

CHAPTER SEVEN

Masquerade

The following morning Edward was waiting for me outside my office. I was getting better at acting normal around him. At least, I didn't feel stunned every time I ran into him now.

"Are you late to work every day?" he asked.

"Good morning," I said. "And yes."

He followed me inside, closing the door behind us.

"How was La Push? Did you learning anything interesting?"

"Yeah, we did, actually." And then I told him the story about the bear legend that Mike shared, and how the black bears had been assembling out at La Push. He seemed quite interested, but he didn't ask any questions. Then he told me that Mercy Brown had scheduled a date for Port Angeles. We talked about her new album for awhile, and then before I realized it, half an hour had gone by as we gabbed and Edward hadn't been to class yet.

"Did you come down here for any reason in particular?" I asked him. "You've missed most of first period."

"Have I?" he said. "I suppose I'll be needing a pass then."

"Right," I said, and started to write one out. I looked up at him and gave him a pointed look.

"What?" he asked.

"Why did you come down here, anyway?"

"To give you this," he said, and pulled a flier out of his pocket for Mercy's show. "So you can put it in your calendar."

I opened up my calendar and marked down the date and could feel him watching me as I did, could feel it like a breeze through the window on the back of my neck. I shuddered and realized I was actually nervous about something. About him.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, and recovered myself. I gave him a smile. "Everything is just fine."

But it wasn't. And I don't think he believed me, but he left without discussion.

Hardly ten seconds later there was a knock at my door and I thought—hoped—he'd come back. But instead Red stuck his head in.

"You were meeting with the Cullen kid?" he asked. My heart sped up a little more.

"Yeah," I said.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well what?"

"What do you think? Have you found anything else out about the family?"

"Not really," I said.

"Those kids make me nervous," Red said. "Keep an eye on them."

"Right."

I would be keeping an eye on that one, anyway. He could count on it.

Saturday night came but I hadn't heard from Jake all week. I'd expected as much, but was still annoyed at him for making such a big show like we were actually dating when nothing could be farther from the truth. What really pissed me off was that he could date me if he was interested. But he wasn't. I sent him a text Saturday evening.

"so you're picking me up, right?"

"omg. sorta forgot."

"..."

"i'm pretty wasted."

"already?"

"watching the game"

"you totally owe me."

"i know, I suck. i'm really sorry. tomorrow?"

"i have plans."

Which was a lie, but fuck him anyway. I didn't want him thinking I was sitting around all weekend waiting for him to decide he had time for me. I wasn't. I was sitting around all weekend stressing about Edward Cullen.

Having Edward in Thoreau club should have been a good thing. As I got to know him, the familiarity should have ripped big gaping holes in my fantastic perception of him. I was clearly in the position of advisor, and this should have helped me view him more as a student—a kid.

But it wasn't working. He was too different from the other kids. Not simply better looking or better dressed or more mature, though he was those things too. He was quiet and attentive. He opened doors and pulled out chairs for the girls when they came in the room. He didn't interrupt people when they were talking. When Mike goaded him into conflict, he avoided it like a sage politician. Whenever he spoke, it was to the point.

And though Mike continued to be rude to him, Edward did become almost friendly with Erik, Angela, Paige and Jessica. They did things like stop in the halls to chat between classes and say hello in the morning. In this sense, Edward's involvement in the Thoreau club had been a great success. He was no longer the lonely emo boy, and this I gladly reported back to Red.

But it didn't mean anything in terms of his mystery. He still never revealed anything about himself, about what he did outside of school or where he'd come from. Things I still very much wanted to know.

"Miss Swan, you're on chaperone detail for the Winter Ball this year," Red informed me.

"No problem," I said.

"I put Derek on too," he said and watched for my reaction.

"Great," I said.

It had become obvious to my coworkers that Derek and I were spending a lot of time together. And the more time we spent together, the more I liked him. Though he wasn't exactly my type, he was the a type I could grow to like—a very practical sort of

guy who liked to make lists and actually do the things on the lists. He did things like plan weeks in advance the discussion topics for Thoreau Club, keeping a separate manilla folder with a typed label for each week, with articles and websites related to whatever the topic was. His classroom and his house were impeccably neat, but not so clean you felt uncomfortable. He never cursed. He drove a Subaru wagon and he didn't even have kids. He went to bed early. He was the picture of stability and I appreciated that. It was comforting.

Back in the faculty lounge as I pondered all of this, Derek came and sat with me. "Are you assigned to the Winter Ball?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm going as the White Witch from Narnia."

