



A Forbidden Love

TwiLoverSue

Complete

Twilight

Copyright Page

This book was automatically created by [FLAG](#) on February 12th, 2013, based on content retrieved from <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/7455169/>.

The content in this book is copyrighted by TwiLoverSue or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved except where explicitly stated otherwise.

This story was first published on October 11th, 2011, and was last updated on February 10th, 2013.

Any and all feedback is greatly appreciated - please email any bugs, problems, feature requests etc. to flag@erayd.net.

Table of Contents

[Summary](#)

[1. Chapter 1](#)

[2. A Rude Awakening](#)

[3. Fabrications](#)

[4. Masquerade](#)

[5. Oh My Edward](#)

[6. The New Girl](#)

[7. Bellissima Ragazza](#)

[8. The Rescue](#)

[9. Not Her!](#)

[10. The Library](#)

[11. Allure](#)

[12. Hidden Talents](#)

[13. Fantasy](#)

[14. The Pastry Chef](#)

[15. Special Requests](#)

[16. Restraint](#)

[17. To Market](#)

[18. Instinct](#)

[19. Protection](#)

[20. Longing](#)

[21. Honourable](#)

[22. Reputation](#)

[23. Quandary](#)

[24. Seduction](#)

[25. Surrender](#)

[26. Dreams](#)

[27. Ignorance](#)

[28. Implications](#)

[29. Assumptions](#)
[30. Indefinitely](#)
[31. Answers](#)
[32. Passion](#)
[33. Promises](#)
[34. For Now](#)
[35. Desire](#)
[36. Oh My](#)
[37. Hopes](#)
[38. Introductions](#)
[39. Suspicions](#)
[40. Courage](#)
[41. Contemplation](#)
[42. Imagination](#)
[43. If](#)
[44. Conscience](#)
[45. Suitable](#)
[46. Unannounced](#)
[47. Sacrifice](#)
[48. Discretion](#)
[49. Difference](#)
[50. Flagellation](#)
[51. Travesty](#)
[52. Purpose](#)
[53. Visitors](#)
[54. Stipulations](#)
[55. Liberties](#)
[56. Audience](#)
[57. Alliance](#)
[58. Meddling](#)
[59. Blessing](#)
[60. Wonderful](#)

- [61. Disclosure](#)
- [62. Beloved](#)
- [63. Engaged](#)
- [64. Approval](#)
- [65. Enlightening](#)
- [66. Resolution](#)
- [67. Celebration](#)
- [68. Rapture](#)
- [69. Joy Filled](#)
- [70. Freedom](#)
- [71. Appreciation](#)
- [72. Misbehaviour](#)
- [73. Everlasting](#)
- [74. Request and Announcement](#)

Summary

Fleeing her father's attacker, Bella masquerades as a servant. While awaiting Lord Carlisle's return, his heir, Lord Edward, decides to protect the beautiful new maid by making her his mistress. With her reputation ruined, all appears lost...or is it? M for lemons and seduction. Happily Ever After...eventually. COMPLETE with just a few out-takes to come.

Chapter 1

ANNOUNCEMENT! A Forbidden Love will be removed from Fan Fiction Net on February 24th. My reasons for doing so are detailed in Ch 74.

TLSue

A Forbidden Love

Ignorance is bliss...or so they say, but in my experience, ignorance simply leads to poor choices. After all, how is a person supposed to make a wise choice, if he doesn't have all the facts?

This is a tale of decisions based on a woeful lack of knowledge, innocence lost, and true love found...in the unlikeliest of ways.

Chapter 1

Forced to Flee

"Bella, you need to leave. Go to Carlisle."

My father's words made no more sense than the vivid red stain spreading across his chest. I wanted to plead with him to let me stay, to see him recovered and our lives returned to their previous genteel normality. But my father's attacker had threatened to return for me—and to finish what he'd started, if Papa survived.

I'd never given much thought to Papa's heir until Lord James Hunter had turned up at Swan Manor bearing token gifts and an oily charm. A distant cousin, he'd shocked both Papa and me by waiting mere days to ask for my hand in marriage, claiming a desire to save me from the humiliation of dispossession upon my father's demise.

The idea was ludicrous.

My father was relatively young and robust, his death not something I'd contemplated, even knowing his estate was entailed to a male heir. I'd always known that marriage was where my future security lay, and while I did harbor some concerns that my plain appearance might limit my potential suitors, at seventeen I was in no rush to face society's scrutiny or leave my father's protection. Since my

mother's death when I was only ten years old, Papa had been a constant in my life...strong, capable and in control.

To my relief, Papa refused Lord Hunter's suit even before word arrived from London confirming our suspicions regarding his character. It turned out that Lord Hunter's reputation was that of a libertine and gambler, one who'd accumulated considerable debts. His haste to secure my hand was clearly a means to an end but one I couldn't easily comprehend. My father's quietly prosperous country estate could not be sold, such were the conditions of the entailment, though it could be borrowed against and the possessions disposed of...by the rightful owner.

Lord James did not take rejection well, and Papa was forced to order him to leave. He also took the precaution of increasing security, calling on his employees and very good friends Billy Black and Harry Waters to keep an eye out for trouble.

In my innocence I wasn't concerned, merely puzzled by Lord James' response, his agitation and indignation seeming excessive. It wasn't as if he could be in any way attached to a simple country girl like myself. Even if I agreed to marry him, he wouldn't gain access to any significant funds as my dowry was of no great consequence.

But that is the problem with ignorance; one doesn't always know that one is ignorant to begin with.

Lord James had no intention of waiting for my father's natural demise to claim his inheritance, and he arrived one morning soon after his banishment, angry and secretly armed. The threats he made regarding me enraged Papa, not that I understood their meaning. I did know the fight that followed was not fair, for I witnessed Lord Hunter shoot my father in the back and vow to return for me when Billy and Harry chased him off.

"Listen to your father, lass," Billy shook me gently by the shoulder. "Ye need to go quickly. Hide that ye're a lady or Lord Hunter will find ye in no time. Leah and Jacob can travel with ye...they'll help protect ye. "

Papa seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness, but his eyes focused at Billy's words.

"Go to Carlisle, Bella...Worthington Hall. Take your mother's pearls."

"What...what if..." my words caught on a sob.

It was almost a year since I'd seen Papa's friend, Lord Carlisle Cullen, the Duke of Worthington, though I knew he and my father corresponded regularly. The bond formed between the two men—my father, the military captain knighted for services to his King and country, and Carlisle, one of the most powerful men in Britain—had been forged in the fires of adversity. Papa had saved Lord Carlisle's life, engineering their escape from imprisonment at the hands of the French. Not that I would have ever heard the story from my taciturn father: it was Carlisle who'd regaled me with tales of my parent's heroics and how they'd met and fallen in love against the backdrop of war, my beautiful French mother and her brave English officer.

I wasn't sure where Worthington Hall, Carlisle's ducal seat, was located or what I would do if he wasn't in residence, but with a deep breath I put my concerns aside. For now I had to bid farewell to my father.

"I love you, Papa," I cried softly.

"Love you, too, Bella..." he whispered in return. "Stay safe. Don't trust anyone but Carlisle...promise?"

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

Papa's eyes fluttered closed, and the sobs I'd been suppressing broke free. But before I could give free rein to my grief, Billy lifted me to my feet and away from my father's limp arms, shaking me a little when my eyes refused to focus.

"There's no time for tears, Miss Bella. You must do as Sir Charles says. I'll take care of him...of everything."

I swiped my hand over my eyes, clearing my vision as Billy herded me towards the door.

"Go change your gown," he instructed. "Something plain. Mrs. Waters will help you."

I paused with one last glance toward my father's prone body.

"Is he..." I couldn't finish the sentence.

He shook his head. "We'll do our best to take care of him, but his injuries are grave. Harry and I will hide him in case Lord Hunter returns with those friends of his that are staying at the inn. But the sooner ye're safely away, the better."

With a sob, I turned and ran up the stairs to my room, oddly reminded of how many times I had been scolded for running when I was younger.

"That's not how a lady behaves," my mother had gently scolded on numerous occasions.

My poor, grieving father had eventually taken up the refrain after she was gone though his heart had never been in it. It had fallen to my governess, Miss Brewer, to continue the task of transforming me into a bona fide lady.

What foolishness it all seemed to me now. How much better it would have been if I'd been taught how to defend the ones I loved, rather than which fork to use or how to engage in the idle chit-chat acceptable to society.

"Quickly, Miss Bella," Mrs. Waters admonished, swiping tears from her red-rimmed eyes. I turned my back to her and waited impatiently while she unbuttoned my gown and then began to undo the tightly laced corsetry that Leah, my lady's maid, had helped me into a scant few hours earlier. It wasn't as if I needed it to achieve a fashionably slender waist, but Miss Brewer had insisted that no lady of quality would leave her bedchamber without being tightly constrained.

"Working girls don't wear corsets, so you'll have to go without," Mrs. Waters explained as she helped me out of the garment. "And you'll have to dress yourself, so I've chosen the gown with the front buttons. The quality is too fine for a commoner, but you can say the dress was a gift...a hand-me-down from a previous employer."

I listened numbly, considering for the first time the implications of masquerading as one from a lower class. The dark blue gown was the simplest design I owned, one I wore when I visited some of the poorer families that tenant-farmed adjoining my father's estate. It would be a little snug worn without a corset, but only slightly. I was naturally slender in the waist and hips though my chest had filled out surprisingly these last six months.

I quickly buttoned the gown while Mrs. Waters rearranged my hair into a simpler style.

"You'll have to wear one of Leah's bonnets as yours are all too fancy, but I think your plain navy coat will suffice. Just keep your head down, and don't let anyone see your face."

Her tone was filled with concern, and I trembled, grasping her outstretched hands for comfort.

"My face?" I shook my head, not understanding.

"Aye. Your bone structure's too fine, Miss Bella; you've got nobility stamped all over your lovely features."

I gaped, surprised at her words. I'd never thought of myself as anything but, well...plain.

"I've put some old gloves in the bag. Wear them in public to keep these smooth hands covered. They'll give ye away in a heartbeat."

She grabbed the worn bag she'd used to pack the few belongings I was taking with me, then placed a small, velvet bag in my hands.

"Your mother's pearls; tie them to your chemise."

I nodded, quickly obeying, and then donned the plainest of my coats before hurrying to follow her out the door. Pausing for a second, I looking back at the room I had called my own since leaving the nursery, then with a stifled sob I rushed to catch up. We took the back stairs, passing by the servants quarters and out through the kitchen.

Jacob, my childhood friend and Billy's son, was waiting in the courtyard. He was holding an old farm horse that the stable master had put out to pasture some time ago. The nag was hitched to a tray-backed cart normally used by the gardeners, a few sacks of apples in the rear.

I stopped and stared. Where was my father's carriage and team of four blacks? But of course, I realized, my usual means of transportation was not an option under these anything but usual circumstances.

Jacob beckoned me over, his expression grim as he took my bag and stowed it in the back of the cart. Leah, Mrs. Water's daughter and my lady's maid, came running from the house, a bag and bonnet in her arms.

"Here, put this on," she ordered, pushing the plain, black hat into my hands.

I'd grown up with Leah, and she rarely stood on ceremony despite our different stations. My father had fostered an unusual household, tolerating a degree of familiarity with his staff not commonly accepted. It didn't bother me as it was all I'd ever known, though Leah's attitude could sometimes rankle. A large part of her problem was that she was in love with Jacob, who unfortunately held an

unrequited—and impossible—torch for me. It was why I tolerated her disrespect. I loved Jacob, too, but like a brother. Even if our stations had allowed it, I knew I could never see him any other way.

My scattered thoughts returned to the present as I was bundled into the back of the cart with Leah perched on a sack beside me.

"Ye'll have to lie down and hide, Bella." Jacob's tone was apologetic.

"I...I understand." I would do whatever it took to keep my promise to my father. Crouching down, I let Leah cover me with a coarse blanket. She was about to pull it over my head when Billy came up to the cart and reached out to place his hand on my shoulder.

"Ye'd best not write or try to make contact until ye're safe with the Duke, at Worthington Hall, Miss Bella."

I nodded in understanding. "Lord Carlisle might not be in residence." I voiced my fear and Billy's forehead furrowed with concern. "Don't worry, I've got a plan. I'll stay hidden until I can speak with him in person."

"Aye, ye do that, girlie," Billy nodded, his brogue deepening with distress. He might technically be an employee, but Billy had grown up with my father and was more like family to me than a servant. He embraced me quickly, then I huddled down as Leah urged Jacob to get moving. With my head covered, I didn't get to take a last look at the home and people I loved, but their images were burned in my memory. Of my father, I couldn't bear to think. I would not be there to nurse him in his final hours—if he was even still alive—or attend his funeral.

Grateful for the musty blanket that covered my head, I gave in to my grief and wept until exhaustion overtook me.

~AFL~

I'd love to hear what you think of the introduction.

xxx TLSue

A Rude Awakening

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm just having fun transporting her wonderful characters back in time.

Thank you so much to all the readers who put this story on alert and for all the lovely reviews. An extra special thank you to Content1 for giving A Forbidden Love, and my vamp story, Once Bitten, a shout out in her author notes over on Sins Of My Past.

A heartfelt thanks to my betas, SqueakyZorro and Chloe Cougar, for all their hard work and for helping me with all the ye's and yer's.

I've decided to update this story twice a week for a while as the initial chapters are quite short, and I'm very keen for us to get to the good stuff!

