound' thanks to the eight-foot-high solid concrete wall surrounding the house and grounds, Bella's face went through an array of expressions; Shock, dismay, surprise, excitement, anxiety, and then, upon seeing the garden my mother had hand-crafted over the years, joy.

"It's so pretty!" she exclaimed, a little breathless.

"I know," I agreed quietly.

Walking toward the house, we were assaulted by the high-pitched squeal of my mother giggling, followed by the lower-pitched tones of my father mumbling something to her. Her subsequent laughter echoed off the Spanish-tiled sunroom, behind the house.

"Mom, Dad, we're here," I called out, hoping to give them enough notice to appear decent when we came around the corner. Some shuffling and muffled exclamations told me the warning had been a good idea.

Turning the corner, Bella let out a gasp of delight as the full view of my mother's garden struck her. It was breathtaking. A classic English garden with an air of unplanned perfection rose up a slight slope, leveling off at the top where a small koi pond gurgled. Somehow my mother had managed to make an English garden and a Japanese koi pond work harmoniously. It was, indeed breathtaking.

The air was decidedly on the chilly side, so we greeted my parents, ignoring their ridiculous grins, and went inside. My mother shocked me by hugging Bella—a warmth she had not shown

any of my previous girlfriends. Dad was his usual affable self, though none of us failed to notice the surreptitious pinches he delivered to my mother's ass when he thought we weren't looking.

Settling into the spacious living room, Bella and I sat on one of the large overstuffed sofas, while my mother took a wing chair next to Bella.

"Where's Jasper?" I inquired of my mother, who was the keeper of all news bulletins.

"He'll be here in a bit. He said he had a stop to make. I think he's bringing a special friend."

I rolled my eyes. "Mother, how many times do I have to tell you, 'special friend' sounds like he's gay. Jasper is many things, but gay is not one of them. If he's bringing a girlfriend, just say so. Is it Alice?"

My mother pressed her lips together tightly—never a good sign—and paused a moment before speaking. "I don't know, dear. He hasn't told me a thing."

"Didn't you meet her at Rose and Em's wedding?"

She stopped, looking thoughtful. "Maybe later in the evening? We were..." She glanced at my father, a faint blush crawling up her neck, coloring her cheeks. "...occupied, most of the later evening. But I dimly recall meeting a gaggle of young women at some point."

"Well, Mother, it can't be laid at Jasper's feet that you were too drunk and horny to notice Alice when she was introduced to you."

Bella gasped, eyes widening in shock as she looked at me.

"Quite right, dear." My mother patted her arm. "Shocking lack of respect. Particularly from one so often drunk and horny himself."

My mother stood and left the room. Bella looked at me, the shock still written across her face. I winked at her.

"Welcome to my family."

~oOo~

An hour and two mimosas later, Bella and I were making out in the hallway, having snuck away from brunch preparations, when the front door flew open and a loud "We're heeeeeeere!" assaulted our ears.

"Jasper!" Bella and I said together. I removed her hand from my hand, which was firmly planted on her left boob, and she pulled her other hand from under my shirt. Tidying ourselves quickly we headed for the foyer, catching sight of Jasper walking in carrying something—

No, he was carrying *someone*. He was carrying Alice into the house.

My parents came in from the kitchen, Mom wiping her hands on her apron as she did. We had a cook, but Mom liked to pitch in, making food preparation a family affair regardless of the help.

Jasper set Alice down, her diminutive size emphasized by Jasper's height as they stood next to each other. For all their physical differences—he tall and fair, she petite and dark—they wore almost identical expressions. Grinning ear to ear, they both seemed utterly joyful.

Bella squeezed my hand as she took in the sight before her, a smile spreading across her own face, mirroring theirs. I could feel my own spreading similarly, the joy they brought to the room was infectious.

"Mom, Dad, I know you met Alice once before, but I think I need to re-introduce her to everyone." He looked down at the smiling, and as yet silent, woman by his side.

"Everyone, this is Alice." He grinned at her, the look echoed in her own face a moment later. "Alice Cullen. My wife."

The next moment was a maelstrom of sounds and emotions. Alice squealed and jumped up, throwing her arms around Jasper's neck; Jasper whispered something in her ear; my mother gasped, a look of horror overtaking her normally calm features; Bella let out a similar sound to my mother's, but hers was somehow happier; my dad dropped an uncharacteristic f-bomb; and I—well, honestly, I'm not sure what I did, but I found myself with my brother's arms wrapped around me, hugging him fiercely.

I knew two things then and there. My brother had never been happier; my mother would be beyond pissed.

~oOo~

Over brunch my brother told us the story of his whirlwind nuptials, leaving out—I was sure—many details. Probably a good idea given the fierce scowl etched on our mother's face.

In short, after leaving my place on Friday morning, Jasper had met with Alice as planned. They had their much anticipated talk. Bella had been right; Alice was seeing someone, but broke it off when she met Jasper and realized the connection they had. Their brunch date turned into a walk, then dinner and drinks, then more drinks, and then at some point they began a series of dares, each escalating in severity. One of the last landed the pair in Vegas sometime in the early hours of Saturday morning.

As the story unfolded my father listened with a studied calm while my mother, years of society training out the window, downed one mimosa after the other, each followed by a handful of bread—her much-loved carb-free diet out the window. But she said nothing. She merely listened, not acknowledging or responding, but at least listening.

Jasper, for his part, seemed certain of his feelings for Alice and determined to stand by his actions, but was also clearly hurt by our mother's reaction. Still, he kept going with his story. To hear Jasper tell it, Alice was the embodiment of female perfection. The outward expression of his hidden self. To put it in the cheesiest possible terms, she completed him.

As he told their story, she would add pieces in—sometimes finishing his sentences, sometimes providing a word he couldn't think of. He never had to ask. She knew, intuitively, what he needed, and provided it. When she took over, painting the picture of his proposal to her late Saturday afternoon, he did the same for her. As she paused, overcome with emotion, he reclaimed the storyteller role, allowing her the space she needed to recover herself.

"I knew she was it for me about ten minutes into brunch on Friday, but thought I must be crazy. I mean, who has ever heard of someone wanting to propose on their first date? And it wasn't even a real date! But I was haunted from that first hour by the thought that she might somehow get away."

Here Alice squeezed his hand, laying her head on his shoulder in comfort. My parents glanced at each other, a brief smile on my dad's face, an answering grimace on my mother's. Jasper frowned slightly, but continued.

"So, by the time we'd gotten some quality drinking in, I was a goner. Really. She's so amazing—" He stopped for a moment, gazing at her smiling face, his eyes filled with wonder. "—I was looking for an excuse really. I mean, shit, we were in Vegas, right?"

"Whose idea was it to go to Vegas?" I interrupted.

Jasper began to answer. "Well...it was my idea—"

"—But it was my fault," Alice concluded.

"Huh? 'Splain me," Bella added with her usual eloquence.

"Well, I was running out of dares to throw at Jasper, so I gave him a wide-open freebie. I dared him to do something that would surprise and shock me. We had just left Purple and were looking for somewhere less stodgy to go next, when Jasper hails a cab. He doesn't tell me where we're going—just whispers in the cabbie's ear and hands him some cash. Long story short, he kidnapped me and flew me to Vegas!" She laughed—loudly. "He won that dare. It surprised the hell out of me."