"Do you think any of these kids will know who that is?"

"The handful of them who like to read will," I said. "Forget the rest of them. I hear you're on duty too."

"Yeah," he said. "I'll have to go as Aslan, now." He smiled.

"So what time are you picking me up then?" I teased him.

"How's seven?"

This was just what I needed, I told myself. A good, reliable man who was age appropriate and might even be interested in me.

"Perfect."

The Forks High School Winter Masquerade Ball was my favorite dance of the year. It was almost as big of a deal as prom. It was a way to keep the holidays magical without having to deal with the risky territory of politically incorrect holiday themes. Kids were allowed to come in any kind of costume they wanted, but they had to be in costume to get in.

I decked myself out in white face paint and wore a white wig and crown. Illeana loaned me an ice blue gown and white stole and even I had to admit I looked fabulous. Like a terrifying ice queen. Derek looked hilarious in his mane and crown, and contrary to his prediction, many of the kids did know who we were supposed to be. They'd seen the movie.

The high school gym had been transformed into a winter-themed night club complete with fake snow banks and paper cut snow flakes, fake smoke and blue lights everywhere. Most of the faculty and staff came, whether they were assigned to the

party or not. That's how it usually was, since Forks wasn't exactly a top night spot. It was something for all of us to do.

As the kids rolled in we saw the usual showing of Christmas elves. There were two Ralphies from A Christmas Story and one Grinch. Then came the kids from Thoreau club. They all came together, except for Edward, each one dressed up as white bears.

"What do you think?" Mike Newton asked. "Pretty good, right? Are you surprised?"

I choked up a little when I saw them all. Jessica handed each of the other bears a stack of flyers that described the Thoreau club and the work they'd done on the bear project, along with a plea to get involved in environmental causes. Red came over to talk to the students, and he was so proud he made an announcement at the break, congratulating them for their enthusiasm and their commitment to conservation.

A few of the kids, most notably Paige, noticed that Derek and I had coordinated our costumes. At the punch bowl, she came over to me and whispered, "So, Mr. Banner, huh? Not Jacob Black then?"

"Shhh," I whispered back. "Don't tell anyone, but I am secretly an old maid. I'm not actually dating either of these guys, but you don't have to go spreading that boring and pathetic fact around, okay?"

She laughed. "Okay, okay," she said. "But you should be."

I waved her away. "Go dance or something."

The music was blaring and the party was in full swing when suddenly all of the kids stopped moving, like the needle had been dragged off the turntable. But it hadn't.

The Cullens had arrived.

Most of them, anyway. Edward wasn't there, much to my disappointment.

Alice, Jasper, Emmett and Rosalie were decked out in black capes with extra big fangs, fake blood dripping from the corners of their mouths. The girls wore outrageous make-up and had their hair tangled into rats nests on their heads. Jasper and Emmett had slicked back hair and tuxedos under their capes. They looked amazing and terrifying.

Red came over to me and whispered in my ear, "What the hell is wrong with those kids, anyway?"

"They can do horror if they want. The theme is masquerade, not necessarily holiday."

"But still," he started, but stopped talking because then they started to dance. And when I say they started to dance, I mean that the entire student body cleared the dance floor and formed a circle around them as they broke out into an acrobatic number that looked like it was choreographed by Randy Jackson himself. They were incredible. Emmett threw Rosalie into the air and she twisted and contorted her body and landed perfectly in his arms. Jasper and Alice were turning coordinated flips. Those kids could move like demons. The sheer joy and enthusiasm they expressed in their movement was infectious. All of the kids began to cheer them on and they just kept going.

"There's something very wrong here," Derek said, coming up to us.

"I know," Red said. "But I can't figure out what it is."

"Come on," I said, annoyed. "They're not doing anything wrong. So they're good dancers. What's the problem?"

"Go talk to them," he said. "Find out how they learned to do that."

I couldn't deny I was curious. When the song was over, they all started to dance normally, though certainly much better than any high school student or adult outside of professional dancing that I'd ever seen. I broke into the crowd to where they were.

"Hey, Miss Swan," Emmett smiled at me.

"Hi, Miss Swan," Alice chirped over the music. "You look amazing!"

"Thanks," I said. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," Alice followed me off the dance floor. "I told Edward he should have come. He can be such a recluse sometimes."

"Well maybe dancing isn't his thing," I said.

"He can dance better than the rest of us," she said.

"How did you all learn to dance like that?" I asked.