Updated: Saturday October 15th 2011

Words: 2666

Chapter 2

Rude Awakening

I was stiff and sore when I woke...and cold. The thin blanket Leah had used to cover me was barely sufficient to keep out the early spring chill. Shivering, I went to rise, but Leah pushed me down, hissing at me to keep quiet. It seemed like hours passed, long uncomfortable hours, before she removed the blanket and let me lift my aching body into a sitting position.

"Sorry," she muttered. "There were too many people about, but ye should be safe now."

I rubbed my eyes and noted that the sky was beginning to darken.

"Where are we?" I asked, addressing my question to Jacob. He attempted a reassuring smile though it didn't reach his eyes.

"Just outside of Colyton."

I frowned; the old horse pulling our cart wasn't making very good time.

"How far is it to Worthington Hall?" I asked, feeling a stirring of panic. At this rate it would take days to traverse the county, let alone half the country.

"Don't fret, Bella. We're just using old Ned here till we get to town, then we'll travel by public coach. This was the best disguise for getting away from Forkston."

"Did...did he pass us on the road? Lord Hunter?" I swallowed hard, afraid to hear the answer.

Jacob shook his head. "We took the back lanes, slow but safer. We'll catch the overnight coach in Colyton to put some more distance between us and home. Tomorrow night we'll find an inn to sleep in."

I nodded, trying to hide my fear. I'd never been so far from home without my father before. We'd visited the seaside once when I was much younger, and I'd enjoyed our stay in the country inns we'd frequented. But Papa said he'd seen enough of the world when he went to war and was content to stay close to home. I had a sinking feeling my horizons were about to be broadened when it came to travel experiences...and not necessarily in a good way.

My intuition proved correct.

That first night spent cramped together in the public coach with half a dozen other travellers was just the beginning of my education. Sleeping in the stuffy, uncomfortable, poorly-sprung coach was nigh on impossible.

"Bella should sit between us, for extra protection," Jacob suggested as we were about to board.

Leah snorted and practically shoved me into the corner position before climbing in beside me, leaving Jacob to take the outside seat. I didn't mind, as long as I didn't have to sit beside one of the rough-looking travellers accompanying us in the coach. It was a very long night, and we were tired, hungry and long overdue for a break when we finally disembarked the next morning.

"Keep yer mouth shut and yer head down," Leah warned when we alighted from the coach. I opened my mouth to protest but Jacob confirmed her instructions.

"Yer accent—or lack of one—will give ye away, Bella."

We were pretending Leah and Jacob were a married couple and that I was their shy young cousin, travelling together to our new place of employment in the north. It was another reason for me to keep my face hidden and avoid interactions with the strangers we met along the way. Jacob and Leah were both much darker than I in hair and complexion—it was rumored their two families shared Romany blood. My brown hair leant more toward auburn than black, and my skin was extremely pale. I'd been told my complexion was fashionable, but growing up around so many golden-skinned people, I'd often felt the odd one out...and a little jealous.

Miss Brewer said I would change my opinion when I was toasted in London for my pale, creamy complexion, though I found that hard to believe. Now I'd probably never know. London and my first season, which I'd been due to experience later this spring, seemed a lifetime away.

The meal Jacob bought for us to break our fast was bland but filling. I didn't complain.

"How long will it take us to get to Worthington Park?" I whispered as we waited while our next coach was being readied for departure. "Will you have sufficient money to get home again?"

"Don't fret, Bella," Jacob murmured before gently patting my back in reassurance. "Pa gave me enough of Sir Charles' money to cover our costs and any emergencies. We should have ye safe in about five or six days, if all goes well."

Nodding, I wondered what would become of the Blacks, the Waters, and all our other staff. I couldn't imagine they would want Lord James as their new master...but where could they go? Finding new homes and employment for so many people would be an almost impossible undertaking.

As we travelled on, the scenes of towns and villages, country roads, farmland, and green pastures blurred together in my mind. I found it hard to concentrate, my mind skipping back to replay the horrid events in Forkston over and over, then forward to worry and fret at the unknown. There was no doubt in my mind that Lord James would claim self-defense and attempt to weasel out of taking responsibility for his violent actions. He had friends in very high places, and neither my word as a young lady—if I'd been present—nor that of the servants would carry much weight. My only hope was that Lord Carlisle would use his authority to intervene and see justice done...and my father avenged.

Exhausted beyond measure and aching as badly as if I'd been thrown from a horse—an unpleasant and rather undignified event that I'd been forced to endure all

too often when I was learning to ride—my relief when we arrived at the inn where we would be staying the night was so intense, I almost wept.

"Just a little longer, Bella," Leah whispered, putting an arm around my shoulder to steady me, surprising me with her support. My misgivings were not easily dispelled, however. When Papa and I had travelled in the past, I'd had Miss Brewer to assist and accompany me: staying in private sleeping quarters, eating in private dining rooms and avoiding the public areas. This would be an altogether different experience.

Keeping my head low, I huddled between Jacob and Leah as we entered the public bar. My nose wrinkled at the smell of stale beer, tobacco smoke, and unwashed bodies, though I tried to remain unobtrusive while Jacob spoke to the innkeeper and negotiated a meal and a place for us to sleep...a patch of *floor* in a communal sleeping room.

I was horrified.

"Surely we can afford a room with a bed?" I whispered urgently as we moved through to the dining area with its long trestle tables, bench seating, and noisy crowd. I'd never shared a bed in my life but was more than willing to make allowances.

"That's not how servants travel," Leah hissed and I hesitated. Grabbing me by the arm, she hurried us to the far side of the room, pushing me to sit on a spare patch of bench by the wall. "If we hire a room it would be like advertising you're here."

I flushed, embarrassed, and hunched lower where I sat. I'd never thought about where the servants stayed when we travelled. Surely Papa would have provided for them, certainly something better than a patch of floor?

Jacob, sensing my chagrin, leaned over from the opposite side of the table where he'd taken a seat and explained, "Your father stayed at better quality inns with bunkrooms for his servants. This place better fits our cover story, and Lord James isn't likely to look for us here."

Nodding, I kept my eyes on the plate of stewed meat that Leah placed in front of me. It was hardly appetizing, but I chewed and swallowed as best I could. I wasn't sure what to make of the ale I was given to drink, having only ever drunk light sherry or fruit wines before, but it was the only drink on offer.

"Just sip slowly, Bells," Jacob encouraged, using the pet name I'd not heard from

him since I was a girl. "It will help ye sleep tonight."

"That's another thing, *Bells*," Leah whispered, leaning close. "Ye can't go calling yerself Isabella Swan till this thing is sorted. How about Belinda, Belinda Brown?"

I sat back, shaken.

"All right, Bel...Belinda Brown." Just until I was safe again, with Lord Carlisle.

The others continued eating while I pushed the tasteless gruel around my plate, my appetite having disappeared. The crowd around us was growing noisier and more raucous as the ale took effect. Glancing up at a particularly loud burst of laughter, I saw a group of men grab hold of one of the serving girls and pull her across their laps. Her peasant blouse was cut very low and pulled down across one shoulder, almost baring her very ample breasts. I stared, horrified and concerned for the poor girl, then saw that she was laughing and joining in with their strange banter.

"Ye'll have to show me some coin before ye get to take ye pleasure," the girl laughed as she crawled off their laps, while the men continued to stroke and paw at her bared flesh.

"How about I show ye what's in me pants, Annie?" one of the men shouted. "Ye'll be so impressed, ye'll offer to do me for free!"

The room broke out into more raucous laughter, and I stared, bewildered.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Jacob ordered over the noise, urging a blushing Leah to her feet. I quickly followed, the entire tableau making little sense.

"Shouldn't we try and help that girl?" I asked, speaking louder than I'd intended and unwittingly drawing attention to myself.

Shouts and catcalls rang out as Jacob quickly herded us from the room, careful to keep his body between us and the men who'd directed their focus our way, their comments lewd and baffling. I was shocked beyond measure when grimy hands reached out to paw at my skirts as we hurried by. As soon as we'd gained the safety of the sleeping room, Jacob directed us to a space in a corner by the far wall.

"Here, quickly, lie down and cover yerselves," he said, passing us a thin blanket each. "Bella against the wall, then you, Leah. I'll stay on the outside and guard ye both."

Quickly obeying I pulled the blanket up to my chin when two men staggered in and tried to push their way past Jacob. They were not successful. Jacob stood well over six feet tall, a solid wall of muscle due to his hours at the forge. He was apprenticed to the local blacksmith and had the bulging biceps and solid fists to prove it.

"Oh come on, lad, don't be greedy," the men whined when they realized there was no getting past him. "We're willing to share; just give us the little, fair-skinned one and we'll leave ye alone. We just want some fun; don't be denying the lass."

"Get out...now," Jacob growled, and I flinched at his tone, never having heard such steel in his voice before.

The men hesitated, but then the innkeeper barged in, demanding to know who was causing the disturbance. Quickly sizing up the situation, he tugged the offenders out by their collars, calling them by name.

When all was quiet Jacob lay down beside us, breathing hard. I peeked out from the blanket, shaking so violently I could barely speak.

"Th...thank you. Jacob," I managed. "I didn't mean to...to..."

"It's not your fault," Leah surprised me again, coming to my defense. "Ruffians like that will go after anything in a skirt, but we need to find you a better coat. Yours is too fitted and shows off every curve."

I gasped, shocked that she would speak of such things in front of Jacob.

"Ye're right, Leah," Jacob said into the semi-darkness. "Maybe we can trade it for a looser one in the morning. The serving girls are all much bigger than Bella. Her coat won't fit them, but one of them is sure to want it anyway because of the quality. A bigger coat will hide her figure better."

As they continued to discuss their plans to keep me safe, I lay huddled against the wall. I couldn't remember the last time I'd lain on a floor, let alone tried to sleep in such a position. Not that sleep was very likely with all the frightening images playing over in my mind. Though I did my best to hold them back, tears welled from my eyes and coursed down my cheeks.

"It's all right, Bella," Leah whispered, putting her arm around my shaking shoulders. Jacob reached past her to pat my back as we clung to each other for the rest of the long, miserable night.

The next few days followed much the same pattern: barely edible meals, long days spent travelling by crowded, poorly-sprung public coach, nights in rough inns and alehouses. It was a little easier to avoid attention in the oversized coat Leah had traded for mine, yet still the men noticed me. I didn't understand their comments or gestures, and neither Jacob nor Leah would enlighten me. Then rumor began to circulate of an enraged Lord hunting a runaway 'bride' and offering a considerable reward for her return. The description matched mine, so Leah stained my face with soot, drawing in pock marks with a stick of lead. The disguise worked in that no one recognized me, but not even my 'disfigurement' discouraged the nightly drunks. I think some of them thought it meant I was more likely to accept their incomprehensible but clearly lewd advances.

I stayed close to Jacob and Leah at all times.

On day six we arrived at Piedmont. It was the town closest to Worthington Hall and where we arranged to catch the local transport to Worthey, the village nearest the ducal estate.

We decided it would be best if I traveled on to Worthington Hall alone from Worthey and send word back to Jacob and Leah of the situation. I was *fairly* certain that Lord Carlisle would offer to accompany us back to Forkston to confront Lord Hunter, but, of course, I couldn't be sure. He was a very important and no doubt busy man, after all, though I had high hopes as he and my father had been friends for a very long time.

If Lord Carlisle *wasn't* in residence, then my plan was to gain employment at Worthington Hall, remaining hidden in plain sight until he returned, in which case it would create less questions if I arrived alone.

Jacob and Leah both expressed serious misgivings at my plan but could not come up with a better one.

"Ye don't know anything about being a servant, Bella," Leah argued.

"Yer voice, yer soft hands, yer ignorance of the life...they'll know ye're not what ye say ye are," Jacob added.

I appreciated their concerns but could not afford for them to undermine what little confidence I had. "Then we'll just have to come up with a story to explain the inconsistencies," I said adamantly, while quietly hoping that it would not be necessary to put my plan—or my *mettle*—to the test.

It took a while, but we eventually settled on a fabrication we hoped would not be needed. Unfortunately, those hopes were dashed almost as soon as we reached Worthey, as the little village was abuzz with the news of the Duke's recent and unexpected nuptials. Lord Carlisle and his new wife, Lady Esme, had travelled through the village on the way to their honeymoon on the Continent, not two days earlier. They weren't expected home for two to three months.

It took all my remaining courage not to weep at the news.

~AFL~

Thanks so much for reading. Next update on Tuesday.

Reviews are greatly appreciated and help bring a smile to my face after all the angst generated by writing my stories!

xxx TLSue

Fabrications

Stephanie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm just here to pay homage.

Thank you so for all the generous and encouraging reviews.

Thank you as always to my awesome betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar.

I had originally offered the following Jacob Out take to reviewers, but I've added it here before the chapter proper. It is unbeta'ed so apologies for any errors in grammar.

Posted: Monday October 17th 2011

Words: 2712

Out-take

A Beautiful Life

Jacob's POV

It was a sobering experience discovering your place in the world. Well...sobering when that place was as far down the ladder as mine turned out to be.

I loved Sir Charles Swan almost as much as my own father, but there were times when I'd secretly cursed the man. The memory did not sit well with me now that he'd been shot, most likely killed, and I was entrusted with the safe-keeping of his beloved daughter. It was just that he'd allowed me to grow up believing that I was virtually *equal* to his daughter, in his affection and in his eyes. The first was probably true, as I didn't think a man could fake the genuine fondness he'd always shown me. The second was not, for no matter how much Bella's father might seem to like and respect me—no doubt, in part due to the great respect he help for my own father—the gulf between us all was still vast and impassable.