Jasper smiled at his wife again, running his hand slowly through her short hair, tucking a stray piece behind her ear before picking up the story.

"The next day we were in one of the casinos. I was still fighting with this urge to rush the hell out of our relationship and tell her I was fucking crazy in love with her. I had no—"

"Game face?" I threw in, raising an eyebrow in acknowledgement of the irony.

"Yeah," he grinned, "I was like you three days ago. So, anyway, there we were in the casino, and I'm walking past a bank of phones when I see one of those stupid machines—you know, the kind with the claw that grabs a toy?"

We all nodded—except my mother, who was busy killing a bread roll with her evil laser vision.

"Well, anyway, no idea why, I stick a dollar in the damn thing—did you know they cost a fucking dollar these days?—anyway, I stick a dollar in and win this cheap-ass little princess dress-up set. Had a little tiara, a wand—"

"Scepter," Alice corrected quietly.

"Yeah, a scepter, a plastic necklace, and a ring. I didn't even think about it, it just came to me. I pulled the ring out of the bag and got down on one knee. I told her I'd thought of my next dare."

"You *dared* her to marry you?" Bella asked, astonished and somewhat dismayed. "With a *toy ring*?"

"Well," Jasper flushed, "sort of. Yeah, but—"

"It was actually super sweet," Alice added, meeting Bella's shocked expression levelly. "He said 'It's my turn to come up with a dare, and since it's all I can think of—all I've been able to think of since I met you—here it is. I dare you to spend your life with me. To be my partner, my friend, my lover. Alice, all I can think of is that I never want to let you go. I don't want to ever know what it's like to be without you. But this dare is different, Alice. This dare comes with an out. You can say no. You can back out any time until you say 'I do'. I just hope like hell you don't.'"

Jasper and Alice both looked down at Alice's left hand, the gaudy plastic ring, complete with pink paste "stone" still on her ring finger.

Looking at my brother, at how incredibly happy he and Alice looked, at the expression on both their faces as they told their story, I knew he was right. Why the fuck not? If they both knew it was right, more power to them for taking the happiness they'd found and owning it. Bella had a distant, dreamy expression on her face, her eyes looking a little misty as she met Alice's gaze.

I smiled at Jasper, nodding in acknowledgement that he had done a good thing. His gaze dropped to the table, momentarily embarrassed. Then he looked up and kissed the top of his bride's head before continuing the story.

"Yeah, so, in short she said yes, we found a chapel, and did the deed—er...the wedding deed, that is..."

I laughed. "Yeah, spare us the *other* details, please."

"But Jasper," Bella spoke up, brow furrowed in confusion, "you texted Edward Saturday morning. None of that had happened yet. Why did you want us all here today?"

He chuckled. "Oh, that. Yeah, I wanted to say thanks for helping me out the other night, and to tell you you were right. I had no idea at the time it would be a wedding announcement."

At the mention of "wedding", my mother let out a tiny choking sound, but quickly drowned it in medicated orange juice. Jasper reached across the table, attempting to take her hand in a gesture of conciliation, or supplication, but she pulled hers away. His answering grimace was disheartening.

"Mom..." I began, but Jasper shook his head slightly at me. "Not now," he mouthed.

Alice, who had missed the exchange, began in her excited chipmunk voice, "Wait! You left out the best part, Jazz!"

I smiled, raising an eyebrow at him in silent question. He shrugged slightly and smiled back, man-speak for "The woman owns me, she can call me whatever the hell she wants."

"Best part?" Bella asked.

"Yeah. When he proposed I said yes, but I gave him a condition." She giggled, the sound turning to a full laugh when she saw his reaction. He was beet red and grimacing. "I told him I'd take up his dare and marry him, if he wore the rest of the princess set during the wedding!"

Bella and I laughed out loud, ending with her spluttering and coughing as orange juice went down the wrong pipe.

"Tell me you have pictures," I asked my new sister-in-law.

"Oh, hell yeah! He made a beautiful princess groom!"

We slowly enjoyed the rest of breakfast, sharing more of their story, trying to ignore the stony silence coming from my mother. I knew why she was upset, and honestly, she had reason. But as much as it upset her, it wasn't her life to live. Jasper was an adult and had a right to make his own decisions. Just as I had a right to support him in that decision. And support him I would, as he would have supported me were the situation reversed.

My dad, on the other hand, seemed to have a foot in each camp. He appeared happy for Jasper, if a bit reserved toward Alice. I'm sure he was having thoughts of pre-nups and trust funds, but was doing his best to stifle those and act happy for the couple—as much as he could without upsetting my mother.

As breakfast wound down and the plates were cleared, my dad finally spoke up, offering a gift both unexpected and priceless.

"Son," he said to Jasper, "give your mother time. She needs to process this, then she'll be fine, I promise. Let me tell you something I learned a long time ago. When true love knocks on your door, and you know it for what it is, take it. However, whenever, wherever you can, you take it. I

don't care how many naysayers or doubting Thomases surround you, you do what your heart tells you is right."

He reached over and took my mother's hand in his, their gazes meeting briefly, a smile crossing his face as she squeezed his hand in acknowledgement.

"You asked who wanted to propose on their first date? Well, *I* did. Not only did I want to, but I *did* propose—and she *accepted*—on our first date." He paused, letting that information sink in before turning to my mother with a grin. "I think it worked out OK for us, didn't it, Esme?"

~oOo~

We arrived back at Bella's apartment a few hours later, emotionally spent. While it wasn't *our* drama that had unfolded in front of the whole family, so many things made it feel very, very close to home. Our own budding relationship; the depth of our feelings for each other; the closeness between my brother and myself; and frankly, my own understanding of his instant and unbreakable attachment to this woman who was, for all intents and purposes, his other half.

Bella set her bag down on the floor next to the couch, before flopping down into it. She held out her hands, silently asking me to come sit with her. I lay back against Bella, loving the feel of her arms as they wrapped around me, holding me tight.

"I love you, you know," she said quietly, after a moment.

I smiled. Honestly, hearing that would never get old. "I think I do, finally, get that."

Her voice was quiet when she spoke. "You've been amazingly patient with me. Thank you."

A short laugh erupted from her before she added, "For a communication challenged, socially retarded geek, you somehow knew exactly how to deal with me, and my borderline psychotic father."

"Borderline?" I chuckled.

"Yeah, OK, certifiable. Both of us."

Sobering, I turned to face her, stroking her cheek. "Certifiable? Yes. Understandable? Yes. Love, what you went through scarred more than just you, and honestly, it's amazing we're where we are already." Chuckling quietly, I added, "Especially your dad and I."

Before I could say anything else of a smart-ass nature, Bella kissed me, her warm, soft lips pulling me in, slowly cutting off the rest of the world. Her tongue ran slowly along my bottom lip, and I opened my mouth, gasping at the reaction my body had to such a simple act.

Our kiss grew deeper, more frantic. It became increasingly more difficult to not touch her—but I had promised both of us, and was determined to stick to that promise, no matter how painful.