"Oh..." she hesitated, then got that weird look on her face, like the first time I saw her. "Are you here with Mr. Banner?"

"Um," I wasn't sure how to answer. "He gave me a ride here, yes."

She leaned in close so nobody else would hear her. "Not him," she said, her tone not grave, but definitely serious.

"What are you talking about?"

"You and Mr. Banner," she said, rolling her eyes. "Look, I'm sorry because I know I'm being forward, but trust me on this one. He's not right for you."

"Well, gosh," I said, a little more sarcastically than probably necessary. "I guess I'll have to call off the wedding then."

"What?" she exclaimed, like I'd told her the earth was about to implode right beneath our feet there in the school gym. "You're kidding, right? You're not engaged."

"No, Alice. I'm not even dating."

"I'm sorry," she said. "It was a thought and it hit me and it just came out, you know? Sometimes that happens before I can stop myself from talking."

"I understand." I wondered if she was stoned, but no stoned person would be able to move like she did on the dance floor. "But as I recall, I was asking you a question about the Cullen troupe's dance skills." I smiled and tried to make her feel more at ease.

"Right," she said. "We used to do a lot of dance competitions back when we lived in Alaska. We all trained in acrobatics together. Kept us busy in the long winters."

"It takes a long time to learn to dance like that," I said. "How old were you when you all started?"

"I don't remember," she said. "It was some years ago I guess. We're fast learners. Plus we did it all the time, you know? Carlisle and Esme feel that physical activity is good for keeping kids out of trouble. We got pretty good, right?"

"I'll say."

"Yeah, we used to win all sorts of awards for it. There's not much to do with it here, though, and Coach Clapp gets pretty mad when we breakdance in gym class."

"No doubt," I said.

"Miss Swan," she said, turning serious for a moment. "He's a perfectly nice guy. He's just not the one."

"Alice," I said, recognizing a potential clusterfuck of emotional upheaval. "I'm not looking for the one. I know where he is—Arlington Cemetery."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm really, really sorry."

"It's okay," I said. "And Mr. Banner and I are just friends, anyway."

"He's totally into you, though," she said. "Like most of the men in this school."

"Now you really sound crazy. Go break dance with Rosalie before Clapp turns you into a pumpkin."

It was late when Derek brought me home, but I invited him in for a drink anyway.

"I don't drink," he said. "But I'd love a cup of tea."

"Great," I said. We went in and I put the kettle on. I decided against a glass of wine.

"That was fun," I said.

"I wonder why Edward Cullen didn't go," he said. "I've had my doubts about that kid."

"Because he wouldn't come to a dance?" I asked.

"No, not that. He just seems so secretive. Like he's dishonest, you know? All of the Cullens give me that vibe."

"Well, we don't really know them. They've only been in the area a few months."

"Six months," he said. "And I really don't like the way Rosalie and Emmett and Alice and Jasper are clearly couples, either. That's inappropriate, I don't care if they are adopted."

"Maybe it's not for us to judge," I said, feeling strangely defensive. "We don't know the whole story there. They're all great students, never really any trouble, right?"

"Edward smokes," he said. "So does Jasper."

"Lots of kids smoke. It's dumb, but it doesn't make them trouble, automatically." He got quiet. I had no intention of arguing with Derek tonight. I was hoping to make some progress moving our friendship onto something else.

"You're right," he finally said. "I'm being too judgmental."

I put my hand out and covered his in a gesture that I hope signaled understanding. "They are unusual, I have to admit." He looked up at me.

"So how was your date with Jacob Black?" he asked, pulling his hand away from mine.

"It never happened," I said. "I'm not dating Jacob."

"He didn't act that way," he said.

"Yeah, well, he can be an idiot sometimes. Most of the time," I said. "We're just friends, trust me."

Derek smiled. "You really do look great in that costume," he said. "I don't think that my version of Aslan does you justice."

“Are you kidding? You make a great Aslan. I am totally acquiescing the throne to you, right now. I hereby declare winter to be over.” I pulled my crown and the wig from my head, in a gesture of mock defeat.

He laughed and unfastened his mane.

“Do you mind waiting here a minute? I just want to wash some of this cake makeup off my face before I end up with hives or something.”

“Sure,” he said. I went into the bathroom and washed my face and ran a brush through my tangled hair.

“Thanks,” I said, coming back to the kitchen. “Do you want to bring your tea inside? We can hang out in the living room. I’ll start a fire.”

“Okay,” he said. “If you don’t mind, can I use your bathroom and wash off some of my handiwork too?”