Oh, you'd barely have noticed it was there on a day-to-day basis, not living in the household of a man like Sir Charles. He stood so little on ceremony that he could have easily moved into the village and lived with the commoners, and nobody would have noticed aught was amiss. My mistake was thinking that someone like me could

have moved the other way. But it was an understandable mistake.

The servants' quarters at Swan Manner were almost as well set up as the family's accommodations, the staff practically treated like family. I think my father and Harry Waters having served together with Sir Charles in the war had a lot to do with it.

Lady Swan, who I remembered as a smiling woman with a big laugh and a friendly manner rarely seen in one of her class—not that I'd known that at the time—had been as generous as her husband. She'd loved children, her daughter most of all, as it should have been, but me and my sisters almost as much. Growing up alongside Bella, I'd fooled myself into believing that she *was* my sister for a time. But then her mother had died giving birth to the baby boy that would have secured Swan Manner—for the family and the staff—and everything changed.

Sir Charles withdrew into himself, and Bella was left to practically raise herself. Oh, her father still set firm boundaries where she was concerned, becoming even more protective if anything. He seemed determined to shelter his daughter from the harsh realities of life as much as possible. But for a long time, he could barely look at his daughter without having to turn away, Bella's striking resemblance to her mother bringing tears to his eyes.

Not that Bella spent all her time alone. She had Mrs. Waters, Leah, and my older sisters to keep her company...and that crazy French Chef, Luis who'd come over from France and stayed on after Lady Swan's death. He'd been with Bella's mother since she was a child, the affection he felt for her readily extending to her daughter. It was hardly surprising. Bella was easy to love.

Then there was me, the boy who'd stuck by Bella's side through thick and thin, though I was probably more help than hindrance. The two of us were as thick as thieves growing up.

Smiling at the memories of the mischief we'd gotten into, I looked down at the girl who I'd loved, in one fashion or another, for as long as I could remember. Leah had finally relented and let her sit between us...or more accurately, I'd manipulated the seating arrangements on this, our final leg of the journey, by boarding first, knowing Leah couldn't leave Bella to the outside position. Bella had fallen asleep on my shoulder, exhausted by...*everything* I supposed. It had been a hard journey for all of us, but most of all for the sweet girl who, while she'd had a broader upbringing than others of her station, wasn't used to the hardships and crudeness of the working-class world. Truth be told, a lot of the things we'd seen and endured on this trip had made *medamned* uncomfortable.

But the worst of it was the tempting idea that had taken root in my thoughts.

I was twelve, Bella thirteen, when I'd realized my feelings for her were changing. Sir Charles had finally gotten around to arranging for a governess to come and teach his, by then, wayward daughter how to behave like the lady she was destined to be. The first time I'd seen her dressed 'properly' as Mrs. Brewer liked to say, it had knocked the wind fair out of my sails, and put thoughts in my head that had no right to be there...then...or now.

Loving someone who you could never be with...hurt. Deep down I knew that Bella didn't feel the same way as I did, seeing me as the brother she'd never had. But I'd secretly harboured the belief, well...more hope really, that if given half a chance she could come to love me, *really* love me, the way I loved her. Of course, my hope was an impossibility due to something that I'd only discovered in the last few years, a slowly dawning realization that the world wasn't actually the place I'd thought it to be. Our different stations in life, which we'd all but ignored for the first dozen years of our lives, were destined to keep us apart just as much as if one of us had been a fish, and the other a bird.

Except that things had changed, and I couldn't quite shake the insidious thought from my mind. If Sir Charles was dead, and I didn't see how he could have survived such a grievous wound, and if Lord Cullen wasn't of a mind to help, then Bella would be on her own in the world and at the mercy of evil bastards like Lord Hunter. Bella was oblivious to the stunning beauty she'd become, still imaging herself as the skinny, freckle-nosed girl she'd been some years before. But I'd seen the way the young toffs had started to look at her, like she was one of their fancy horses they bought at auction. Another family would have sold her to the highest bidder by now, but not Sir Charles. He wanted to keep her with him as long as she was willing, and would only give her hand to a man he knew would treat her well.

But Sir Charles wasn't around to protect Bella anymore, and the job had fallen to me. There was little I could do to safeguard her from the so-called gentlemen of the *ton*—they were a law unto themselves, and a girl like Bella wouldn't stand a chance without a father's protection—not here in England, anyway.

And that was my plan...more a partially formed idea, in reality. If I could somehow get us safely out of the country, on a boat to America, we could make a new life for ourselves in a place where class didn't matter and a man was judged by his merit, not his breeding.

And if I'd been a man, not the sixteen-year-old boy I was in truth, I would have begged Bella to take a chance and come away with me. But the only money we had

was the little my dad had given us for this journey, I was years away from having my trade, and I'd promised to get Leah home safe to her family. Not that any of those things would have stopped me if I'd believed Bella would say yes.

But deep down I knew she wouldn't.

Her faith was in Lord Carlisle, and truth be told, if he put his influence and wealth behind her, Bella would have all the protection a young lady could ever need. And why would he not? Bella was a beautiful girl inside and out, and she deserved a beautiful life...a life I could never give her

~AFL~.

Chapter 3

Fabrications

Bella's POV

The three of us sat disconsolate in the otherwise deserted public dining area of the local inn. We'd taken the risk of spending some money on a cheap but private room the night before, and I'd never enjoyed a bath and a bed so much in my life.

"Ye can't pretend to be a servant for *three months*, Bella," Jacob broke the silence, voicing my fear aloud.

"She's tougher than ye think," Leah said in my defence. "Besides, what choice does she have? Ye've heard the rumours. Lord Hunter's spread the story that she ran away from their wedding, *and* he's saying he's her legal guardian. If he finds her, he'll force her to wed, and that'll be the end of that."

I shuddered at Leah's blunt words, and Jacob gave her a pointed look.

"What I don't understand is why he still wants to marry me? He must know I'll never forgive him for shooting Papa and that we could never live peaceably as man and wife. He's got what he wanted: Swan Manor. Why can't he leave me alone?"

Jake and Leah exchanged another one of their looks, the ones they always refused to explain.

"There's a lot ye don't understand Bella," Jacob said softly, reaching to pat me on the hand. I turned my hand palm upward and linked my fingers with Jacob's much

larger ones before reaching out to Leah with my other hand. The young woman, who I'd known all my life and was in many ways more like an older sister than a servant, smiled at me. And I considered how different things would have been if we'd shared the same station in life. We'd definitely grown closer during this ordeal, and I could sense a growing bond between her and Jacob...at least I hoped so. It would be good if *something* positive were to come of this nightmare.

Bringing my thoughts back to Jacob's words, I pleaded, "Well why don't *you* two explain what I need to know." While it might be customary for a young lady of my station to be protected from the coarser aspects of life, my sheltered upbringing wasn't helping me out in the world of the working class. Half the time I felt like I had no idea what was going on or the meaning behind the words being said!

"It's not necessary, Bella," Leah interjected. "I've spoken to some of the local girls and they all say the same thing: Lord Carlisle is not your typical noble; *that's* something we can all agree on."

I tended to forget that both Jacob and Leah's fathers had fought alongside Papa and the Duke against the French. They'd grown up with the same tales and history as I had, of Lord Carlisle's heroics and honour...and my father's.

"Apparently he has very strict rules against staff fraternizing." Leah's face flushed. "And he insists that girls who work for him can do so, er...unmolested by the toffs, um gentry, I mean." She shrugged apologetically.

"Unmolested?" I enquired, knowing my query was sure to earn another look.

"She means ye'll be safe at Worthington Park. No one will...bother ye."

"Well that's all right then, isn't it?" I looked hopefully from one to the other. They were silent for a long moment before they nodded in unison.

"I can't see any other option. We don't have enough money to keep us all for three months, and even with Leah's disguise ye've been attracting too much attention," Jacob admitted reluctantly.

"Do you think the story we came up with will do?" I asked, looking for reassurance. "Can I pull off the ruse?"

"I'm sure ye'll be fine, Bella." Jacob did his best to sound encouraging, but he couldn't completely hide the uncertainty in his voice. Then his face brightened a little, and he joked, "If they let ye bake up some of your lovely pastries and such,

they'll realize what a treasure ye are. Ye won't be able to escape the kitchen even after the Duke returns."

I smiled, grateful for his words, and the seed of an idea that his jesting words planted. It appeared my father's relaxed household relationships may have done me an unexpected favor.

When my mother came to England she'd been accompanied by the faithful family retainers who'd kept her safe during the long years of unrest. Louis was a very talented pastry chef who could have easily found employment with the highest families of the *ton*, yet he'd stayed with us, even after Mama's death. I'd adored him from an early age, dogging his footsteps and picking up some unusual skills for a girl of my class. It was not something that would have gone over at all well with the neighbouring upper-class families, but I loved to bake. Many a time I'd had to hide a smile behind my hand when 'compliments to our marvelous cook' for the delicious pastries or desserts our guests enjoyed should actually have been sent my way.

"You're right; if I can get them to let me work in the kitchen, I'll be fine. Three months will pass like...*that*." I clicked my fingers to demonstrate.

The three of us smiled at each other, though the expressions didn't quite reach Jacob's or Leah's eyes.

With my decision made it seemed best not to procrastinate. The plan was for Jacob and Leah to wait for word that I was settled at Worthington Hall before making their way back to Forkston. I wondered what they would do when they returned home but couldn't bring myself to ask, holding myself together by avoiding thoughts of home and all that I'd lost. At least Jacob and Leah would have their parents to help them through the transition...and hopefully each other.

Jacob arranged for me to travel to Worthington Estate with a local merchant delivering goods. We would arrive early in the afternoon, and I'd send word of my situation back with the merchant. At least we'd heard one piece of good news; quite a number of Carlisle's extended family members and their friends were in residence, having come for the nuptials and staying on to visit. Consequently, extra servants were needed to cope with the increased number of nobility and gentry in residence. I briefly wondered why Papa hadn't been invited to the wedding but brushed the unsettling thought aside.

"We could stay with ye, get ourselves hired on as well," Jacob offered at the last minute. Leah looked startled at Jacob's suggestion, then nodded hesitantly.

I was sorely tempted, and tears sprang to my eyes...*again*. I'd become a veritable watering pot this last week, a fact I hated.

"Thank you so much, both of you," I said wiping my eyes with a handkerchief. "But I can't ask you to stay. Your families need you...and Jacob, you can't risk your apprenticeship." I knew how important it was for him to obtain his tradesman's qualification. His ability to support a family was dependent upon it.

"I could always try for it again later, Bells. Ye know I'll stay if ye ask," he replied solemnly.

I studied my hands, wondering if I was reading more into Jacob's words than he intended.

"Thanks, Jake, but its best you go home with Leah."

Jacob looked at me for a long moment and then nodded his agreement.

Our leave taking was quiet. I hugged them both, holding tight before letting go, then Jacob assisted me up onto the cart's bench seat, my small bag stowed beneath my feet. The merchant promised to meet Jacob at the inn on his return, to give them my news in exchange for a modest sum.

I waved goodbye to the servants that had always been so much more to me—my best friends—then turned abruptly to face the rough-looking brown cob as it strained against the traces, forcing the heavy-laden cart into lurching motion. With my heart pounding in my chest and tears clogging my throat, I didn't look back.

~AFL~

Oh gosh...very sad and angsty, I know. But not forever! So, any thoughts on what Worthington Hall will be like?

If you're enjoying A Forbidden Love, you might like to check out my vamp story, Once Bitten. It's very romantic, lots of fun, but they do call me the Queen of UST! (That's Unresolved Sexual Tension for those like me who would otherwise have to google it to find out.)

Reviews are much appreciated. I love hearing your thoughts and ideas on the story, or just a couple of words to let me know you're out there!

xxx TLSue

Masquerade

Thanks, as always, to Stephenie Meyer for her wonderful creation. No copyright infringement intended.

Thank you so much for all the encouraging reviews and especially to those who've come over from my vamp story, Once Bitten, to give my Twi/Regency/Romance a go. You guys are wonderful. :D

Extra special thanks to my betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for taking on beta'ing two of my stories at once. You both go above and beyond, and I'm privileged to have your support.

I'm glad you enjoyed Jacob's POV. I promise to give him his own HEA further down the track. Now, onward to Worthington Hall!

Posted: Thursday October 20th 2011

Words: 2950

Chapter 4

Masquerade

The towering forests between the village and Worthington seemed to go on forever, the dark, green canopy enclosing us in an eerie approximation of night. Shivering in my thin coat, I sighed with relief when we finally broke through into the pale wintry light, briskly rubbing my arms to try and warm myself. The countryside was beautiful in a slightly untamed manner, but the green fields, hedgerows, and meandering rivers gradually gave way to more formal landscaping as we travelled on. After another long drive, we topped a rise, the road passing through a tree-lined avenue of oaks that rose cathedral-like towards the sky. Then Worthington Hall finally came into view.

Gasping, I rose from the seat.

"Aye, it affects everyone like that when they first sees it," the merchant commented on my reaction. "But ye'd best be sitting back down; we've still a fair way to go."

The road before us extended in a gentle gradient down the hill and then split into two, veering to either side of a long, roughly rectangular shaped lake that stretched for furlongs up the valley. Astonishingly, dramatic fountains could be seen shooting water high in rhythmic patterns at regular intervals. Beyond the lake there were elaborate formal gardens, a sweeping circular drive, and then a house that could only rightly be described as a castle.

And not a quaint, fairy-book castle.

While not having any direct experience, only what I'd had described to me by my father and Mrs Brewer, I was fairly certain that Lord Carlisle's family home could rival a royal domain for sheer size and grandeur.

My heart sank.