Luckily for me, she was equally aware of the deal, and remedied my lack of touching her almost immediately.

"Touch me," she whispered against my lips, her hand enclosing mine, guiding it up to her breast before resuming our kiss.

Her hand pressed harder against mine as our breath came more erratically. I knew how she wanted me to touch her, but I couldn't—wouldn't—take the initiative, no matter how much we both wanted it, without her explicit aid. That was our deal.

"I love you," she whispered.

"Me too," I answered, "so much."

"Show me."

Had I been able to speak, I would have said yes. As it was, I couldn't even nod. I wanted her so fucking badly all I could manage was a soft whimper as her lips found mine again.

Somehow she found the strength to pull away, taking my hand as she turned and walked toward the bedroom. Following behind her, my jeans feeling uncomfortably tight, I couldn't believe that this amazingly sexy, funny, smart woman was mine. She loved me. She wanted me. She was equally tortured, equally maddened by me, and was letting me see that.

*So. Fucking. Sexy.*

Walking into her bedroom, my eyes never left Bella.

Without hesitation she turned to face me, about six feet of space between us, and pulled her t-shirt over her head.

*Holy Victoria's Secret, Batman!*

I had seen Bella without her shirt on before, but never from any distance, and never so clearly. Shutting the door—just in case—I took a single step closer, reminding myself not to touch. My eyes never left her, roaming from her beautiful lips, slightly swollen and red from our kisses, to her flushed cheeks, wild hair, and then down to...gah! She was wearing a blue bra with white trim, her smooth flesh pushed up enticingly. Even through the bra I could see the hardened tips, the ones she loved for me to touch.

*Don't. Touch.*

Bella's face flushed deeper as I looked at her, and her arms started crossing over her chest, gaze beginning to rest on the floor. My staring was making her self-conscious.

"Bella." My voice sounded odd even to myself. "Bella, I can't...I can't *tell* you...But Bella, please don't be shy. It's *me*. It's just *me*. I love you."

Nodding once, she regained the courage that had gotten her this far, and ordered me to match her state of undress.

I've never taken my shirt off so quickly in my life.

Walking up to me, she ran her hands first up, then across my chest, starting on my abs, and ending on my shoulders, her eyes roaming over me as she chewed her bottom lip.

Women tended to like my chest for some reason—a girlfriend had once told me that girls loved swimmer's bodies. It meant nothing at the time, but now, with Bella, I cared a lot what she thought.

Leaning in, she kissed my chest, softly running her lips across my skin, hands caressing where her lips did not. My breathing became embarrassingly erratic. When her lips encircled my nipple, and her hot tongue flicked out, laving it firmly, I actually gasped, trying desperately not to clutch at her head to get her to do it again.

But she did anyway, then again, chuckling at my repeated response.

Stepping back, she shocked the hell out of me by beginning to unbutton her jeans, slowly extricating each round fastener from its hole, before sliding the entire article down her hips, then off her completely. Her panties were a matched set with the bra, sitting on her hips and just barely covering everything else.

Her body was in-fucking-sane. She was slim, but had beautiful curves, rounded in all the right places.

In my experience, most women look better before you actually see them undressed. The vision in your head is always better. Bella was the exception.

Cocking an eyebrow, she stood in front of me expectantly. "Well? Are you going to stand there and gawk at me all day, or are you going to drop trou too?"

Now it was my turn to get nervous. She had touched me—there—a few times now, but touching under the cover of clothing, or while, say, driving down a highway was one thing. Having her see me like this—fully exposed—was another, and slightly nerve-wracking. But she had been more than brave enough already. It was my turn.

Smiling nervously I began to remove my jeans, only to hear Bella chuckle before saying, "Edward, don't be shy. It's just *me*." Her face grew more serious then, voice deepening just a touch as she added, "I love you."

The truth of her words, the utter confidence she had about them, pushed all nervousness aside. We wanted each other. Nothing else mattered.

As I stood again, painfully erect and clothed in nothing but my boxer-briefs, she took me in as I had done her, slowly running her gaze over my entire form. I didn't fail to notice that her gaze lingered in particular areas longer than others, eyes widening at times, before moving on.

I wasn't paranoid about size, or anything *physical*. Truth is, for all my awkwardness and social retardation, I knew that I was fairly good looking and not *lacking*, physically. It wasn't about that. My shyness came specifically from being with Bella. She was so fucking important to me, that exposing myself to her felt like I was risking something.

She took my hands in hers, leading me back to the bed.

"Edward, are you OK with this?" she asked softly. "I know what you said last night, and you're right, we have to both feel comfortable."

Reaching for her face, I cupped her cheek in the palm of my hand before kissing her gently.

"I'm not sure what 'this' is, but yes, right now you can do whatever you want."

Her eyebrow shot up, amusement flitting across her face.

"Don't push it, Swan," I chuckled, kissing her again.

She turned us so my back was to the bed, and pushed me down onto it. When I was laying flat, she crawled cat-like up my body to straddle me.

I almost came right then and there. The view of her perfect tits, half covered by her long hair, her ass slightly raised as she crawled, and the prowling look in her eye were almost more than I could take.

"*Fuck, Bella,*" I breathed out, resuming my mental mantra about not touching.

She smiled, then her lips owned mine. Her body pressed down against me as we kissed, the warmth of her naked flesh warming me in more ways than one.

My hands stayed painfully motionless as she began to slowly grind against me, a sweetly torturous motion. I groaned in response, unable to stop myself before it came out. Then she began to move down my body, kissing my bare flesh as she slid slowly down. I wasn't sure what her plan was, but I was pretty sure anything headed in that direction was going to end with me embarrassing myself all too quickly.

"Bella," I choked out, "what are you doing?"

"Shhh...it's OK. I just want to see you."

As soon as she was low enough, she began to slowly remove my boxer-briefs, indicating for me to raise my hips, allowing her to pull them off completely. As soon as she had done so, she sat back, looking directly at...me. A slow, tentative hand moved out to touch me, and I twitched in response, holding in a groan at the sensation.

Looking at my face then, her eyes locked with mine for a moment before she said simply, "You're beautiful, Edward," then returned her gaze to more...interesting...parts of my anatomy.

Watching her fascination as she looked at me, stroked me, and explored me made me want to cry. I realized, too late, that she had never been...up close and personal...like this before. She was learning all of this for the first time. That's what was so amazing about her. With no experience worth mentioning, she was already sexier than any girl I'd ever known.

Then she just about sent me over the edge, when she leaned down and swiftly swirled her tongue around the head of my cock, tasting the pre-come that had gathered there.

My hands formed fists, clenching against the desire to hold on to her head, to guide her mouth onto me, to touch her in ways I hadn't even processed yet.

"*Jesus*, Bella, I can't...that's gonna make me..."

"OK, fine," she chuckled at me, almost too quiet to hear it, and crawled back up my body, returning to her position over me. Sitting up, weight resting rather strategically on my overexcited boy bits, she reached behind her and unclasped her bra. As it fell loose she caught it, watching my eyes grow wide as she slowly lowered it, revealing more of herself to me. Her breasts were perfect. Stunning. So utterly kissable.