“Of course,” I said, and pointed the way back. “Hey, we should start planning that Lake Crescent trip,” I yelled back to him. “I think the kids will be really into it.”

“Yeah,” he called from the bathroom. “I’ll be right out.”

I built a fire in my fireplace, something I’d only done a few times since I’d lived there, and not since last winter. I watched as the paper caught fire and lit the log over it. The house began to fill with smoke. “Shit,” I said under my breath and ran to open windows.

“Did you open the flue?” he asked. Like an idiot, of course I’d forgotten. Derek came running out and had a coughing fit. He ran to the fireplace and opened the flue while I opened every window and door in the house and broke out a fan.

“I’m sorry!” I said. “I don’t build a lot of fires here.” He kept coughing and coughing. He was having trouble catching his breath. “Derek?” He was starting to look panicked as he kept hacking away. “Derek, come on. Let’s get in the car. I’m taking you to the ER.” I wasn’t sure if he was having an asthma attack or what was going on, but I helped him to my car and sped the half mile over to the hospital.

I walked him in, and the attending doctor could see he was in need of immediate assistance with the trouble he was having breathing. They brought him to the back for evaluation and I waited, wondering at the strange sight we must have been in our Narnia garb.

About 20 minutes later an extremely good looking young doctor came out to speak to me.

"Hi Miss Swan, I'm Dr. Cullen," he said. "I want to update you about your friend. He asked me to come speak to you."

"Dr. Cullen," I said. "Of course. I know your kids—I work at the high school."

"Yes, I know," he said, "Edward's told us all about you," he smiled and I smiled back, a bit freaked out, not having any idea what Edward might have said. "He's really enjoying Thoreau club."

"How is Derek?"

"He's resting comfortably now," he said. "He had an asthma attack brought on by the smoke. We gave him a nebulizer treatment and he's much better."

"I didn't know he had asthma."

"Neither did he, apparently. I can bring you back to see him."

Dr. Cullen walked me back through the Emergency Room into the little stall where Derek lay, an oxygen mask over his face. He looked much better than he did when we got there.

"I'm sorry, Bella," he said, looking embarrassed. "That's never happened to me before."

"No, I'm sorry. I'm the idiot who almost burned the house... oh my God." I realized I hadn't done anything to make sure the fire was out in the fireplace. I dialed Charlie in a panic. It was midnight.

"Dad, I need you to go into my house and make sure it's not on fire!"

"What the hell are you talking about, Bella?"

"I can't explain but would you please go over and make sure the fire in the fireplace is out?"

"I'll be right there. Wait. Where are you?"

"In the Emergency Room."

"Bella, what the hell is going on?"

"I'm fine—everything is fine. Please just go and I'll explain later." I hung up the phone. "Gah, I'm sure I'll be a great asset to the Lake Crescent backcountry expedition with my fire building skills." He laughed and reached out for my hand, which surprised and pleased me. I took his hand, which was warm, his skin was soft. He squeezed mine lightly.

"You'll be great in the backcountry," he said. "You've got the right attitude."

Dr. Cullen came in and Derek pulled his hand away, which I figured was because he was the parent of five of our students, and he didn't want anyone to know we were—what? In the ER together?

"You're free to go," he said. "Take this inhaler with you and use as directed. You'll need to follow up with your primary."

"Thanks," Derek said.

Charlie called me back and told me everything at the house was fine. Didn't even look like I'd started a fire, he said. I thought that was weird. I drove Derek back to my house to get his car. I'd offered to drive him home, but he didn't take me up on it.

"I'm fine now," he said. "And despite everything, you know, I had a good time."

"Me too," I said. Derek smiled and leaned in to give me a kiss, and my heart fluttered a little. Then he stopped.

"Is this okay?" he asked.

"Yes, definitely," I said.

His lips were warm and soft, like his hands. The kiss wasn't too fast, like someone who really doesn't want to kiss you. It wasn't the start of a make out session, either. It was sort of a medium paced kiss. The kind you give someone when maybe you're trying the kiss out. Like if it goes well, you might give another, and then another, and then the next thing you know you're hoping that just-in-case condom at the bottom of your purse hasn't expired.

But I didn't get the second kiss, just the first kiss, which wasn't too wet, but not completely dry. It didn't have any tongue in it, which would have been all wrong right then anyway. It was a perfectly decent kiss, and I would have been happy to have a second, but that wasn't the way Derek operated, apparently. Because when he pulled back from me, he was definitely smiling, like we'd passed the first kiss test.