I told myself that Lord Carlisle was the same person who'd shared fishing stories with Papa, brought me gifts of books and art supplies, and enjoyed my cherry tarts and peach crumble. But it was difficult to reconcile the man who'd visited Swan Manor during my childhood, telling me to call him *Uncle*, with the Duke who made this intimidating edifice his home. I hoped he'd be happy to see me and eager to help, but what if he was angry or embarrassed by my bringing my problems into his presence? And why hadn't he invited my father to his wedding? In fact, if he and Papa were such good friends, why in all the years they'd been acquainted had he never issued an invitation for us to visit his home?

Having no answers to these questions, I swallowed down my fear, taking deep breaths to ward off the panic rising in my chest. I shuddered to think what would become of me if Carlisle wasn't willing to come to my aid.

Squaring my shoulders, I put these thoughts aside. There were enough hurdles to cross to ensure my immediate safety without worrying about problems that I would not have to face for months.

As we drew closer I was increasingly stunned by the sheer size of Worthington Hall. My home, Swan Manor, was the second-largest house in Forkston, but it would be easily lost in a small corner of one of its many wings. Looking up and up, I gulped as we passed beneath the towering stone walls on our way around to the service courtyard, feeling thoroughly intimidated.

The merchant pulled the cart to a halt, and workers quickly approached to assist with the unloading. "Knock on that door over to the left and ask to see Mrs. Cope," he offered gruffly, pointing as he spoke. "She's the head housekeeper and will take

care of ye."

After thanking him I carefully lowered myself from the cart, silently congratulating myself for accomplishing the feat without assistance...and without falling flat on my face. Grabbing my small bag from under the seat, I brushed off my grimy, dusty skirts—I'd never worn a dress for an entire day before, let alone days and nights for a week—and walked towards the servants' entrance. A young lad of about twelve or thirteen opened the door at my knock and stood shyly looking at me from beneath his fringe.

"Can I 'elp ye miss?"

"May I speak with Mrs. Cope, the head housekeeper, please? My name is Miss Belinda Brown," I requested politely.

The boy gaped at me, standing frozen to the spot.

"I'm not expected, but I'm sure Mrs. Cope will see me. I'm here to apply for a position working in the household." I smiled but he continued to stare without saying anything, and my confidence waned.

"Oi, wots the 'old-up, Seth? Someone boverin' ye agin, or 'as the cat got ye tongue?"

A large, bearded man wearing a blood-stained apron and holding a meat cleaver manhandled the boy out of the way. He glared at me, and then his eyes widened.

"Oi! Excuse me, milady." He bobbed an incongruous-looking bow, his very large belly interfering with the movement. "The boy didn't mean no 'arm. Ye've been sent to the wrong door, that's all."

"Oh, I have? I would like an interview with Mrs. Cope, to ask her about obtaining a position here in the household. Is there another entrance I should approach?"

My request was met with silence as both the very large man and the young boy gaped at me like I was a two-headed lamb at a travelling fair.

"But...but ye're a lady, ain't ye?" The man frowned and looked me up and down several times. I swallowed hard, dismayed. I'd not even made it past the door without discovery. This was going to be more difficult than I'd expected.

"Oh, no, I'm not a lady," I demurred, happy to be able to tell the truth...at least in

this instance. I might be a legitimate member of society, but while Papa was a highly decorated officer and had received a knighthood, by birthright he was merely an 'Honorable,' the grandson of a Baron. Consequently, I was merely a 'miss,' not a 'lady.'

"I'm here to work...to find employment." I stuck to my story, not knowing what else to do.

The man's mouth opened and closed like a fish, revealing some alarmingly blackened teeth. Startled, I took an involuntary step back and would have fallen off the step had it not been for a quick-thinking footman who caught me around the waist, giving me a chance to steady myself.

"Well, well, what have we 'ere? A pretty little miss, I'll wager," the young, fair-haired man said with a broad smile.

Clearly *he* hadn't assumed I was a lady; he'd be out of a job if he dared speak to one in such a manner.

"She says she's after an inta, inter...wants to talk with Mrs. Cope about a job," the lad called Seth piped up.

"In that case, let me escort ye. It would be me pleasure." The young man continued to smile broadly. "The name's Mike, Mike Newton."

"Thank you, Mike, I appreciate the assistance." My smile faded when he faltered at the sound of my 'non' accent. I'd always performed passably well at charades but had never tried to alter my accent before, well not to one typical of the English working class. Languages and accents were not my strongest suit. My French was flawless due to my mother's influence, but my Italian and German were merely passable and that had been with years of tuition. I suspected the distorted vowels and varied accents I'd heard on my journey from Forkston were beyond my ability to mimic.

"This way, then." Mike looked puzzled as he directed me past the gaping onlookers which by now included a number of other kitchen workers.

The room we entered was clearly used for butchering, and I held my breath, averting my eyes as best I could until we were past the gruesome sights and smells. The hallway beyond was pleasant but plain, leading past rooms filled with people involved in various industrious activities, mostly related to food preparation. Finally we reached what appeared to be the housekeeper's office where Mike directed me

to wait on a hard-backed chair in the hallway by the door.

"Well, good luck then, miss." The young footman hesitated for a moment, fiddling with the buttons on his red livery vest. "I guess I'll be seein' ye...if ye stay?"

I smiled, thankful for his assistance, then folded my hands in my lap to stop myself from fidgeting with nervousness as I settled in to wait for Mrs. Cope. Mike continued to gape for a moment, then tugged briefly at his forelock before frowning and backing away down the hallway.

My father had taught me to treat people with respect regardless of class, but there was clearly something about my manner that was setting me apart from the role I was pretending to play. I could only hope the story I'd concocted would cover the discrepancies. Fortunately, I was not required to wait long before a neat, grey-haired woman approached.

"I'm Mrs. Cope, the head housekeeper. You're here to apply for a position?" she queried, tilting her head.

I stood quickly, bobbing a curtsey as per Leah's instructions.

"Yes, Ma'am. My name is Miss Belinda Brown. I'm here to apply for a position as an assistant pastry cook, or failing such a position being available, wherever I may be of service," I explained.

Mrs. Cope's eyebrows rose and she stared for a moment before ushering me through to her office.

"You'd best come in then, Miss Brown."

I followed her in, taking a seat before the desk.

"Please, just call me Bella," I said, using the name I preferred. Lord James had only ever addressed me as Isabella so I'd decided it should be safe, desperately needing something of my true self to hold onto.

"Bella, then," Mrs. Cope nodded. "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

Taking a deep breath, I then launched into my recently concocted story, wishing I'd had a bit more time to rehearse and double check it for flaws.

"My father managed an inn near the seaside catering to holiday makers. I worked

mostly in the kitchen assisting the French pastry chef. I also assisted with serving in the private dining rooms," I'd seen it done often enough to be fairly confident I knew what was required, "and occasionally in general cleaning and tidying." This I hadn't done since I was a young girl, following Mrs. Waters around when Mama was busy.

"My father died very recently, leaving me orphaned and I was forced to...to find an alternative place of employment." The grief that this statement elicited was genuine, and it took me a moment to regain my composure. Mrs. Cope waited patiently for me to continue.

"I'd heard good reports about Worthington Hall, that it is a safe place for a young woman by herself, so I decided to journey here and apply for a position," I finished in a rush and waited for the housekeeper's response.

She eyed me for a moment while drumming her fingers lightly on the scarred but highly polished desktop. "You've clearly received a level of education far above the norm for a servant...or pastry cook."

It wasn't a question, yet it was, and I gulped, hoping this part of my concocted story would sound plausible.

"My mother was from a good family and insisted I receive a proper education. She died when I was ten, but a friend of hers—a governess—retired at the inn and saw to it that my mother's wishes were carried out." I held my breath and waited.

Mrs. Cope studied me for a long moment and then sighed.

"You're clearly a determined young woman and no stranger to tragedy; I'm just not sure how well-acquainted you are with hard work. I will take you on for a month to start with and we'll see how you fit in. We already have a full complement of cooks, though I suppose a skilled assistant won't go astray. What we are sorely in need of is more maids and serving girls." She stood, motioning for me to follow her as she left the office and walked briskly down the corridor. I grabbed my bag, running to catch up.

"I'll give you a trial with our pastry chef tomorrow afternoon and we'll see what you're capable of. In the meantime you'll spend your time cleaning, setting tables and serving in the breakfast dining room. With all the extra guests, there's plenty of work to keep you busy."

Entering a storage room, she began to remove items of clothing, piling them up in my arms.

"Here is your uniform. Staff rise at five-thirty a.m., breakfast promptly at six. Don't be late. The household tend to keep country hours, so breakfast must be available for family and guests from seven-thirty a.m. until ten. Morning tea is served at eleven and luncheon at one p.m. Staff take their midday and evening meals in shifts depending on their duties. You will present yourself to Chef Peters in the kitchen at two p.m. and remain there until eight p.m., then you'll be excused to spend your free time in your room. Lights out by ten. You'll have one afternoon free per week as well as the opportunity to attend a Sunday service on the grounds no less than once every three weeks."

I swallowed hard, overwhelmed by the intimidating work schedule. I didn't normally rise until seven-thirty or eight in the morning and was used to considerable freedom when it came to my schedule. After the harrowing week I'd just experienced, I was sorely in need of a good rest, one I clearly wasn't going to get.

Mrs. Cope exited the storeroom and showed me into another room beside the water-closets where she instructed me to change into my uniform. I hesitated when she remained, but she tilted her head, her gaze steady and I quickly removed my tired looking gown. It was then I realized her purpose. She took one look at my now soiled but finely embroidered and quality silk chemise and shook her head.

"Just as I thought; not at all the attire I would expect of an innkeeper's daughter. Your dress and shoes are in dire need of a good clean but their quality is unmistakable. They could have been a gift from a guest but the rest? Other than your jacket, you're dressed in the best of quality right down to your petticoats and stockings." Her eyebrows rose as she indicated my too-fancy undergarments, clearly waiting for an explanation.

Trembling, I bit down on my lower lip, a habit Mrs. Brewer had not been able to rid me of, despite much nagging. Tears welled in my eyes and I blinked them back.

"Please, Ma'am; I need employment and somewhere safe to live." Which was nothing less than the truth.

Mrs. Cope eyed me pointedly, her expression severe. "You're obviously running from something. Your parents? An unwanted betrothal?"

I shook my head, my expression pleading, "My parents truly are dead, my father barely seven days past." I wasn't sure if this was entirely correct and could only hope that Papa had died quickly, without suffering. "I'm not betrothed." No matter what the wicked Lord Hunter might claim, I thought. "I just couldn't remain where I was. It wasn't...safe with my father gone."

"What of family, connections? Have you been left completely unprotected?"

I hesitated. Lord Carlisle should prove to be all the connection and protection I required. *if* I found a way to survive until his return, and *if* he was the man I remembered from his visits with my father.

"I'm alone," I said, wringing my hands tightly before me. "There's no one."

"What of your mother's family? Or was she disowned for marrying beneath herself?"

I blinked at Mrs. Cope's question, startled at how she put the meagre facts I'd given her together and came to her own conclusions.

"I never met her family; she didn't like to speak of them," I answered truthfully.

"Mmm...orphaned, homeless, and without protection. I assume we can add penniless to the list of your woes?" Mrs. Cope asked not unkindly.

I nodded, as I considered Mama's pearls to be part of the secret I must keep until Lord Carlisle's return.

"What of your tale of working with a French pastry chef? Is that a fabrication?"

"Oh no, ma'am, Louis is an excellent chef and he taught me a great deal." I was terribly relieved that this part of my story was indeed true, and could only hope the knowledge I'd gained from my occasional hobby would be enough to secure my position in the household.

Mrs. Cope continued to stare and then seemed to come to a decision.

"Wait here. I'll bring you some spare underclothes and nightwear. It would be best if you put yours away. It *might* make it easier for you to fit in." The last was said with a shake of her head as she left the room.

Sighing with relief, I felt my shoulders sad. I was going to be allowed to stay.

After giving me the promised replacement clothing, Mrs. Cope left me to dress in private. The underclothes, chemise and petticoat were made from coarse, graying cloth, worn thin from repeated washings. I donned the long-sleeved white blouse and heavy black skirt that comprised my new uniform over the top of them, then put on my own low, black boots over the heavy woollen stockings she'd given me.

At least now I should look the part, I hoped. If I could just curb my upper-class tones and hard-won ladylike demeanour, I might have a chance of success with this charade. Though I had to admit, the reaction I'd received since arriving at Worthington Hall hadn't exactly inspired my confidence. If only I was as good at acting as I was at baking delicious pastries!

~AFL~

Thanks so much for reading. Reviews are like warm fuzzies for us hard-working writers and, let's face it, the only payment we're going to get! So, please leave a review, and let me know how you think Bella will fare. As for the arrival of a certain young gentleman, let's just say the next chapter *could* be called 'First Sighting'...but it isn't. :D

xxx TLSue

Oh My Edward

Stephenie Meyer created the wonderful characters of Twilight. I've just relocated them in time and place.

Thanks to my wonderful betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for all their help and support.

Thanks also to the many hundreds of new readers who signed up for A Forbidden Love this week, and extra special thanks for all the wonderful reviews. It's early days but your support is greatly appreciated! :D

Posted: Monday October 24th 2011 Words: 2126

PS: You might want to read on past the ANs at the bottom of the chapter to hear from a certain young gentleman regarding his opinion of a certain young maid!

Chapter 5

Oh...My...Edward...