"You want to touch me, don't you, Edward?" she asked seductively.

Swallowing, despite the sudden dryness in my throat, I had to stop myself from nodding.

"I want whatever you want, Bella. I can't do it without you, love."

She nodded then, and reached over to take my hand in hers, pulling it up to her breast. Cupping her hand behind mine, she placed my palm around her breast, squeezing. Her head rolled back a little, a tiny moan escaping her lips. Squeezing my hand harder, she positioned my forefinger and thumb around her nipple, rolling them so they teased the hard nub.

A louder moan escaped her at that. She kept one hand wrapped around my right hand, the other hand searching to find my left, repeating the same action once she had found it.

Bella was fucking glorious. Kneeling over me, holding my hands to her as she directed me, using my body to tease her own, her hips rolling slowly up and down mine, cheeks flushed with desire, eyes glazed and sexy.

Just as I was about to give her a warning about making me come, she leaned down, lifting her hips off of mine. Removing my right hand from her left breast she leaned forward, kissing me. After a moment she pulled away, murmuring, "I want your lips on me." With that she placed her breast in my face, resting her nipple on my lower lip.

Fuck. Me. Ded.

Without any instruction from me, my tongue snaked out, tasting the hard bud.

She moaned, hissing, "Yes!" before pressing herself harder into my mouth, asking for everything I wanted to do. My lips wrapped around her, and I heard myself groan as I tasted her—licking, sucking, teasing with my lips, making her writhe with my tongue.

Her right hand continued to squeeze mine, pinching and rolling the other nipple.

As she moaned, and writhed, torturing herself with my body, torturing me with hers, I was grateful that she was still wearing panties. The way our bodies were joined right now it would be so easy to just slip in...

*Stop! This time is for Bella.*

Then in a flash Bella was off me, pulling me with her as she rolled onto her back. Before I even recognized what she was doing, her panties were somehow on the floor next to the bed, with me laying half on top of her.

Not. Good.

It would be, I knew, too hard to keep this all about her, if I were on top. Bella pulled my head to hers, kissing me hard, mouths joined in a sloppy urgent kiss. Grabbing my hand again, she ran it down her breast, moaning against me as my fingers grazed her nipple. Then her hand continued south, passing over her firm abdomen, but not really slowing until it got to the crest of her pubic mound. Taking two of my fingers in hers, she ran them slowly down towards her clit, circling it softly, then more firmly. She moaned, loudly, at that, and I let out a hiss of sheer pleasure.

"Jesus, Bella, you're so wet."

Spreading her legs more, she then guided my fingers down, slowly exploring with them. I knew that this moment was key. She needed to guide everything here, memories of the last time I had touched this part of her echoing in my head.

She was clearly thinking the same thing, because she whispered against my mouth, "It's OK, Edward. Trust me, I *want* you inside me. I *really* want you inside me."

Hearing her say that almost made me lose it. How could she be so fucking sexy, and not have a clue what she's doing?

I moaned out loud with her as she guided my two fingers inside her, warmth enveloping them. Her fingers had been on mine, guiding them in, but she pulled them back now, preferring to use my palm to guide my fingers in and out of her.

She writhed against me as my fingers filled her, curling up slightly to find the small bud as she moved me. She cried out against my mouth then, clutching desperately at my hair with her free hand, increasing the pace of my hand moving inside her.

"Oh, God, Edward!" she cried out, then looked me straight in the eye. "I want your mouth on me. Please make me come with your mouth."

I thought through whether that worked with our rules, but decided that at the end of the day it was about what she wanted, and her maintaining control, and there was no arguing that she wanted this. Her face reflected everything I felt on the inside. The desperation to be close, to own each other, and to gain relief from the overwhelming lust for each other.

Moving down her body as gracefully as I could with one hand otherwise occupied, she kept a slightly slower pace on my palm as I settled down lower, coming face to face with...her. And she was beautiful. I watched in torturous fascination as my fingers sank deep inside of her with each thrust, glistening with her arousal. Her clit protruded slightly, swollen with need, just peeking out. My mouth watered to taste her, but my mind told me to go slowly. At least, it did until Bella's hand pressed down on the back of my head, encouraging me.

"*Please?*" she pleaded quietly.

My dick twitched then, and I knew, I just knew I wouldn't make it through this without coming. I was ready to come now. A single stroke and I'd be done.

Looking up at her, our eyes meeting, dark and frantic, I said quietly, "Please *what*, Bella?"

I shouldn't have done it, but I wanted to hear her say it. It was the one thing, with our rules, that I could do. She hesitated, then her need dismissed any shyness she had. "I want your mouth on my pussy, Edward. *Please.*"

I sank my mouth on her, as she continued to thrust my fingers in and out, teasing her. She was so tight it was a torment to not have my cock in her. My tongue swirled around her swollen clit, licking up her slit, circling the top, then back down again. I sucked her clit into my mouth, teasing the very tip with my tongue.

She cried out, moving her free hand from my head to her breast, which she began to squeeze as her hips rocked rhythmically against my face.

I picked up the speed just a little with my tongue, letting her set the pace of my hand. It only took about five more strokes with my tongue before her back arched up and she cried out, calling my name as she came, pulsing around my fingers, slowing against my tongue.

I was still for a moment, my face resting against her thigh, her hand holding onto mine, no longer inside her. I hadn't come yet, but was about to. I didn't know if it would be too weird to just let it happen then and there or—

"Edward? Lie down please."

I looked up at her, surprised she could talk already. I couldn't. At any rate, I did as she asked and came up to lie next to her. She pushed me onto my back, kissing me deeply before pulling away. She was breathing hard still.

"You taste like me," she said thoughtfully.

I laughed. "You're surprised?"

She shook her head, not laughing back. "No, but I want to taste like *you*." She then crawled down my body again, as she had done earlier, and only paused for a single breath before enveloping me with her mouth. She took me in deeply, warmth and moisture hugging my cock. I heard her moan, the vibration moving against the tip, and her mouth began to move on me, milking me, taking in as much of me as she could.

I couldn't take it. I had almost come a dozen times since we started, and most of those times she hadn't even been touching me. Her mouth, that was the sexiest thing I'd ever fucking seen. The idea of filling it with me, of her wanting to taste like me, put me over the edge, and I just had time to call out a warning before I came with a loud moan, pulsing into her, wave after wave of climax washing over me, thrumming through my entire body.

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## **Geek Love Chapter 22: In Which Edward Contemplates the Space-Time Continuum**

Six months later

Walking into the downstairs game room of my parent's house, it was impossible not to laugh at the scene before me.

Bella was sitting on the floor, legs crossed, her modified netbook propped open, typing furiously. I had helped her install OSX on her Dell mini netbook, and received a very special thank you for it.

*Don't remember the 'thank you'. Erections aren't a "family brunch" activity.*

Every few seconds Bella would look up at the giant TV screen thoughtfully, then return to her laptop, fingers flying over the keyboard.

Jasper lay sprawled on the couch, making comments presumably aimed at Bella. Some she would ask briefly about, some she merely nodded and dutifully noted in her document.