I could only assume the second kiss would have to be earned in some other way, probably by some other outing that didn't end with one of us in the ER.

I went to school the following Monday wondering what would happen when I saw Derek at school. Would he have any kind of bounce in his step? Would he go out of his way to see me? Would I go out of my way to run into him? I didn't see him when I first got to school, but then I hardly ever did, so now I had to wonder when the first opportunity might be to run into him and how it would go. I was in my office

considering how I might put myself in his way when I had an unexpected visit. It was Edward, clearly perturbed about something.

"I'm quitting Thoreau Club," he said.

"Why? What happened?"

"Nothing," he said, pacing my little office, running his hand absently through his wild hair. I could watch him do that for hours, I thought, but then pushed the thought away. "I need the time to study. It's a lot of extra time right now for me."

"Don't," I said.

"Why not?"

I wasn't sure what to say. All I knew was that I wanted him around, and that was a desire I couldn't voice.

"We're going to apply for credit because of all the work you guys have been doing on the bear project. So you'll be able to put the time towards graduation requirements."

"Is that the only reason?"

"Of course not," I said. "I'll miss having you there."

He took a seat on my couch.

"So, I hear you and Mr. Banner are dating."

Ah ha. I'd wondered if Edward was nursing a crush and was happy to know at least it hadn't been one sided, as fucked up as that felt. I tried to stifle a smile.

"Is that so?" I said.

"Is it true?"

"Edward," I said gently, "this isn't a line of questioning I can answer for you."

"Fine," he said. "Are you still coming to the Mercy Brown show?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course."

"Good. I'll introduce you. She loves to meet new fans."

"You should be her manager, or her publicist or something." I said. "You should get a commission for every new fan you bring into the Mercy Brown fold."

"I just do it for love," he said, his mood lighter. Maybe I was wrong about the crush after all.

"Lucky girl," I said.

That afternoon, I planted myself in the faculty lounge during Derek's break, hoping to run into him. He came in and gave me a smile and sat down next to me, but otherwise seemed the same. He talked about possible day trips for Thoreau Club and made other small talk, and then there was a moment when we were alone.

"Are you busy Friday night?" he finally asked.

"Yeah, actually, I am," I said. I could have invited him out with me to see Mercy Brown. In fact, I should have done that. The fact that I had no intention of doing that should have troubled me far more than it did.

Derek's face told of his disappointment and I said, "I'm free the rest of the weekend."

"How about dinner Saturday?"

"Definitely."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mercy

Friday night I met Illeana and Carl at the club in Port Angeles. I didn't go alone, because there was a real possibility of running into people I knew in Port Angeles and last thing I needed was to be seen out at a club with a student by myself. Besides, Illeana had become a big Mercy Brown fan since I'd pushed her new album on her and she would have been pissed if I hadn't told her she was playing.

We took our seats and I spotted Edward up near the stage, sitting at a cluster of small tables with his entire family, chatting with Mercy Brown. Mercy was leaning into Edward, and I had to assume they were an item. With her flawless pale skin and rich chocolate brown hair, she looked like she belonged with them.

I almost regretted that I hadn't invited Derek. It would have been nice to have a date. It was a little sad to be there watching Illeana and Carl in their new baby glow all on my own. I looked up and was caught by surprise to see Edward standing at our table.

"Miss Swan," he said. "Glad you could make it. No Mr. Banner?"

"Hi," I said. "I brought my friends, Dr. and Mr. Rogers."

"Pffft, call me Illeana," she said as she smiled at him. "This is my husband Carl. Nice to meet you. This singer is your friend?"

"Yes," Edward said. "She's like family to us."

"She's got a future," Illeana gushed. "Bella sent me her CD and I am addicted to it. With those looks and that voice, she's going places."

"I agree," Edward said.

"She's your girlfriend?" Illeana asked. Nice and subtle, she was.

"No, just an old friend." He glanced at me briefly, but I did not miss it. Then Alice bounced across the room, all sparkles and smiles, as usual.

"Hi, Miss Swan! How cool of you to come see Mercy! She came down to play a set for my birthday."

"Happy birthday, Alice." I smiled. "What a great gift."

"You have to come to our table," she said. "She wants to meet you."

"She does?"

"Yeah, Edward told her all about you." Alice giggled and Edward rolled his eyes. Now I was worried. Told her about finding me drunk at her last show?

"I told her you had a fine appreciation for music," Edward reassured me. "She likes to meet new fans."

"I'd love to meet her," I said.