To my relief, Mrs. Cope allowed me to send a message to the merchant to pass onto Jacob and Leah, letting them know that I'd been successful in my attempt to gain a position at Worthington Hall. Swallowing hard, I clamped down on the grief that rose up as I thought of my friends returning home without me. I'm not sure if Mrs. Cope sensed my distress but she gave me no time to mope, pointing to a place where I could store my belongings temporarily. In the evening, I would be shown to the room I was to share with some other serving girls in the attics.

"I'll pair you up with Jessica and Angela, both experienced girls. You'll room with them; just follow their lead," she informed me while striding briskly from the room and ascending the stairs to the first floor. Running to keep up, I followed her along another corridor to a work room where two girls, who looked about my age, were seated at a long table polishing a veritable mountain of silverware. The introductions were made swiftly, and I soon found myself seated beside them with a polishing cloth and a pile of cutlery before me.

I smiled shyly, and was relieved when both girls smiled in return.

"Ye're not from the village, are ye?" Angela asked. She was a slim girl with black hair tied neatly in a bun.

"No, I'm from a little town near the seaside," I answered, watching the girls' eyes widen at my well-rounded vowels.

"Well, wot ye doin' 'ere then?" Jessica, a slightly plump blonde, demanded.

"I'd heard this is a safe place to work," I answered tentatively.

Angela's eyes widened, her mouth forming an 'O.'

"It is...safe here?" I asked nervously.

"Oh yes," Angela gave me a reassuring smile, "Very safe. Ye've got no worries working for His Grace...even when he's away."

"Too damned safe, if ye ask me," Jessica muttered.

I stared, shocked to hear such language spoken so casually by a young woman, even after the week I'd spent sleeping rough in public inns.

"There's no such thing astoo safe, Jessica," Angela admonished.

"Yes, well, not all of us are scared of the opposite sex, ye know. I 'appen to like fraternisin' with the fellas."

"Well maybe ye should have thought of that before ye left your last position and came to Worthington Hall." Angela's tone was sweet but her expression determined.

"Why *did* you come here?" I asked, fascinated by the byplay.

Jessica shrugged then broke into giggles. "'Cos the Cullen Lords are the best-looking toffs in all of Britain. 'Ow was I to know His Grace would make 'em all keep it in their pants?"

I frowned, but decided not to ask to what she was referring.

"What makes ye think they'd be interested in ye?" Angela said lightly, "Besides, I thought ye liked Mike"

"I've 'ad no trouble getting the attention of the Lords afore." Jessica shrugged.

"And it's not like Mike is offerin' me his undyin' loyalty."

Angela nodded; her expression sympathetic. Then the room fell silent as we all set to polishing. I mulled over the odd conversation but could make little sense of their words.

While working steadily, the girls kept glancing towards the long windows that looked down on a vast cobblestone courtyard and nearby stables and carriage house. I wanted to ask what they were looking at but kept silent, deciding the less I spoke the better, especially while I was trying to gain acceptance. I would have to come up with an explanation for my unusual speech, well, unusual for a common serving girl, as it seemed to be causing me the most trouble.

The last thing I wanted was to denigrate my parents' memory in any way, but considering how poorly I was fitting in, I was tempted to encourage Mrs. Cope's incorrect but understandable conclusions. I'd heard rumours of upper class ladies marrying beneath themselves before and knew it was considered a terrible disgrace, which had always seemed a pity to me. In all honesty, I much preferred Jake's company to the stuffy, wimpish gentlemen of my acquaintance, but that didn't mean I'd ever viewed him as a potential beau. Even if I could have envisioned Jacob as more than a friend, it would not have been possible for us to contemplate marriage without dishonouring both our families, despite my father's enlightened views.

It was the way of our world, but it saddened me to have people think my mother had married beneath herself. Even worse was the idea that they would consider my father somehow inferior because of his station in life, but it seemed the best way to explain the inconsistencies in my behaviour. My other option was to let people come to their own conclusions, as long as those conclusions didn't link me to the tale of Lord Hunter's 'runaway bride.'

At a noise from outside, the girls dropped their cloths and raced to the window, kneeling down to peer out at the activity below. I hesitated, not wanting to be caught shirking my duties during my very first hour of employment. But after a few moments my curiosity got the better of me, and I crept over to kneel beside them.

"What are you looking at?" I whispered, and then my eyes widened as I caught sight of three men on horseback riding across the courtyard towards the stables, three of the most handsome men I'd ever seen.

"Who are they?" I gasped in awe.

"The Lordships," the girls sighed in unison.

"The big one with the dark hair; 'e's Lord Emmett Cullen, Viscount McCarty. He's His Grace's nephew, but he's lived with the Duke most of his life. 'Is parents got taken off in an epidemic when he was a lad," Jessica explained, her attention rapt.

"The tall, blond 'aired one is Lord Jasper Whitlock. 'E's an Earl with estates in the south," Angela explained.

"And then there's Edward..." Jessica sighed dreamily.

"That's *Lord* Edward, the Marquis of Masen, Lord Cullen's heir," Angela said sternly, then giggled, "And without a doubt the best-lookin' man alive."

I didn't argue. Edward rode tall in the saddle, his tousled hair the colour of honey tinged with gold. His face was almost too perfect, dazzling in its artistry with arching dark brows, wide eyes, and a straight nose and jaw-line that looked like they'd been chiselled by a master sculptor.

"Oh...my..." I whispered, a strange sensation fluttering in my stomach.

"Yeah well, don't be gettin' any ideas," Jessica muttered, crouching beside me. "If I've not been able to tempt 'im to break 'is father's 'no fraternisin'" rules, ye don't stand a chance."

I flushed with embarrassment, not exactly sure what she meant by 'fraternisation' but well aware that high ranking Lords did not spend time socialising with serving maids. "No, of course not. I wasn't thinking any such thing," I demurred, though I couldn't have said precisely what I was thinking.

Under different circumstances, I would have received a proper introduction to Edward as a peer...of sorts. I was under no illusions that anything would have come of the introduction. He was a high-ranking noble in direct lineage to the throne and undoubtedly one of the most sort after bachelor's in the empire, while I was a plain, shy girl from an inconsequential family.

"Lord Edward doesn't spend too much time here as he's got his own estates, but he's promised to take care of business for the Duke while he's away," Angela explained.

"Lord Emmett and 'is wife Lady Rosalie live 'ere most of the time as she doesn't like the cold, and the McCarty estates are in the north of Scotland. She's the Lady of the House while the Duke and 'is new Duchess, Lady Esme, are away," Jessica murmured, while continuing to stare avidly at the three men below as they

dismounted and handed their horses over to a flurry of grooms.

"Watch out for Lady Rosalie," Angela warned. "She's a right ice queen."

"A right bitch, ye mean," Jessica muttered, and I stifled a gasp, shocked to hear such language but not wanting to alienate myself from the girls whose friendship I would need if my charade was to succeed.

"Make's ye feel right sorry for Lord Emmett," she continued. "I hear she only lets him share her bed once a week, and 'e's in an' out so quick it's hardly worth the mention."

I was puzzled by Jessica's words but refrained from asking what she meant. It was customary for married members of society to keep separate bedrooms, though I had a vague memory of my parents sharing a room.

"What of Lord's Jasper and Edward? Are they married?" I asked instead, genuinely curious.

"Lord Jasper's got 'is sights set on the Duke's daughter, Lady Alice. Make a good match, with their both bein' so 'ighl-ranked an all. She's right smitten, too, if ye ask me, but I don't know what sort of husband e'll be. Randy bugger, I've heard, not that any of us girls are gettin' to enjoy 'is favors." Jessica grumbled. "Bloody 'no fraternisin' rules."

I gaped, unable to hide my shock at her crude language.

"Lord Edward's single...for the moment," Angela added, clearly unfazed by her friend's outlandish comments. "But he's the most eligible toff in the empire. The ladies'll be buzzin' like bees when they realize he's stuck here while the Duke's away. He normally keeps on the move so they can't catch him."

I was astounded by how much the girls knew about the private lives of the nobles they served and fascinated by their insights. Crouching beside them, my eyes remained fixed on the three handsome Lords conversing not far beneath our window position. But if I was honest, it was Lord Edward who held my gaze. While all three men were a sight to behold, there was something about Lord Carlisle's son that captured my attention, causing my heart to pound and my stomach to flutter. My interest must stem from having heard Lord Carlisle speak of his son—and daughter—on several occasions, I attempted to reassure myself, troubled by my unsettling response.

Then Edward looked up at our window and stared straight at me. The other girls squealed and ducked down below the sill, but I remained at the window boldly returning his gaze. Truth be told, I was frozen immobile, which had the same result.

Time seemed to stand still as we stared at one another. The sounds of the house, the horses, and the groomsmen drifting up from below all faded away as my focus narrowed in on the extraordinarily handsome young man standing in the courtyard below me. From this distance, I could not make out the colour of his eyes, but his gaze was penetrating—*mesmerising*—and held me fixed in place.

Lord Edward, the son of my potential saviour, continued to stare up at me for a long, fraught moment, and hope rose in my heart. But then he frowned and rubbed his brow before looking away dismissively... and whatever fantasies I'd momentarily indulged were quickly dispelled. Whether disguised as a servant or dressed in my finest dress, there wasn't the slightest possibility that a gentleman of Lord Edward's calibre could ever find anything of interest in a girl such as myself.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of work, introductions, more work, a hearty meal hastily eaten between more chores, before we were finally released to trudge wearily up four flights of stairs to our attic room. I'd never been so tired in my life, and the thought of rising at five a.m. the next morning filled me with dread.

Stowing my belongings in the timber chest at the foot of my narrow bed, I carefully hid my mother's pearls as best I could. Then I washed quickly from the bowl of water I'd filled myself from a barrel in the hallway, replenished daily from buckets carried up by the serving boys. The water was ice cold, but at this point I was just grateful I hadn't had to lug the buckets up all those stairs myself.

As exhausted as I was, I expected sleep to overcome me as soon as my head hit the thin pillow, but my overtired mind kept repeating the events of the day, and the previous week...all that I had lost...all that I had endured. My hopes for the future seemed particularly fragile when I remembered the cold, dismissive expression that had appeared on Lord Edward's face while he was looking at me, and tears seeped from my eyes as I silently cried myself to sleep.

~AFL~

Well, she's seen him, now they just need to meet...

I originally intended on writing this story only from Bella's POV, but Edward's thoughts kept invading my head. There will be a double up of POV chapters for a while until I've caught up to where I'd prewritten before

posting, but I endeavour to not just repeat the same scene. The EPOVS are well worth reading, as I have made sure to add something extra to the story each time.

xxx TLSue

Posted: Thursday November 3rd 2011 Words: 1795

This EPOV is unbeta'ed, so apologies in advance for any errors in grammar.

Ch 5 Outtake

First Sighting

EPOV

Tightening the reins, I felt my mounts powerful haunches bunching beneath him as he launched us over the massive log that had fallen across the path. Clearing it with room to spare, I nodded in satisfaction; the eighteen-hand black Percheron stallion was worth every guinea I'd paid.

"You've found yourself another ripe one, by the looks," my good friend and fellow connoisseur of horseflesh, Lord Jasper Whitlock, called to me as he slowed his chestnut Thoroughbred to a trot. He and my cousin had taken a slightly easier route through the section of forest, meeting me on the edge of the field closest to Worthington Hall.

"Edward's got the devil's own luck when it comes to choosing cattle," Emmett groused good-naturedly, his big bay gelding prancing sideways even after a long and tiring run.

Luck had nothing to do with it, which my cousin well knew, but he liked to needle me whenever possible, a leftover from our youth spent competing for my father's—his uncle's—approval and affection.

"Oh, come on, Em," Jasper spoke up in my defense, not that I was concerned. "Edward knows his bloodlines and has an excellent eye for quality. That's how he finds his champions and why he breeds the best hunters in the country."

Conversing more easily now that we'd slowed our mounts to a walk on our final approach to the stables, Jasper addressed me directly. "Have you bred from the

black, yet?"

Nodding, I enjoyed the feel of the horse in questions' long, easy stride. "I've a foal from Sabre and Summer's Folly due anytime now, plus a couple more expected to drop over the next month or two. I'm hoping to breed him with that racer I purchased from Cudmore last winter."

"Speed and strength," Jasper acknowledged, his tone admiring. "You certainly know your stuff, Edward. No wonder you've got them lining up, bags of doss in hand, for whichever foals you can bare part with."

"What do you expect?" Emmett grumbled. "He spent more time in the stables than the schoolroom as a boy...yet he still aced every exam. Knows more about horseflesh, breeding cycles, and fertility than the blasted stable master!"

Emmett's complaint drew a smile to my lips, my face stretched by the unfamiliar expression. I hadn't felt inclined to smile of late, and God only knew the last time I'd laughed. But now that my father and his new bride had left for their honeymoon on the continent, I hoped to regain the equilibrium I'd lost these last months. It wasn't that I resented my father's newfound happiness; I just couldn't comprehend it, the unaccustomed perplexity not sitting well with me.

Did he not remember the long, dismal years of his marriage to my mother? Her passing, some three years earlier, while publicly lamented with all the appropriate pomp and circumstance required for a grand Duchess, had been met privately with a sad level of indifference. Not even my truly kindhearted younger sister could own to more than a moderate level of distress. Shunned by the self-absorbed and cold-blooded lady who'd birthed us, we'd struggled to grieve for the woman who'd been mother to us in name only.

But what else was one to expect from a true lady of the nobility? "The bluer the blood, the colder the heart," I'd heard muttered by the servants on more than one occasion in my youth...but only when they were dealing with my mother. My father, in striking contrast, was universally admired. My mother was not, well, not by the staff and servants. *Thank God for nannies* had been my private conclusion. Alice and my raising had been left in the capable hands of a genuinely good woman of lowly birth but majestic spirit, and we would undoubtedly grieve her eventual passing...for real.