Alice lay on the other end of the sofa propped against a pile of throw pillows, feet in Jasper's lap. In her hands was an iPhone, turned landscape. She was engrossed in whatever was on the tiny screen, ignoring the larger one—which was impressive given the size, volume, and content.

Jasper took his eyes off the screen, looking at Bella. "Did you get the software?"

"Um...yeah, I got a trial of a few different ones. Right now I'm just working in Neo Office. I'll migrate it over later." She spoke without looking up or interrupting her flying digits.

"OK. We need to talk deadlines and stuff soon."

"Yeah, and you need to do research on locations and talent. We need to keep in mind what's feasible—don't want to break any laws." She waggled her eyebrows at Jasper, making him laugh.

"Locations huh? What about—"

"Jasper, I only have two rules. No farms, and no 'little people'."

"What? God, woman, you ruin all my dreams. How does Edward put up with you?"

Bella flipped Jasper the bird. "Talk to the hand. Oh, wait, the rest are busy, just talk to this one finger."

I sat behind Bella, wrapping my arms around her waist, enveloping her hips in my thighs. She reached around and squeezed me in brief acknowledgement, still typing with the other hand. Having Bella in my arms always felt like I was finally whole. I could never get enough.

*Jesus, Cullen, there you go sounding like you forgot your balls again. Maybe Oprah could hire you to work for her as a 'hugger', giving out hugs to her studio audience. Or tiny baby animals.*

Ignoring my inner monologue, and snuggled up to Bella. Leaning my chin on her shoulder, I read her notes—chunks of scene descriptions interspersed with random dialogue ideas. It was fucking *awesome*. Some of it was so funny I laughed hard enough to force Bella to stop typing for a moment, earning a glare from her.

"Cullen, if you can't stand the heat get the fuck out of my screenplay."

Jasper's eyes tore away from the TV, and he leveled Bella with a glare, one eyebrow raised. "Your screenplay? What the fuck am I, chopped monkey nuts?"

She laughed. "Sorry Jasper, *our* screenplay. You know this is mostly yours. I'm just your glorified secretary slash color commentary."



Yes, Jasper and Bella were writing a porn screenplay.

Active research was ongoing on my dad's 55-inch 1080P screen.

None of this surprised anyone in the house. What *did* surprise me was Alice's lack of attention. We had all gotten to know the tiny spitfire of a girl who had taken my brother's heart. She was funny, sweet, smart, fearless, and devoted. Everything I could want for my brother. She was also a porn freak. Again, everything I could want for my brother.

So, her ignoring the giant bukkake scene in front of her was more than a little out of character.

"Alice?" I spoke quietly, trying not to interrupt Bella's notations.

"Mmmm?" She didn't even look up. Her right thumb scrolled slowly on the screen, eyes darting almost imperceptibly left to right as she read whatever it was, then quickly tapped out some text.

"Alice, didn't you pick this movie?"

"Mmmm. Yeah. I guess." Again, she hadn't even looked up.

"Alice?" I chuckled a little, knowing I sounded like a four-year-old.

"*What?*" She still didn't look up, and was clearly less amused than I.

"Whatchya *reeeadin*?" I sing-songed.

Now she looked up, tilting the screen toward to back of the sofa—further away from my eyes—as if I could see it anyway.

"Oh, um, nothing. It's something for...work."

"Uh-huh. Work."

Fast as an adder strike—and equally silent—Jasper's hand darted out, snatched the iPhone from Alice's unsuspecting grip, and he leaped over the back of the couch to safety, giggling.

Surprisingly quickly, she followed, lunging at him. "Jazz, you fucking—"

"Holy shit!" he interrupted, eyes glued to the phone's screen as he warded off Alice's attack with one arm, holding tight to the iPhone with the other. "Alice, is she really—"

"*Shut up*, Jazz! You weren't supposed to see that. Now keep your freakin' pie-hole shut."

"But—"

"Shut. Up."

"But—"

"Shhh..."

"But—"

"Do you ever want to have sex again?"

He sighed, handing the phone back to Alice. "OK, fine."

"Good boy."

As curious as I was, I left it alone. She may be tiny, but Jasper's wife was ferocious. I'd been on the receiving end of her playful punches before, and they left bruises. Big ones.

Bella, however, hadn't looked up from her screenplay. She was chewing thoughtfully on her bottom lip as she typed a word, backspaced over it, and then typed another. I loved how seriously she took her work—whether it was at her actual job, or writing a porn screenplay with my brother. The woman was intense, serious, dedicated, and yet also playful, funny, and...let's face it...she was just perfect.

At least she was until she reached behind her and casually took my iPhone from its home on my belt.

No! No-no-no-no-no!

Snatching it back from her, I reacted much more quickly than I had intended to. I knew instantly that had been a mistake. It looked awfully suspicious.

"Edward?" she asked, confused, "What's up? I just wanted to check something online—"

"Can't you use your netbook? Where's *your* phone?"

I knew my defensiveness was only making things worse, but I really needed her to not see...things.

"I left mine upstairs in my purse, and my netbook isn't on your parent's wireless network since you locked the security down by MAC address."

"Oh." Relieved to have the distraction from my admittedly odd behavior, I grabbed her netbook, beginning to retrieve the MAC address so I could add it to my parent's wireless network. "Let's fix that."

Bella let me, but didn't help me. She just sat and watched, her expression growing more suspicious by the second.

Normally this wouldn't have aroused any suspicions from my girlfriend—geeks are, by nature, weird about their toys. However when you add in the times I'd had to sneak off to an empty office to take calls at work, quickly close my browser window when she approached, or hold off checking my voicemail till she wasn't nearby, the woman was starting to suspect that I was—

"Edward, are you hiding something?"

*Shit. Shitshitshitshit.*

"No, Bella, of course not." I took her hand, looking into her eyes so she could see the truth there. I wasn't hiding anything...*bad*...after all. But I knew that's what she was thinking. We may be utterly in love, and deliriously happy together, but she was still a girlfriend, and they tend to get suspicious when their boyfriends lie. Particularly when they're as bad at it as I am.

"Bru-u-nch!" my mom's voice called down the stairs.

Grateful for the distraction, I jumped up, suddenly eager to eat—or rather, to get Bella thinking about something else. "Come on your pornverts, brunch is ready."

No one moved but me. Jasper was engrossed in the video again, Alice was frantically texting someone, and Bella was watching me closely. Sighing, I pulled out my secret weapon.

"We have mimosas."

It was as if I had not one, but *both* keys to the nuclear launch device, and had used them to activate The Big Red Button, launching Jasper and Alice up the stairs.

Bella stood much more slowly, but seemed less suspicious as she walked towards the stairs. I breathed a sigh of relief at the close call and followed her up.

Reaching the main floor, the sound of more people arriving made everyone turn toward the front door. Suddenly Alice broke into a squeal, and dashed forward, launching herself at my newly arrived sister, who embraced her, laughing.

I had seen Emmett and Rosalie a handful of times since they returned from their honeymoon. Marriage had changed Rosalie a lot. Well...honestly I wasn't sure if it was marriage or the relaxing influence of a honeymoon followed by unemployment. Her epic bitchcount was epic no more, coming in at a mere 3.4 on the Bitch-o-Meter. Compared to her previous high score of 9.7, this was a vast improvement.