We walked over to the Cullen encampment up by the stage. Walking into a cluster of such perfectly formed human beings was unsettling. They all looked refined to an ultimate degree—like their heavenly bodies, their ideal selves, could do no better. They looked unreal. Maybe I should lay off the Klonopin, I thought.

"Miss Swan, we're so glad you could make it," Dr. Cullen said.

"Thanks Dr. Cullen."

"Please, call me Carlisle. This is my wife, Esme."

Esme nodded and gave me a big smile. "The kids have all said such nice things."

"Well, that's very nice to hear." I was not convinced, especially when Rosalie gave a little snort and looked away. "They're great kids," I said. "Impeccable grades and a whole host of hidden talents. Half the student population thinks they're secretly superheroes. Some of the faculty too, actually." They all laughed. Even Rosalie cracked a satisfied smile. "And now I understand the talented Miss Mercy Brown is also a friend of yours?"

"Yes, she's a dear," Esme said. "She comes to stay with us whenever she plays Seattle. She and Edward sit in the music room for hours straight playing."

"Esme," Edward said, somewhat embarrassed. "Don't... "

"Edward's an enormous musical talent, but too modest," Carlisle interrupted. "You should get him to play some of his compositions for you. They're very good."

"Really?" I looked at Edward. "You sure do have a lot of secrets." The entire table burst out into laughter, the magnitude of which made no sense to me.

"He's an enigma," Alice said, and bonked him on the head with the palm of her hand. Then she put her arm around Jasper, who remained quiet and removed. He didn't look entirely comfortable being at the coffee house, like he'd sort of been dragged there. But somehow the sight of him put me at ease.

Just then Mercy Brown came back out from behind stage. She looked a lot smaller than I remembered her from Seattle. I suppose being right next to her took away a little of her stage aura.

"Is this her?" she asked, looking right at me, a devilish smile, her eyes lit like flames. "She's delicious."

"I love your music," I said. "I've got your entire catalogue on repeat on my iPod. I think I'm a little obsessed."

"Perfect!" she said. "You've got to sit right up front here. I want a completely honest critique after the show. Don't go easy on me!"

I laughed. She was immensely likable, in addition to talented and beautiful. I sort of hated her, but it was difficult given how alluring she was. "I'm with here friends," I said, and motioned to Illeana and Carl, who appeared to be completely lost in some conversation, likely related to nursery decorating and assorted baby registry details. I was glad to have some other folks to talk to. Mercy looked over at Illeana and gave a low squeal.

"Oooh, your friend is expecting, how wonderful!" she said. "Or has she not told anyone yet?" She bit her lip regretfully. "It's still early. Ah, my big mouth." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "It's a girl."

I laughed and shook my head, feigning ignorance, and hoping to cover some of my amazement. Mercy smiled and floated over to the side of the stage and started to prepare herself for the performance.

Edward pulled out a chair for me.

"Please," he said. "Make yourself at home."

I sat down, and Edward went over to Illeana and Carl and invited them to join us. Illeana looked up at me and waved and motioned they'd stay where they were. Clearly they didn't mind having a little time to themselves. I suppose they were savoring it now since that would be over in about eight months.

Edward sat next to me and said softly, "I'm glad you came." I smiled and nodded, and tried to contain what I was feeling because I knew it was something I shouldn't be

feeling and something I sure didn't want to be expressing. The lights dimmed and Edward leaned over again and whispered, "Enjoy the show." Then he hopped up out of his seat and strode up onto the stage and picked up an acoustic guitar. The lights dimmed and Mercy stood in front of the microphone.

"Good evening everyone," Mercy said. "Thank you so much for joining us. I'm Mercy Brown and tonight I'm accompanied by my dear old friend on guitar, Edward Cullen. Please make him feel welcome." The room broke out into applause and Edward looked up and gave a small wave. "I also have to say happy birthday to my dear friend Alice, who is..." she looked down to where we were sitting to spot Alice in her chair. "How old are you again? 193?"

The crowd laughed and Alice waved her off. "I guess it doesn't matter much, since this place isn't serving."

She started her first song and I was transported. Her velvet voice blanketed the cafe in warmth and color. She owned that room. Edward's playing was flawless and soulful. Now to all the things that made this kid perfect in every way aside from his age, I could add accomplished musicianship. I would have steam coming from my ears with the sickening irony of the situation if I wasn't so tamed by the soothing tones filling the room from his guitar and her voice.

"I told you, right? He's very good," Esme leaned over and whispered to me, smiling.