Of course, I understood why my father had married my mother. It was an excellent match with impeccable bloodlines on both sides reaching all the way back to William the Conqueror. The alliance had increased the wealth and standing of both families

and, most importantly, was applauded and approved by royalty. The fact that my honorable, considerate father and my grasping, vainglorious mother had absolutely nothing in common other than a duty to provide the required 'heir and a spare' to the Duchy of Worthington, played little part in the matter.

After my birth, the true state of my parents' match became increasingly obvious with them choosing to live as separate lives as possible. It was to be five years before my mother agreed, albeit reluctantly, to attempt the production of the 'spare.' Alice's birth was a great disappointment to her and she'd refused point blank to endure such indignities ever again. Whether her words had referred to the birth or the conception was not made clear, but the outcome was the same. The marriage was over in all but appearance, and Alice was banished to the nursery to rarely be seen again.

But how I'd adored my new baby sister...and still did.

Alice was now almost eighteen and due to be presented to court during the coming season. While it was frustrating to be spending this time overseeing my father's primary estate and not have Alice in residence, I'd understood my father's arranging for her to spend time with—and be properly chaperoned by—our Aunt while he and Lady Esme were abroad. We were all well aware of the tendre she'd developed for Jasper. Not that they wouldn't make an excellent match...on paper. While it was obvious that the attraction Alice felt for my undoubtedly handsome and titled friend was mutual, I would need to see a considerable change in Jasper's behavior before I entrusted him with the care of my sister. There was no denying that he was a renowned rake, and did not seem in any hurry to settle down to the responsibility of his position.

This would not normally have bothered me in the least, as I was similarly inclined and had only fairly recently begun to settle to the weighty responsibilities of my position in life. But Alice was my sister and an utter conundrum as far as I was concerned. She did not fit the mold of the typically coldhearted, social climbing, and empty-headed young heiresses I'd grown accustomed to. While quietly concerned that her differences: intelligence, sensibility, humour, compassion, and a truly delightful joie de vive—which would have been applauded in a young man—would cause grave problems for my sister in relation to her coming to terms with her place in life, I greatly admired those differences and would do whatever it took to see that she was kept from harm.

If only there was another young woman of nobility like my sister to be found, I would have married her in an instant...well, after the required due process, and considering my position and titles, only with the blessing of the crown. But, I was

well aware that Alice was entirely unique. Three god-awful years of being pestered by the marriage making mamas of the upper ton, and their equally awful daughters, had cured me of the delusion that I might find a wife who fit all the necessary requirements for the role of my marchioness and duchess in waiting and who I could also respect, admire and maybe even come to...love. The young ladies who did meet the stringent requirements for marriage to a Marquess, one in direct line to the throne, were all as coldblooded as they were 'blue.' Like my mother.

I could always handle things the way my father had done, I supposed: marry for duty and keep a mistress for pleasure, making very sure that the two were kept entirely separate and both equally cognizant of their place. But he'd dispensed with his mistresses years earlier and now professed to have married for love! While on the surface, Lady Esme did appear to be somewhat different from the typical matrons of the *ton*, I didn't buy it. I'd learned my lessons well. When it came to bloodlines, the females of my class were almost universally characterized by the same traits: coldness, self interest, greed, and an utter indifference toward those less fortunate than themselves. Excellent qualities to be saddled with in one's wife.

Entering the stable yard, I shook off my miserable musings, handing the reins over to a waiting groomsman. After a few words of instruction, I dismounted and waited for my compatriots to finish their languid discussion of the merits of varying brands of hunting rifle. My mind had already transferred to the veritable mountain of work that awaited me post ride. While I'd willingly agreed to oversee my father's estates in his absence—the renovations being conducted on my own country seat a good incentive to vacate for a while—keeping track of the many and varied aspects to the multiple properties involved was no small task.

A glint of light caught my eye, and I looked up to see movement in a first story window overlooking the courtyard. For a moment, the mid-afternoon light reflecting off the window obscured my vision, but then the heavy gray cloud cover once again blocked the sun. And that's when I saw her...a girl more beautiful than any I had seen before in my life, whether in the country, town, or at court. Her skin was fashionably pale but without the sickly look that often accompanied such pallor. She exuded a healthy vitality with blush pink cheeks and rosebud lips of a slightly darker hue. What little I could see of her hair, framing her exquisite, heart-shaped face, was a warm, auburn brown. At this distance, I could not accurately discern her eye color other than to know that they were dark and framed by long lashes that made her wide-eyed gaze even more dramatic.

She didn't seem real, more like something out of a dream, and yet I felt a flash of recognition. Though I knew we couldn't have been introduced, or I would have made enquiries of her name, station, and father's interest in an alliance immediately. If I

had to be saddled to a coldhearted noblewoman or aristocrat for a wife, please God, let her at least look like this one!

But then my gaze widened, and I took in the clothing she was wearing and that I had somehow missed at first glance, so taken was I by the girls preternatural beauty: the stiff necked white blouse, plain black skirt, and white cap that covered her hair. Disappointment and unexpected anger coursed through me, and I rubbed my brow, turning abruptly away from her taunting gaze.

She was a servant and completely off limits.

~AFL~

So...what do you think of their first sighting from both Points of View? Id love it if you left a review. :D

xxx TLSue

The New Girl

Thanks, as always, to Stephenie Meyer for letting us mess around with her creation. No copyright infringement intended.

Special thanks to Elidunbigboot for giving AFL it's 200th review :D

Thanks to my wonderful betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, for all their hard work and encouragement.

Finally, a note about Bella's level of innocence in this story. It might seem a little unbelievable considering the wealth of knowledge and information we have at our fingertips, but it was highly possible in the era that this story is set (early 1800s) for a girl of Bella's background to have been kept entirely in the dark when it came to any knowledge of sex. If that seems far fetched to you, the inspiration for this very integral aspect of the story came to me, in part, due to my mother's, grandmother's and great grandmother's experiences. Not one of them went to their marriage bed with any knowledge or understanding about sex. I'm talking nothing...nada...zip. My mother, a very intelligent and educated lady (she was an amazing artist and teacher) took until she was seven months pregnant with her first child to pluck up the courage to ask her doctor how they were going to get the baby out of her belly button. And this was in the 1900s, not early 1800s. I hope that helps make this key plot point a little more believable.

xxx TLSue

Posted: Thursday October 27th 2011

Words: 3232

PS: Don't forget to read past the ANs at the bottom for the EPOV.

Chapter 6

The New Girl

BPOV

Morning came too soon and I groaned as I lifted my aching body from the bed.

"It'll get easier," Angela's tone was sympathetic. "It's extra busy at the moment with all the guests stayin' on from the weddin'. Ooh...that was hectic, but the loveliest sight ye can imagine. Are ye just out of practice or was the last place ye worked smaller than this?"

"A bit of both," I answered with a weary smile, quickly donning my uniform before splashing water on my face. It was then that I realized I had a problem...well, another one to add to my already impressive list. While I'd managed to take my hair down the night before, though the plait I'd tied it in was rough to say the least, I had no idea how to put it up into a bun.

Angela and Jessica eyed me sceptically.

"Ye've never done yer own 'air, 'ave ye?" Jessica shook her head with disdain.

I hesitated, before nodding. "My friend, Leah used to put it up for me."

"Well, I'll help ye this morning," Angela offered. "But we'll have to hurry, and ye'll have to learn how to do it yeself 'cos we don't 'ave much time in the morning."

I listened carefully as Angela explained the process, holding up the little mirror we had to share between the three of us to show me each step.

"Ye've got beautiful hair, Bella," she said with a shy smile.

"Really?" I blinked at her in surprise. "It's just...brown." The Merryton sisters had enjoyed pointing out that fact to me as often as possible.

"Oh no, it's not just brown. It's got lovely red-lookin' highlights and it's so soft and healthy."

"Thank you." Smiling in return, and not just for the unexpected compliment, I had a feeling Angela and I were going to be friends.

Breakfast was served promptly at six, plain food amply supplied. After we'd helped clear up the staff's breakfast, drying a mountain of dishes, I followed Jessica and Angela to the dining room where breakfast was to be served for the household. It was one of the largest, most impressive-looking rooms I'd ever seen, but it apparently paled in comparison to the more formal dining room where luncheon was served. Depending on the numbers, which could vary from a handful to dozens, dinner was served in even more distinguished surroundings. There was even a formal banquet hall that could seat over one hundred, though I found that difficult to

imagine.

The girls explained that I might get a glimpse of these rooms if I was on cleaning duty, but only the butler, under butlers and experienced footmen served at luncheon or dinner. The girls helped with breakfast as it was served buffet-style, a highlight of their very long day.

"Lady Rosalie and the other Ladies sleep in and 'ave their breakfast in bed," Angela explained quietly as we made our way to the breakfast room.

"Thank God for small mercies," Jessica muttered.

"What about Lady Alice?" I asked, "Will she be down for breakfast?"

"Ooh no. The Duke had her sent off to visit family or something when he went on his honeymoon. Don't think he trusted leaving her behind with Lord Jasper around, even with a half dozen chaperones."

I nodded but didn't really understand. If the Duke didn't trust his daughter with Lord Jasper, why would he countenance a betrothal?

Arriving at our destination, we were quickly set to work cleaning the already immaculate room, spreading table cloths and setting the long table. At least I knew where to place the cutlery.

When ornate carts arrived with fruit platters, pastries, and piping hot covered dishes, we positioned the plates on the long sideboard for the household members and guests to serve themselves. It was our job to clear away the used dishes and replace or refill others as required. The other girls were also experienced at pouring the guests' tea or coffee, something they assured me I would *not* be required to do.

My leg jiggled with anticipation as the usual time for the lordships' arrival approached.

"Keep still," Angela admonished, and I blushed to be caught acting in such an unladylike manner. My tendency to fidget had been a source of embarrassment for as long as I could remember, causing me to seriously doubt my legitimate membership in the superior class on more than one occasion. Of all the talents I was supposed to have mastered to prove my credentials as a 'Lady of Quality,' drawing was the only one I enjoyed. I was barely passable at the pianoforte, hated embroidery, and my singing was better left unsung. But I could discuss the weather in several languages, so I supposed that was something.

My attention refocused rapidly when the door opened, and Lords Emmett and Jasper entered the dining room. They were talking and laughing together, dressed for riding in cream jodhpurs, long black Hessians, and tightly fitted hacking jackets, looking as impossibly handsome as I recalled from the day before.

The girls and I let out a collective sigh of appreciation and simultaneously bobbed our curtsies, even though the men merely glanced our way without responding. It was an unnerving experience to be treated so dismissively. Under *normal* circumstances, I would have expected a proper introduction, greetings, and at least a few moments of idle discourse from the gentlemen...not appraising looks and no direct comment whatsoever.

The two men quickly filled their plates and took seats across from each other at the table as they continued their discussion of an upcoming hunt and the respective merits of various steeds and hounds. Lord Emmett signalled for a cup of tea, and Henson, the head butler, nodded to Angela who quickly obliged, taking the tea service to the table and filling Lord Emmett's cup.

"I'd rather coffee," Lord Jasper said, waving Angela away. Jessica moved quickly to serve him, smiling and swaying her ample hips as she walked.

I gaped at her shameless display and Lord Jasper's clearly indulgent response. He smiled up at her and then lifted a hand and let it rest briefly on her hip. While I'd seen worse behaviour in the public inns on my journey from Forkston, I certainly hadn't expected to see such familiarity in a ducal manor. More than a little shocked, I glanced over at Angela who gave a half shrug and then motioned for me to face forward.

Then Lord Edward entered the room, and I needed all of my concentration to remain standing.

Up close, Edward was more handsome than I thought humanly possible. He strode across the room toward the buffet then glanced at me and stopped, his intensely green, heavily lashed eyes flashing with an emotion I did not recognize.

"You," he growled, his brow furrowing in a scowl.

I took a step back, feeling a blush rising in my cheeks and wishing I was still young enough to wear my hair down as hiding behind it would have given me a semblance of protection. Not that I'd have had that option in my current position as a servant, I reminded myself.

Dropping my eyes, I bobbed a curtsy, remembering not to sweep lower to the ground as I had trained to do under Miss Brewer's strict guidance.

When I glanced up, Edward was still staring, his expression forbidding.

"Quit scowling at the new girl, Edward," Emmett chided. "She can't help being a beauty, and you know you can't touch. Stop torturing yourself and eat."

"Bloody hell," Edward grumbled, running his fingers through his neatly coiffed hair, creating a rather tousled effect. "Do you have to be so blunt?"

"Just saying what we're all thinking," Emmett said with a wide grin. "Don't think I didn't notice her as soon as I walked in the door, but *I'm* a married man. I don't ogle."

"About the only thing you don't do," Jasper remarked wryly.

"But not under Carlisle's roof...I'm no idiot," Emmett defended himself.

"Not where Rosalie might find out and put your balls in a vice, you mean," Edward retorted.

It was all I could do to not gasp out loud. If I'd had any doubts about my change in station they were thoroughly dispelled by this shocking conversation. Gentlemen of the *ton* did *not*, under any circumstances, swear or speak crudely in front of a Lady.

Edward filled his plate, glancing my way several times, his frown etching creases in his wide brow. Then he took his seat and motioned for a cup of coffee, shaking his head when Angela went to attend him.

"The new girl," he said, staring intently at me.