As for my new brother in law, Emmett had a perpetual grin on his face—probably from the daily sex demanded of him by his "trying to conceive" wife.

In fact, that particular grin was common in my family these days. There wasn't a man in the room who didn't wear a certain smug satisfaction. I tried very hard not to think about the fact that this included my father. As I'm sure he tried not to think about it including me.

Things had gone very well with Bella over the past six months. We had grown, as a couple, and all squickies were well and truly banished.

It had taken some time for things to be *easy* between us. In fact, the first time we actually had sex we almost gave up.

*Almost.*

After Jasper and Alice's surprise return from their first "date", my mother had pulled together an amazing wedding reception in record time. The couple had celebrated with two hundred of their closest friends and family about three weeks after their surprise Vegas nuptials.

My mother had remained upset about Jasper and Alice's elopement exactly as long as it took for them to acquiesce to her throwing them a huge-ass party.

As opposed to a huge *ass-party*, which was something Jasper attended a few years back. But I digress.

Guilt is a powerful force, and my mother used it at every turn—reminding Jasper that she should get her way in all things party-related, as she had been denied the opportunity to help plan his wedding.

As with all projects my mother lavished her attention upon, it was spectacular, and went off without a hitch. Bella and I arrived at the Cullen Compound in our formal evening attire, greeted by valets, the bride and groom, and the happy hosts. There was lots of food, copious quantities of alcohol, and cake. There was a traditional wedding cake, and a groom's cake. The latter really took the...cake.

*Groan.*

Emmett, recently returned from his honeymoon, had accompanied Alice, Bella, and me to choose Jasper's groom cake. There was only one place to go to find a cake for Jasper—The Erotic Bakery on 45th. Where else could you buy a cake with two naked men whipping each other, sporting proportionately gargantuan marzipan dongs? Or a platter of pierced nipple cupcakes?

The cake Jasper had the privilege of cutting in front of two hundred people stood about two feet tall, and was a sculpture of a naked woman—entirely anatomically correct—whose torso and head were actually formed from a huge penis.

It was a dick with a face and boobs...and a vagina. Yes, a dick with its own vagina. I theorized this contradiction of nature might create a fissure in the space-time continuum, or possibly lead to the discovery of cold fusion, but Alice assured me that such things had existed in Thailand for centuries, available to anyone for the right price.

I did not ask for details.

After the cutting of the cake followed by much hilarity, celebration, drinking, and only two accidental submersions in the koi pond, the evening was declared a success, and my beautiful girlfriend asked me to take her home.

In the weeks following our trip out to Forks, Bella had slowly transformed. She almost glowed with contentment as the pressure she had been putting on herself slowly left. Our relationship was solid, we were in love, and her dad and I had made peace.

We both knew she was still worried about our final physical step, but honestly it didn't concern me in the least. It would happen when the time was right, and I felt no rush for it. The steps we had taken were more than I'd expected. I knew the rest would come with time.

The night of Jasper and Alice's party, she made it clear that time had come.

Returning to my apartment after the festivities, Bella led me to bedroom. We slowly helped each other out of our clothes, until we stood face to face, wearing nothing but our underwear—though in her case that happened to be an amazingly tantalizing strapless bustier and matching panties.

I would have been the happiest man on the planet just kissing her for the entire night. Holding Bella in my arms was the best feeling I'd ever had. We fit together *just so*, and I never failed to smile when she wrapped her arms around me, pulling me in.

She told me she loved me often, but it was unnecessary. It was in everything she did. Every time we slept in the same bed, every time she asked me to touch her, every time she let me see her tears, I heard it loud and clear. She was trusting me with her pain, trusting that I would see she was broken and want her anyway. I didn't see it that way, but I knew she did.

But this night, the night we celebrated the addition of Alice to our family, Bella decided it was time to put her demons to rest for good. She led me to the bed, her hair, newly released from its pins, flowed over her shoulders and onto me as she pushed me onto my back and crawled up my body. The "don't touch" rule was still technically in effect, but was not strictly enforced for tried and true activities.

Like playing with Bella's fantastic boobies.

I was now free to do that at any time, and I took full advantage, much to both of our amusement. She thought it was hilarious that I liked to just keep my hand there while we watched movies, or sometimes even while we ate breakfast. I thought it was hilarious that she didn't realize they were basically an "on" switch for her, and almost every time I touched them, we ended up getting each other off.

As she straddled me, leaning in to initiate a deep kiss, my hands drifted up her sides before cupping her soft flesh. She moaned in my mouth, pressing against me. I loved her responding to me like this. I had spent so many months—years almost—dreaming of this woman, imagining her just like this, only the reality was so much better than any fantasy.

We kissed and touched, exploring each other. She took my bottom lip between her teeth, biting gently, before caressing it with her tongue. Our eyes met as we kissed, my need to stay connected with her, to make sure she was OK, always paramount. She pulled away for a moment, smiling.

"I love you," she whispered.

"So much," I whispered back.

We kissed, caressed, and explored more, her hands wandering across my chest, shoulders, and arms, occasionally running her hands through my hair. As much as she teased me about it being permanently messy, she always made sure it was. I chuckled at the idea that she might have a messy hair fetish.

Thanks to Jasper I've heard of weirder things, that's for sure.

As my hand traveled over her covered breast, grazing her nipple, Bella whimpered against me, pressing her hips hard against mine in response. I continued to tease her as she turned, lying on her back pulling me on top of her. This was something relatively new. I had conspired for her to always be on top when we were close, or at least side-by-side, figuring it gave her more control. But lately she had wanted to be under me, and honestly, I liked it. A lot. Seeing her below me, eyes bright, cheeks flushed with color, lips swollen and red from our kisses, I had never wanted anything more in my life.

And she was mine.

As I was hers. At least I hoped so, since she was taking off my boxer briefs.

Resting my weight on one elbow, I kissed her deeply while helping her remove my clothing. I let out a gasp as her hand found me—only partly because it was really freakin' cold—and heard her breath speed up as my mouth found her nipple, deftly freeing it from its confines with my teeth.

She gasped loudly as my tongue teased her. Her thighs wrapped around my hips, and pulled me close. It was then I realized that she had also removed her own panties.

"Bella," I hissed. "Careful."

"Of what?" she whispered back, chuckling a little. "Accidentally having sex?" Then her expression grew more serious, and she added, "I want to, Edward."

"Now?" We hadn't discussed it, and as much as I wanted it, I was concerned for how it might turn out. The last thing I wanted was to upset her.

"Are you sure?"

Our eyes met, and I could see no reservation there—nothing but desire and love.

"Yes, Edward, now." She reached a hand between us, stroking me as she whispered, "I want to feel what it's like to have you inside me."

I reached for the nightstand to grab a condom from my "whenever the time comes" stash I had recently purchased. I knew Bella had been on the pill for years to regulate her cycle, but condoms were habit. I'd never had sex without one.

Bella's hand stopped me as I was reaching in to the drawer.

"Edward...?"