One good thing about the night was that I had a perfectly reasonable excuse to just stare at Edward, and I did stare openly. I was riveted as I watched his hands work over that guitar with the care and precision of a heart surgeon. The concentration in his face gave him an intensity I couldn't break away from. Every so often he'd look out at the audience and I had to turn my gaze to Mercy. If his eyes met mine, I wasn't sure what he might find behind them.

When they were done playing and the applause finally died down, Edward packed up his guitar and came off the stage, directly over to me.

"So you're leaving school to hit the road for the big time, then?" I teased him. "That was pretty spectacular playing there, Cullen."

He laughed. "Glad you approve. I think I'll still go for the diploma, though high school drop out does add to the allure of the traveling musician."

"Yes, helps the rock image a bit. Straight-A-ivy-league-bound-high-school-student doesn't have the same dark allure to it."

"Just the same, I think I'll stay put."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said, sincerely.

Outside, Illeana was all over me. "Girl, that Edward has it for you. Bad. What did you do to the poor kid?"

I blanched at her words. "No, I don't think so," I stammered. "Mercy is his girlfriend."

"Please, you're so blind. How soon is he 18? He's a doll."

"Oh. My. God. You're pure evil. Don't even think like that."

"Oh, come on. You know you're thinking it."

"I have a job I'd like to keep, you know? Jesus."

"Don't listen to her," Carl said. "She's pregnant. She can't think straight."

"En serio, Bella, he's gorgeous and so mature for his age, don't you think? Plus boyfriend plays guitar like a dream. I'm pretty sure he's got the big torch, you know? Not the small one." I didn't want to be considering the size of Edward's torch. Not at all. "You say he's a senior?"

"He's seventeen. I don't know when his birthday is, but he's a high school student and I am not even discussing this. Not even a little."

I walked Illeana and Carl to their car and Illeana gave me a big hug. I kissed her on the cheek and told her I'd call her later in the week.

I walked slowly back to my car, sort of dazed, lost on a trail of impure thoughts that I'd tried to veer from, but Illeana's implied approval of the unthinkable put me squarely back on it. The thought of kissing him swirled in my mind deliciously, and I could not dislodge it. I held it there, contemplating.

I stepped out to cross Front Street, back to where my car was parked when I heard the screech of tires. I looked up to see a black Toyota pickup headed right for me. I hadn't even bothered to look before stepping out into the street, I was so distracted by my fantasy. I saw the oncoming truck, but I was frozen to that spot on the road, unable to move.

Then there was a painfully strong tug on my right arm and I was pulled out of the street, backwards onto something, on the sidewalk. I tried to catch my breath as I realized it was Edward.

"Are you all right?" he asked, a wild edge in his voice. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," I said, but my arm was sore where he'd gripped me. "Where did you come from?"

"I was behind you," he said. "You stepped right into traffic. You didn't even look." He shook his head. "Why did you do that?"

"You were definitely not behind me," I said. "I would have noticed."

"Yeah, well if you're so observant, why didn't you notice that truck coming?" He glared at me.

I had no excuse. I clearly wasn't paying attention because I was thinking of him and of all the illegal and improper things I wanted to do to him. I couldn't very well explain that, though.

The driver of the truck came running to where we were sitting on the sidewalk, and Carlisle, Esme, Alice and Jasper, who must have been coming out of the club when it happened, came running over.

"Jesus Christ, lady!" The man driving the truck yelled at me, "You could have gotten us both killed. Why the hell don't you watch where you're walking?"

"Back off," Edward turned and growled at him, an entirely different tone than I'd ever heard before. The man shrank away.

"I'm sorry," I said, growing more embarrassed and upset. "I'm really sorry."

"Miss Swan," Carlisle bent down next to me. "Are you hurt?"

"No," I said. "Just a little stunned."

Carlisle put his hands on my shoulder and my arm and felt around, and I noticed his hands were cool through my clothes. Like an ice pack. Did he have the same condition as Edward? Was that even possible? He helped me to my feet.

"I'm so embarrassed," I said. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"We're just glad you're okay," Esme said, patting me on the arm.

I turned to Edward. "Thank you," I said. My voice cracked and I just plunked myself back down on the sidewalk, my head beginning to fill with the adrenaline of my delayed terror. I put my hands on either side of my head and just tried to breathe. "I'm okay," I said to the concerned crowd. "I just need to catch my breath."

Edward sat down next to me. "Let me drive you home," he said.