Startled by Edward's unexpected command, I glanced up at Henson who nodded warily. With considerable trepidation, I went to the sideboard and collected the silver coffee service, before making my cautious way to Edward's seat and placing the rattling tray on the table. With blatantly shaking hands I went to lift the coffee pot, but Edward put his hand over mine, holding me in place. A tingling sensation raced up my arm at his touch, and I gasped in a quick breathe before peeking up from beneath my lashes, my cheeks aflame.

"I think you'd best let me pour," Edward murmured quietly. "I don't fancy having my vital equipment scalded this early in the day."

Captivated by his emerald gaze, I froze for a second, but then his words registered and I tried to pull away. He held my hand in place.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that! I mean I'd try not to," I stammered and blushed even more furiously...but then I conceded. "Well, maybe it would be best if you poured. I can be a bit clumsy, especially when I'm nervous, and just as likely to spill the contents in your lap as get any in the cup...um...m'lord," I remembered to tag onto the end of my garbled sentence.

Edward's eyebrows disappeared beneath his now tousled fringe, his expression disbelieving. Henson cleared his throat while Jessica giggled, and I looked up and noted both Jasper and Emmett's stunned expressions.

Clearly I had just committed a terrible faux pas. Serving girls did not speak, even when spoken to?

Then Edward shocked me further by bursting out laughing, the other gentlemen soon joining in, and I smiled tentatively in response.

"Maybe we can manage it together," Edward said with a chuckle in his voice when he'd stopped laughing. Smiling he lifted the coffee pot with his large hand wrapped around my own.

"Here, allow me, m'lord," Henson offered stepping forward.

"Ah, leave him, Henson," Emmett intervened. "He's just having a little fun with the girl. God knows it's as close as he'll get with His Grace's expectations hanging over his head."

"Yes, all right Emmett, you've made your point," Edward muttered as we poured his coffee together; his smile fading.

As soon as he released my hand, I beat a hasty retreat to my place near the wall. Glancing nervously back at the table, I saw that Edward was staring at me again, his expression serious once more. Embarrassed to be caught looking, I ducked my head and kept my eyes lowered, my blush a permanent fixture. While I tried to tell myself that his opinion of me didn't matter, especially considering I was in the guise of a servant, I was mortified that he'd witnessed my incompetence.

More guests arrived, all male, and began to serve themselves breakfast. Staying clear of the tables, I focused on clearing and restocking the sideboard and making sure everything looked perfectly presentable at all times. A few of the gentlemen

flirted with Jessica, who didn't seem to mind at all, and with Angela, who kept her head down and her skirts away from straying hands. I heard several references to the 'new girl' but tried to focus on my work until my attention was captured when I heard Lord Hunter's name.

"So, what's Hunter up to now?" Jasper asked.

An older gentleman with a large paunch and graying sideburns replied, his tone that of a man divulging a secret. "He's come into a nice little inheritance; a minor one but quite the juicy plum."

It was as if time stilled at the carelessly spoken words. I stifled a gasp and gripped my shaking hands together, my fragile hopes shattering along with my heart. Here was the proof I'd been dreading; Papa was dead and Lord Hunter had gotten away with murder.

"Well, that's good to hear," Edward joined in the conversation. "Maybe now he'll repay me some of the doss he owes. James does like to gamble but paying up can present a problem."

I listened in horror. James owed Edward money...they gambled together...they were friends!

"But that's not the best part," the older gentleman continued. "Apparently he was all set to do the honourable thing and marry the daughter of the previous holder. Gal was orphaned, and Hunter offered for her to save her from penury."

"Not what I'd expect from Hunter. Hardly the charitable type," Jasper mused.

"He's a better man than I," Edward defended my father's murderer. It was at this moment I realized I'd been harbouring a faint hope that I could trust Edward with my secret rather than wait until his father's return.

"James is a bit competitive and keeps some rather unsavoury company, but if he's willing to wed the chit it shows a depth of compassion I'd not own to," Edward continued, shaking his head. "I might have assigned her a small allowance under the circumstances...but offer marriage? She must be thanking her lucky stars."

"Well, that's the thing," the gray-haired man continued, clearly enjoying his place at the centre of attention. "The gal up and did a runner! Stole the family jewels or some such, and Hunter's got all and sundry out tracking her down. Not sure if he'll marry her when he finds her or have her thrown in prison."

The room spun, and it was all I could do to stay upright.

Keep breathing, I told myself as my heartbeat pounded so loudly in my ears it drowned out the rest of the conversation. Angela nudged me with her arm, her expression concerned. Fighting back tears, I struggled to regain my composure, suppressing my fear and grief.

Tuning back into the gentlemen's conversation, I listened for more news of my father's murderer and to what had become of my home, but the discussion had shifted to other topics. Eventually finishing their breakfast, Edward and the other two Lords rose to leave. They were planning on riding out over an area of the estate that Edward wanted to inspect and then hunt on their return ride. As they moved toward the door, some of the other guests rose to follow, and another middle aged gentleman, who I'd noticed watching me earlier, walked towards me. I stepped back in alarm as leering at me, he reached out his hand and caught hold of my skirt.

"Barclay," Edward called and the man hesitated, looking over his shoulder and tugging me against him in the process.

"You'll join us, won't you?" Edward queried, his tone casual, "On the ride?"

Barclay let go of my skirt and turned away, leaving me to stumble back against the wall in relief.

"Masen, very good of you to offer." Barclay puffed up like a peacock. "Just give me a moment to change. Valet won't be pleased, not at all," he chuckled and moved out the door.

Edward turned toward me, spearing me with a look so intense that my barely recovered breath caught in my throat.

"Henson, I think you'd best reassign the new girl," he said in the same impassive tone he'd used when talking to Barclay, his eyes never leaving my face. "She's clearly not trained for her current position."

"Very well, m'lord," Henson said without inflection.

Edward nodded once and then strode quickly from the room.

It was all I could do not to cry out with indignation. This was my very first morning; how dare he judge me so harshly? Angry tears sprang to my eyes, and I hastily wiped them away with the back of my hand. My day had barely begun, yet I

would have given anything for a strong cup of tea and a lie down.

It was much later in the morning before the girls and I found time to discuss the events of the breakfast room, though Jessica had been shooting me killing looks at every opportunity.

"Oh, I'd never go after Lord Edward," she did her best to mimic my tone, her hands on her hips and head wagging. "I'm not interested in the Lordships...Ooh, I could slap ye," she hissed taking a step toward me.

I froze, too shocked to even raise my hands in self-defence. Fortunately Angela intervened, stepping between us.

"It's not Bella's fault Lord Edward took a liking to her," Angela said firmly. "He probably just prefers brunettes to blondes."

Jessica harrumphed but backed away.

"Took a liking to me?" I said with genuine astonishment. "He practically had me dismissed, the arrogant, insufferable...prig!"

The girls stared at me with shocked expressions. Truth be told I was a little shocked myself, never having used such harsh language to describe anyone before in my life.

"Bella, he was only trying to protect ye," Angela said, reaching out a hand to place on my arm.

I frowned, bewildered. "From what...spilling the coffee?" Though for all I knew, spilling hot coffee on a Peer of the Realm was a hanging offence.

"Nay, from that randy old bugger, Lord Barclay. With His Grace away, he was probably thinking he'd ignore the Duke's house-rules. Lord Edward made it clear ye're not to be harassed despite his own attraction to ye. He's clearly a good man like his father, and he refuses to give in to his darker nature."

"Ooh, darker nature, my arse!" Jessica interjected. "Just 'cos ye've been burned doesn't mean the rest of us can't 'ave some fun."

"Ye think Bella would find Lord Barclay's attention 'fun'?" Angela retorted, her eyes flashing.

"Of course not, I was talkin' 'bout Lord Edward."

The girls glared at each other while I looked on bewildered.

"What she's tryin' to say," Jessica said, turning to me with a huff. "Is Lord Edward wants ye, God only knows why, but ye don't 'ave to worry. He won't do nothin' about it 'cos of the Duke's bloody rules!"

With that Jessica flounced off, leaving Angela and I to finish ironing the mountain of serviettes and tea-towels we'd been assigned. I couldn't understand why she was angry with me or what she meant about Edward wanting me. For what? Angela thought he found me attractive, but that was impossible. My biggest fear was that he somehow recognized me as the girl running from Lord Hunter, though if that were the case I imagined I'd have been arrested by now.

How could Carlisle's son be friends with such a villain? And what if Carlisle chose to believe Lord Hunter's account of events over mine? He was a fellow peer after all, while I was merely the daughter of an old friend and possibly not as close a friend as I'd presumed.

Three months seemed like an impossibly long time to have to wait...and worry.

~AFL~

Sigh...well, they've met but it wasn't exactly roses and sonnets.

I'm so glad you're all enjoying this story. I wrote the first Edward POV outtake for a bit of fun, but I so enjoyed getting inside Lord Edward's head that I've decided to continue writing them. I don't normally like reading the same scene from different points of view, but I've been careful not to just repeat things, only doubling up on the most significant moments and attempting to show Edward's thoughts and feelings. So far so good, if all the wonderful feedback is anything to go by. From about Ch 15 onwards the POV swaps will be for separate scenes.

I hope you enjoy the breakfast scene from Edward's perspective.

My apologies for any errors in grammar, as this outtake is unbeta'ed.

Posted: Thursday November 3rd 2011

Words:1326

Ch 6 Out take

Honourable

EPOV

My disposition, which had been barely agreeable for some time, was sorely affected by the brief encounter—if one could even call it that—with the mystery girl the day before. After a mostly sleepless night, I was counting on a good breakfast and a long ride to improve my mood. I'm sure my companions and house guests had similar hopes for an upturn in my attitude and demeanour. My surliness had been remarked upon more than once the previous evening, as I'd been a rather poor host during dinner and could not bring myself to enter into the nightly games and entertainments. Politely enduring the inane chatter of my father's house guests, or the ill-disguised and simpering flirtations of their eligible daughters, was beyond me with the mystery girl's hauntingly beautiful face etched permanently in my memory.

Mystery *servant*, I reminded myself for the umpteenth time which meant that the girl was unsuitable for dalliance and deserving only of the protection my father would expect me to provide in his absence. Not that I disagreed with his edict or the beliefs that he had come to hold so dearly. Wilberforce's impassioned speeches had touched even my hardened soul, and I understood my father's passion to see the abolishment of slavery and the establishment of basic rights for the working classes.

But still...I could not get the damned girl out of my mind.

My hopes for distraction were dashed almost as soon as I entered the breakfast dining room, when I looked up and saw the object of my new found obsession standing meekly by the wall, looking for all the world like a timid young maid and not the bold woman with the taunting expression that had so thoroughly captured my attention the day before.

"You," I accused, my tone and expression fuelled by my aggravation at the peace of mind—and *sleep*—that the young chit had cost me.

The girl's eyes widened and she stepped back, a delicious, rosy coloured blush staining her cheeks. Dropping her eyes—they were brown, a deep, warm brown the colour of a fine brandy—she bobbed a curtsey. Frozen in place, I stood waiting for her to look up so that I could see those stunning, doe-like eyes once more. To my consternation, she was even more beautiful than I recalled now that I could see her clearly, standing not ten feet away and without the glass panes of a window to obscure my view. She also had the most damnable affect on my person, one that was

physical...visceral...and intensely arousing.

"Quit scowling at the new girl, Edward." Emmett's words brought me to my senses just as I was about to move towards her, inexorably drawn like a moth to a flame. "She can't help being a beauty, and you know you can't touch. Stop torturing yourself and eat."

"Bloody hell," I muttered, embarrassed to be caught so transfixed. "Do you have to be so blunt?"

In a desperate attempt to regain my equilibrium, I allowed myself to be drawn into some rather crude jesting with my typically astute cousin. Of course he would notice my interest and the girl's extraordinary appeal. I wasn't overly bothered. As long as neither he nor Jasper were exercised to action due to their recognition of her charm and I maintained my distance, the girl would be safe, and I would recover from my uncharacteristic loss of control.

Unfortunately, my control was not yet recovered, and I found myself insisting that the new girl serve my coffee. She looked as shocked as I felt at my having issued the order, and I scowled at her, infuriated by the inexplicable attraction that I couldn't seem to ignore. But then she approached, shaking so badly by the time she placed the rattling tray before me that I knew there was no way in hell I was letting her pour a hot beverage anywhere near my person...or hers for that matter. The thought of her smooth, creamy skin marred by a burn was quite frankly, unacceptable.

"I think you'd best let me pour," I murmured quietly, stunned by my reaction to this unknown girl who looked to be little more than a child. She couldn't be more than sixteen or seventeen at the most. "I don't fancy having my vital equipment scalded this early in the day."

Her eyes met mine, and I was momentarily captivated by her warm, chocolate coloured gaze. Breathing in deeply, I drew her sweet scent into my lungs—one way to have her where I wanted—closer than my own skin. The thought, and the sudden image of her laying naked beneath me, her mahogany hair spread out like a silken shawl against white linen sheets, triggered a surge of pure lust to roar like fire through my veins. She went to pull away, but I held her hand in place.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that! I mean I'd try not to," she cried, her soft creamy cheeks suffusing with a vermilion glow. "Well, maybe it would be best if you poured. I can be a bit clumsy, especially when I'm nervous, and just as likely to spill the contents in your lap as get any in the cup...um...m'lord," she stammered nervously and I stared at her, stunned by her innocently spoken words.

Laughter burst from my lips, as a surprising jolt of humour replaced the lust that I was battling to contain. She was adorable, sweet, and quite funny...unintentionally I was sure. When my laughter finally waned, I was pleased to note her shy smile, her timidity no act. That, along with her unexpectedly refined speech and the silky smoothness of the skin I could feel beneath my hand, created an even greater aura of mystery around this lovely girl. What was her story, and how had she come to this place of servitude, clearly so far beneath the circumstances in which she must have been raised?