The tone of her voice caught me by surprise. She sounded shy, almost embarrassed. I turned to see her face matched her tone exactly.

"What is it, Love?"

"Can we...not...use one of those? I...I...want to feel *you* inside me."

My first instinct was to tell her we needed to use one, but then it hit me. If I had my way, this was the only woman I would be close to...for the rest of my life. I could shed the one barrier I had always kept; could be closer to Bella than I ever had been to another woman. This would be a first for both of us, though in different ways.

Slowly I pushed the drawer closed and lowered my face so our foreheads touched. Resting there a moment, I let everything pour over me. I was scared of screwing it up—of rushing her, or frightening her. I was worried about how much I wanted this. I wanted it to last, but the mere *idea* of being inside Bella, let alone unprotected, almost sent me over the edge. But mostly, I wanted—no *needed*—Bella to be OK.

"I think you should be on top," I whispered, kissing the corner of her mouth, my hand drifting slowly over her many intriguing curves.

She shook her head, placing her hands on either side of my head to move me back, meeting my gaze. "Please, Edward? Can we be just...like this?"

"I'm afraid you won't feel in control like this, sweetheart."

"I'll tell you if I get scared. I promise. I just want it to be...to be...like I'd always imagined." She turned away shyly, her cheeks burning redder.

I realized then that she was asking me to fulfill her fantasy, and smiled, loving the idea that she had thought about us like that too.

"Anything," I said sincerely. I would give her anything.

Our hands and mouths continued touching, exploring, my fingers somehow finding themselves teasing between her legs as my mouth found her nipple. Her breathing sped up, and I could tell she was getting close. She needed to be as ready as possible—as relaxed as possible—for this to happen.

"Edward," she moaned. "Edward, please..."

"No," I whispered back in her ear. "You have to do it."

Her hand found its way between us; found me, guiding me to her. The moment I touched her I could tell she was ready—physically at least. As she pulled me into her, grabbing my hips with her thighs, slowly joining us, she released a sigh. Inch by inch she pulled me in, until I was fully seated within her.

It was almost too much for me. She felt so...perfect. I hadn't expected for her to take me all the way in like that. It felt too fucking good. I had never experienced this...intimacy...before, and it threatened to do me in before we even got started.

*Baby bunnies bathed in...*

Luckily for me, Bella didn't move. She kept her legs locked around me in an iron grip. I had been watching her face closely, looking for any sign of discomfort. Our eyes met, and she smiled at me, a tiny, sweet smile. Then she closed her eyes, and after a moment, a large tear fell down the side of her cheek.

Panicked, I began to pull away, but she held me close, gripping me firmly.

"Stay," she whispered the command.

"Bella, you're upset! I knew this wasn't—"

"Edward," she said quietly, "just hold me for a minute, please?" She pulled my face to hers, looking into my eyes. The hurt I expected to find wasn't there. At a loss for what to do, I did as she bade, and held her tight, tucking my face into her neck. We were still joined, her legs holding me tightly.

"We can stop," I whispered, weaving my hand through the hair at her temple. "We can always stop."

"That's true. We could stop." She spoke in a low, almost sad voice. "We could stop, and try again another time."

"Of course, Bella. Is that what you want?"



She didn't loosen her grip on me at all. "I don't want to go backwards, Edward," she whispered. "I don't want to fail at this. But...*fuck*...I'm *scared*." Her voice broke a little as she said it. "I don't know what to do."

"Baby," I pulled my head back, smiling at her, "Bella, you've already *done* it. We're together." I indicated the space—or lack of space—between us. "You don't need to prove *anything*. We did it. There's no failure here."

She sighed. "It's not...it's not what I wanted though, Edward. I didn't picture us stopping here." Her voice broke again. "I wanted...more."

"Do you still want more? Or do you want to try some other time? Or never? It's your call, sweetheart."

"I want more," she whispered.

I smiled again, brushing the hair from her temple, kissing the tip of her nose. "OK, then you'll need to unlock me. Whenever you're ready."

After a few moments she took my hand from her face, and lowered to her breast, just as she had done the first few times I touched her there. Slowly I began to touch her, tease her, and get her relaxed again. I kissed her, touched her, and stroked her until she began to squirm against me. Then slowly, her legs relaxed, and she began to move against me. I tried hard not to move; to let her set the pace.

"Oh." She let out a tiny sound as she experimentally pushed against me once, then twice.

Resting my weight on one elbow, I let my mouth fall to her breast, freeing the other hand to move south, touching her carefully as she moved underneath me. Her movements were driving me crazy, but I was so concerned for her I knew I could ignore the urge if I needed to.

She clutched at my hair, pressing me harder against her breast as she moved against me more quickly. It was all I could do not to move with her. She felt so fucking amazing.

Suddenly she pulled my head off her breast and looked me directly in the eye.

"Edward, please do this *with* me? I need this to be both of us."

I knew then what she meant. No matter how much we agreed her taking the lead was a good idea, ultimately we both had to be equal partners. She wasn't feeling my presence in this act. I threw our "rules" out the window, and kissed her—hard.

"Tell me if—"

"I will," she panted.

With that I joined her, meeting her tiny thrusts with my own, trying to match her pace. My hand stayed between us, doing what I knew from experience worked for her. With each thrust she relaxed. With each movement she became freer.

"Oh, God! Edward...that's...oh shit!" Eloquent as ever, Bella was letting me know in no uncertain terms that we had broken new ground.

For my part, I was just trying not to...well, *you* know.

Bella grabbed my face and pulled me down for a kiss, frantically clutching at me, kissing me between mumbled declarations of love, until she cried out, body shaking, and threw her head back in a gesture I had gotten to know very well in the recent past. The sight of her climaxing beneath me, knowing we were finally truly together, sent me over the edge, and I came, clutching at her, desperate to be as close as I could to Bella.

~oOo~

"Baby brother!" Rosalie called out to me, walking into the foyer, arm around Alice. She looked as relaxed and happy as she had the last few times I'd seen her. Walking over, she gave first me, then Bella a hug.

I smiled, remembering their first meeting on Rose's wedding day, when she had shown such stellar cuntitude towards my girlfriend. But Rose was someone who knew when she was wrong, and would apologize...eventually. With Bella she made an extra effort, and they had coffee together right after Rose returned from her honeymoon. By the end of that day they were comfortable together, if not fast friends.

Alice, however, had become the girlfriend Bella had never had. They bonded as quickly as Jasper and Bella had, and the four of us spent a lot of time together. Alice and Emmett had definitely become part of the family, and everything seemed to be turning out great. Only one thing was missing—

"Edward dear, can I see you for a moment?" My mother walked into entry of the dining room as the whole group was getting seated, waving to me.

Bella looked up curiously as I abandoned my seat, telling her I'd return shortly. I shrugged in a "who the hell knows" gesture, but Bella merely narrowed her eyes at me.

I really *do* suck at lying. Not even my *shoulders* can pull it off.

Mom led me up the stairs to her massive master bedroom, closing the door behind her.

"Do you have it?" I asked anxiously.

She scoffed. "Do I have it? Pfffft...I'm your mother, and a society lady. If there's anything I know how to handle, it's this."