"No, that's not necessary," I said. "I'll be fine in a minute. Go on and have fun with Mercy. It's Alice's birthday and I'm sure you've got plans."

"We're just going home," Alice said. "Mercy already left with Emmett and Rosalie."

"I don't want to leave my car."

"Edward can drive your car, and we'll follow you. I insist," Carlisle said. "You shouldn't drive right now." I didn't know how to argue, but part of me knew I should. But then, if I protested too much, would my guilty conscience make it more obvious?

"He's a very good driver," Esme said with a reassuring smile. "You'll be in good hands."

I can't even begin to describe the awkward thrill that was the experience of Edward driving me home. First of all, he drives too fast. So do I, so this wasn't much of a problem for me. I didn't really know what to say to him, and again I was concerned, thinking of how this entire night might play back at school in the retelling. Had I done anything wrong or out of sync with school policy? I didn't think so, but I felt so guilty I wasn't sure.

"How do you like this mini Cooper?" he asked, speeding along the road, distracting me from my clutter of awkward thoughts.

"It's peppy and handles decently, but it's not the Z4 I wish I had," I said. "On my salary, that's a little bit of a stretch. Unless I want to live in it."

He laughed. "So you like expensive cars and boats, then."

"I do," I said. "And your family has quite the impressive car collection, I've noticed."

"Yeah, well we all like driving a lot. It's sort of a hobby."

"You have a lot of interesting hobbies. Driving, yachting, music. It's a wonder you get any studying done."

"Well, I don't sleep," he joked. "Ever."

"Not up all night playing Guitar Hero either, I assume."

"Ha, no, I don't think so," he said and smiled. "I'm more of a Call of Duty kind of guy anyway."

"Somehow I have trouble seeing you in front of a Play Station or an Xbox."

"Really? Where do you see me, then?"

In my bed, I thought to myself, but didn't say.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, suspiciously. I am sure I turned red, but luckily it was dark.

"Nothing," I said.

"You've got to be thinking about something. You just don't want to say what it is."

"Maybe," I said. "But then don't you do the same thing all the time? Mr. 'I don't like to talk about myself?'"

"Okay, fine."

"I'm just feeling very embarrassed," I said, which was the truth. "I almost got myself killed in one of the stupidest ways imaginable."

"Well, I'm very glad you didn't get yourself killed," he said.

"Yeah, thanks to you."

"Anytime," he said, taking his eyes off the road look at me. I don't know how he managed to look at me like that and continue to steer the car, but we made it to my driveway in one piece. And I didn't think to ask him then how he knew my address. It just seemed like, of course, he would know. Because for no good reason, that's how it felt when I was with Edward. There was the thrill of being close to him, but also the comfort of being with someone you'd known forever. And I very much hated feeling that way around him, because it was a feeling I desperately wanted to have with someone. Just not him.

He walked me to my door, keeping a modest distance. I waved my thanks back at his family, who'd followed us there. I had no proper way to show him my gratitude and floundered for some type of good night that felt both sincere and appropriate. I put the key in the lock of my front door and opened it.

"Home safe and sound," I said.

"Good night," he said, and turned to walk away.

"Edward?" I couldn't stop myself from calling after him.

"Yes?"

"I had a great time," I said, feeling unbearably stupid. "Aside from the almost getting myself killed part."

"Me too." He smiled at me and then did a jog to his family's car. I stayed on the porch staring after them until their tail lights disappeared down K Street.

When I went inside, my cell phone rang. I found myself hoping it was Edward, but how would he even have my number, and why would he call anyway?

It wasn't him, it was Charlie.

"What's wrong, Dad?" I asked, worried. "Why are you calling so late?"

"Are you sitting down?" he asked.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

"She said yes," he said, quietly. I was silent. "Bella? Did you hear me? She said yes."

"I heard you," I said, and began to cry. "Dad, you asked Sue to marry you?"

"I finally got up the nerve, can you believe it? Looks like my bachelor days will be behind me soon."

"I'm so happy for you," I said, and began bawling.

"Oh, Bells, don't," he said. "Aw, come on, please don't cry honey."

"No Dad, this is good. This is really, really good. Don't mind me. You know how I get."

Charlie's engagement blew my giddy, stupid Edward fantasy to bits and it littered my floor with its sparkly lies. Edward was a diversion. A derailment from any possible real relationship I might pursue. Even my father was moving on into a future with someone he could build a life with. I was chasing a seventeen year old boy I could never be with.

So soon, I'd be the last Swan on the lake without a mate.