I smiled, and pulled her into a quick hug. "Thanks Mom. You're fucking awesome."

She handed me the box, opening it before placing it in my palm. I almost had the breath knocked out of me. It was perfect. Absolutely perfect.

*God, do I need to revisit that whole "where's my vagina" thing again?*

"Are you sure you're OK with this, Mom?" I looked up to see her face, and knew she was more than OK with it. Her eyes shone, and her smile was utterly genuine.

"Grandma would have be very, very happy, Edward."

"I hope so. I hope *Bella* is, too. Thank God this is almost over, she's starting to get suspicious."

My mother chuckled, shaking her head briefly. Do you remember my surprise fortieth birthday party?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you know I hired a private detective to tail your father a few days before that, because I thought he was having an affair? He'd been acting so cagey—hiding things, sneaking off to make phone calls—I couldn't think what else it might be."

I looked up, shocked. "You thought Dad was cheating on you? *Jesus*, Mom. You don't think Bella thinks—"

"Whatever she thinks, son, it's not going to be an issue in just a few minutes, right?"

I smiled. She was right. It would all be over soon.

Patting my hand briefly, she turned to leave the room. "Come down when you're ready, Edward."

Forgetting to acknowledge her, I stared at the small box in my hand, running over in my mind what I had planned. Squaring my shoulders I tucked the box into my hoodie pocket and left the room.

My hoodie, it should be noted, was a zombie hoodie, complete with "How to Kill a Zombie" instructional. There was no denying the influence Bella was having on my life, right down to my wardrobe.

Coming back down the stairs, I heard a loud kafuffle in the dining room. A happy cacophony involving hugs, tears, and spilled orange juice. The sound wasn't unexpected, but the timing was. Curious I peeked my head in to see everyone crowding around Rosalie and Emmett, hugging and smiling.

Bella saw me and mouthed, "Pregnant."

My sister was pregnant. I was going to be an uncle! "Holy fuck!" I blurted out, effectively silencing the room. Emmett playfully covered the baby's "ears" by putting his hands on either side of Rose's still-flat belly, and scolded me for my language around his son.

In a flash I was around the table, arms wrapped around my sister. "Congratulations sis," I said quietly. This was all she had wanted, and she was living her dream. I couldn't be happier for her. "And...um...nice work, Emmett!" I high-fived my brother in law, making my dad laugh and my mother blush.

Looking at Alice, I asked, "Is that what all the stealth-ninja texting was about?"

She nodded enthusiastically, grin splitting her face.

Sitting back down to brunch, I ate in silence, listening to my family talk about the first grandbaby. Bella watched me, the curious look back.

"What did your mother want?" she asked, chewing a piece of French toast as she waited for my answer.

"Oh, um...nothing. She needed help moving something in her room."

It was *sort of* true. I moved the little box *out* of the room...

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," she muttered grumpily, returning her gaze to the plate in front of her. It was stacked Bella-style, with French toast, pancakes, eggs, bacon, sausage, hash browns, and something creamy-looking that I couldn't even identify. She had an array of beverages in front of her also, including mimosa, milk, water, and coffee.

"*Good thing I have money,*" I thought, "*that woman's gonna be expensive to feed!*"

Just then my father stood, tapping his mimosa glass gently with a butter knife to shut everyone up. With my family something closer to a starter pistol is more effective, but in this case it worked well enough.

Raising his glass in a toast, Dad spoke about family and how happy he had been to welcome Emmett and Alice to the Cullen clan. He went on to say that while this new baby was a shock because clearly he was "far too young" to be a grandfather, he was overjoyed at the news.

Everyone raised a toast to the new family, tipping their mimosas back enthusiastically in celebration. It took approximately ninety seconds for my mother to turn to Jasper and Alice and ask, "So, when will you two be bringing a new member to the family?"

Jasper, not expecting that, choked on his mimosa, earning a hearty back pounding from Emmett. Alice merely stared unblinking at my mother, her mouth slightly agape, fork mid-air.

I chuckled, knowing she was just fucking with them. They apparently didn't get the joke. It was, however, a perfect introduction for me.

"I'd like to be next," I chimed in, probably louder than necessary. All eyes flashed to me, including Bella's. Everyone else wore a look of curiosity; hers bore an expression bordering on sheer terror.

"A...baby?" she squeaked, all color draining from her face.

I laughed, shaking my head. "No, Bella, *you*."

I stood then, pulling the box from my pocket, and pushed my chair out of the way. Kneeling in front of Bella, who by now was covering her hands with her mouth, eyes shockingly wide, I began to speak. Everything I had thought to say, even jotted down in notes, was gone. I couldn't remember a bit of it, so I just started talking.

"Bella, the two years I've known you have been the happiest of my life. I kick myself every single day when I think about how much time I wasted looking for the balls to ask you out. I don't ever want to waste time like that again. I want to make a life with you, have a family with you, and—"

"Yes!" Bella hollered, interrupting me. "Fuck, yes!"

She then launched herself off her chair and onto me, knocking us both to the floor. Her legs straddled me as she kissed me fervently.

"Awesome! Looks like they're gonna make the next grandbaby right now!" Emmett chimed in.

We broke apart, laughing, and Bella sat up, allowing me to regain just a little of my dignity. The family crowded around, trying to get a view of us on the floor.

"So *that's* what all the Spy vs. Spy lying to me was about?"

"Yes," I replied, grateful to finally be free of my secret burden. "Jesus jam on toast woman, you're hard to lie to."

"You were lying about the...wait, I didn't imagine that did I? There was a *shiny*, right? I *saw* a *shiny*." Bella's eyes darted around the floor. Reaching over I grabbed the small box from under the table, it having fled to safety when Bella attacked me.

I laughed again, ecstatic she had said yes. I knew she would marry me eventually, but had thought possibly she would resist the first few times I asked.

"Yes, Bella. It was my grandmother's...um...*shiny*. And now it's yours."

Holding the box up for her, she grew sober as she looked at the ring. My mother had worked carefully with the jeweler to restore it, keeping the original setting and stone, but updating and reinforcing the band.

I feared for a moment that Bella didn't like it, but then she held out her visibly shaking left hand for me, whispering, "It's perfect."

Still sitting on the floor, I placed the ring on her finger and kissed it gently, pulling Bella in for a hug. She began to cry, gently at first, escalating to a full-fledged blubber.

"It's OK, Bella," Emmett called out, "I cried at first too. But you get used to them."

Bella and I laughed together, and I wiped her eyes before we climbed up off the floor, to the general applause and congratulations of my family.

*Our family.*

Cloud nine wasn't good enough for how I felt right then. I was flying on cloud eleven—because in my world it always goes to eleven.

As we sat down to resume the oft-interrupted brunch, my mother brought Bella a much-needed tissue, hugging her tightly before taking her place at the table again. Bella looked down at her plate of food, a lost expression on her face.

Laughing, I teased her, "You gonna be OK with that? I'm worried you might start crying again and get snot all over your pancakes."

"Oh, shut it, Cullen!" She rolled her eyes in my direction. "This coming from a man who said 'balls' when he proposed to me."

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**The End**

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