Knowing that my actions disturbed the sensibilities of my father's butler, I left my questions unanswered—there would be time to make my discoveries at a later date—and assisted the girl to pour the hot coffee into my cup. I was not ignorant, nor in denial of the fact that doing so gave me an excuse to keep touching her for a few seconds longer.

The rest of breakfast passed in a fashion similar to any other, though I barely took note of the topics of conversation except for one concerning an acquaintance of mine, James Hunter. It seemed he'd gotten himself into an interesting situation, one that I was sure he would see resolved to his satisfaction. If there was one thing to be said about James, it was that he was a survivor with an uncanny instinct for getting his own way.

Despite recognizing the futility of my interest, the girl took up most of my awareness. Not that I had any intention of acting on my desires, or of ever speaking to her again. But then Barclay, an odious man who was only granted acceptance in my father's circle of acquaintance due to his connections at court, made his way towards the girl, his intentions neither respectable nor hidden.

In a move designed to distract, I flattered his ego with an invitation to join us on our ride, and then moving quickly to protect the girl from any further unwanted advances, I ordered her reassignment away from public duty. One consequence of my action would be to rob myself of the pleasure of daily viewing her visage, and a part of me wanted to howl in impotent rage at the loss. But after allowing myself one last moment to memorize every aspect of her delicate, arresting face and slender, yet curvaceous figure, I strode from the room.

As my father was about to say, doing the right—the *honourable*—thing, was rarely the easiest.

~AFL~

Awww...poor Lordward! I'd love to hear what you think of the breakfast

scene...from either POV.

xxx TLSue

Bellissima Ragazza

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks as always to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro.

A huge thank you to my wonderful readers for all your support and encouragement.

Posted: Sunday October 30th 2011

Words: 2626

Chapter 7

Bellissima ragazza

BPOV

The next few days passed without mishap. No longer assigned to serving with the girls in the morning, I washed dishes, cleaned, and polished until my hands were raw. By the time it came for me to report to the kitchen in the afternoons, I was exhausted but determined to do my best.

Chef Peters was sceptical of my abilities, testing me quite arduously in the beginning. I was terrified of failure, more certain than ever that I must find a way to remain here at Worthington Hall until Lord Carlisle's return. He was my only hope. To my relief, my skills did not abandon me, and I even began to hope my place was becoming secure when Chef Peters served my cream profiteroles for afternoon tea...and not to the servants.

Of Edward and the other gentlemen I saw nothing, which was a good thing. The less they saw of me, the less likely they were to connect me with Lord Hunter's runaway bride. But it didn't stop me from looking over my shoulder at odd times when I was alone, half-hoping to see Edward walking by.

Mike Newton on the other hand was turning out to be a little *too* friendly, and he wasn't the only one. I had no idea why, but the footmen and kitchen lads seemed to find me fascinating, like a shiny new toy. With no experience at flirting, certainly not with the way it was done amongst the servant class, I had little defence against their

advances. While I didn't want to rebuff them too harshly and risk causing offence, I was loathe to encourage them. But no matter what I did, Jessica remained furious with me and acted as if the young men's interest was entirely my fault. Fortunately we were all too tired by nightfall when we reached our cold attic room to spend much time in conversation...or argument. All any of us wanted to do was sleep.

A week passed before I next saw Edward. Alone in a hallway, I was doing my best to artistically arrange a large bunch of flowers from the hothouses...not a forte of mine. The job would normally be undertaken by one of the more senior maids, but Lady Rosalie was on the warpath again and they were needed to placate and resolve whatever imaginary complaint she'd come up with this time. Honestly, the woman was impossible; I was just glad I didn't have to deal with her personally. She went through lady's maids at an alarming rate, and I'd been very relieved to deny any knowledge or skill when it came to hair or fashion.

Finishing my third attempt at arranging the flowers, I stood back to consider the overall effect. The large crystal vase was positioned centrally on a carved and highly polished side table, the arrangement of roses, irises, hyacinths and other unseasonal flowers a little lopsided but about the best I could manage. Sighing disconsolately, I acknowledged the need to redo the arrangement again.

"I think they usually put the tallest ones at the back and work forward...or something like that."

Startled by the sound of a man's deep, velvet voice, I spun around to see Lord Edward leaning casually against the wall, his expression amused.

"Oh! m'Lord, you startled me," I accused and then winced at my tone. I might be angry with him for his treatment of me in the breakfast room, but I daren't deliberately antagonize him.

We stared at each other for a moment, and then I remembered, rather belatedly, to bob a curtsy. Edward continued to stare, and when the silence and the effect of his unbroken gaze reached an unbearable level I spoke up, knowing I was breaching protocol...again.

"Is there anything I can do for you, m'Lord?" I asked, my words polite and hopefully sufficiently servile.

Edward frowned, and I wondered if he noticed my lack of an accent. But then he shrugged and his mouth curved into a half-smile that did very strange things to my stomach.

"You can tell me your name," he answered eventually, his green eyes glittering in a mesmerizing manner.

"My name?" I asked when my feeble wits prompted my mouth to respond.

Edward's smile widened. "I'm assuming you have one? Most people do."

"Oh, yes, of course...I have a name."

"Well?" One of his eyebrows rose with his question. It reminded me of a novel I'd read by Mrs. Radcliffe, where she described the hero as having a 'sardonic brow.' I'd wondered what one looked like, and now I knew.

Straightening, Edward walked towards me, coming to stand in front of the vase of flowers. With a few deft movements he created something quite presentable out of the rather chaotic creation I'd been fussing with for the better part of an hour. I huffed under my breath, and he chuckled.

"I'm sure you have many talents, though flower arranging and pouring hot beverages don't seem to be among them."

I blushed and looked down at my fidgeting hands. Miss Brewer would not have approved.

"So, are you going to tell me or am I going to have to *force* you to give me the information?" Edward murmured, moving closer. I looked up, startled.

"*Your. Name.*" he enunciated carefully.

"Bel...Bella...Belinda," I stammered, my cheeks firing with embarrassment.

"Well, Bel...Bella...Belinda, that's a lot of names for one girl. Do you have a preference?"

I should have said Belinda...but didn't. It was taking a risk using my own name considering that Edward was an acquaintance of Lord Hunter's, but after the last two weeks it felt like all I had left of my old life...and of myself.

"Bella...I prefer Bella," I murmured shyly.

"Un bel nome per una bellissima ragazza." Edward nodded, his expression solemn.

I gasped. He'd said, 'A beautiful name for a very beautiful girl,' in Italian.

"You speak Italian?" he asked, his brow creasing in a frown.

"No, of course not," I lied, shaking my head. "It's just, I thought I heard my name...when you spoke." My excuse was flimsy to say the least, and I held my breath.

Edward smiled. "That's because Bella means beautiful in Italian."

"Oh," I tried to sound surprised, which I certainly was. I couldn't believe he thought I was beautiful. Were Angela and Jessica right? Could Edward be attracted to me?

"There's something I've been wanting to speak with you about." His expression turned rueful. "The other morning?"

"You mean the one where you had me banished from serving in the breakfast room on my very first day?" I asked sweetly, the temper I'd been doing my best to suppress coming to the fore.

Edward's eyes widened. "So you *were* offended," he mused, rubbing his jaw.

"Er...of course not, m'Lord," I quickly modified my tone, remembering to lower my eyes submissively. Did I want to lose my position altogether? "I understand...really...I do. I could have spilled the coffee on you or one of the other guests. It was very gracious of you not to have me dismissed."

"Ah, Bella," he sighed. "You misunderstood. I wasn't concerned about your ability to serve the coffee. I'm sure you're aware of my father's unusual *standards* concerning the treatment of his staff?" He ran his fingers over the satiny smooth finish of the side-table as he spoke.

I nodded, swallowing hard. It was difficult to think clearly with Edward standing so close.

"We're not like others of our class," he continued. "We endeavour not to prey on the weak and vulnerable. My father has devoted his time, his wealth, and his position to work for the betterment and protection of the working classes, a situation that has not been without cost to his reputation."

"And you follow his creed?" I asked softly.

"As much as I can," Edward nodded and took another step closer, carefully gauging my reaction. I held my ground—and my breath—once again.

"I try my best to honour my father's wishes, Bella, especially in his own home, though my efforts sometimes come at...*personal* cost." He reached up and ran his forefinger down my blushing cheek. I felt the sensation all the way through to the bone.

"You have amazing skin, Bella," he murmured. "Soft as silk."

I blinked rapidly, staring up into his beautiful face and swaying towards him.

"There you are, Edward. I've been looking for you everywhere," a cultured female voice scolded from further down the hallway, startling me back to my senses.

Lady Rosalie.

I'd learnt from the rest of the staff to get my head down and my hands busy whenever she was around. Quickly bobbing a curtsy, I then turned to fiddle unnecessarily with the flowers Edward had rescued.

"Good morning, Rosalie," Edward said, smoothly placing his body between mine and hers as she approached. "Is there a problem?"

There was always a problem with Rosalie, and she immediately launched into a long list of complaints about disrespectful staff, unskilled servants, and general incompetence. Edward murmured reassurances at appropriate intervals and began to steer her further down the hall. I was almost in the clear when she turned and looked over her shoulder at the vase of flowers.

"This is exactly the sort of thing I'm talking about. This arrangement is atrocious. Honestly, Mrs. Cope will hire any riff-raff." Rosalie's critical words and eye were aimed directly at me, and I flinched. "What's your name, girl, and who gave you permission to make a travesty of the Duke's flowers?"

Bristling at Rosalie's tone, I did my best to suppress my indignation. Being able to take abuse was all part and parcel of the role of a servant when dealing with the upper *ton*. I took a steadying breath and was about to reply when Edward interjected.

"You'll have to blame me for this particular *travesty*, Rosalie. Bella had done an admirable job when I decided to try my hand. Made a right mess, I'm afraid."

Rosalie's and my expressions reflected our surprise. Then Rosalie scowled at me, her look transforming to one of suspicion.

I quickly ducked my head, bobbing another curtsy to be on the safe side.

"Oh...I see what's going on here," she drawled, looking from Edward to me and back again. "Carlisle's away and the golden son will play. *Bella*...how interesting."

Edward straightened abruptly, his relaxed expression disappearing.

"You will leave her out of this, Rosalie. Is that understood?" he growled, a tic pulsing in his jaw.

Rosalie's expression grew even more speculative.

"I've often wondered about your type as you're clearly not interested in regal blondes," she said with a sniff. "But really, Edward, where's your taste?"

"That is quite enough," Edward's voice cut like a knife. I flinched at his tone, but Rosalie continued to smile her icy smile before turning and walking away, her long, full skirts swaying in her wake.

Shuddering, I rubbed my arms to warm myself.

Edward turned to me and sighed, running his fingers through his hair. His valet must despair at keeping him respectably presented, I thought distractedly.

"I'd like to assure you that nothing will come of Rosalie recognizing my interest, but I'd be lying." His tone was surprisingly apologetic. "The best I can do is to keep my distance and hope she forgets the incident."

I gaped in utter astonishment. Edward had just admitted that he was interested in me. The rest seemed suddenly irrelevant, though on one level I knew I should be wary of drawing Lady Rosalie's ire. Unsure of how to respond and worried about making some gushing remark, I remained silent. Feeling a little giddy, all I wanted to do was smile at Edward and stay standing with him in this hallway beside the now crazily leaning flower arrangement forever. But then I realized I *was* smiling...widely.

Edward was not.

He must think me a fool. Embarrassed, I quickly dropped my gaze, curtsied then

turned and fled.

When the rest of my long working day was finally over, I couldn't wait for the other girls to finish preparing for bed. As soon as we were all huddled beneath our blankets, I asked them the question that had plagued me since my encounter with Edward.

"Do either of you know why Lady Rosalie would be jealous of Lord Edward, um, *liking* another lady...I mean girl?" I whispered.

Jessica sat up and stared down at me.

"Care to explain wot ye're on about?" she hissed.

I hadn't wanted to say too much but ended up telling the girls the whole story, leaving out the part where Edward had called me beautiful in Italian, stroked my face, and said he was 'interested' in me, of course.

"Ooh Bella, ye must be careful around the lords," Angela admonished. "It doesn't take much for 'em to get the wrong idea."

"Oh bosh," Jessica muttered. "But Angela's right about one thing, I'd be careful if I were ye. Lady Rosalie's not one to 'ave as an enemy."

"But Lady Rosalie is married to Lord Emmett. Why should she care who Lord Edward speaks to?" I asked genuinely confused.

"'Cos 'e's the one she really wanted," Jessica's said as if that was obvious. "She 'ad her sights set on being the next Marchioness of Masen and Duchess in waiting...but Lord Edward wasn't interested so she 'ad to settle for Lord Emmett and becoming a Viscountess. I think Lord Emmett thought he was getting' a bargain wiv her bein' so beautiful and all, but 'e didn't take into account the ice water she's got runnin' in her veins. I don't think he's particulary' enjoyin' his conjugal rights, wot wiv gettin' his man parts frozen in the process."

It took me a moment to make what sense I could of Jessica's accent and explanation, and when I did my mouth dropped open in surprise. Rosalie wanted Edward for his status and the position it would afford her, was rebuffed, and married Emmett as a consolation. I knew that members of the upper *ton* rarely married for love, but this sounded particularly cold-hearted. At least Edward had been able to see past Rosalie's perfect façade and avoid the fate that had befallen Emmett, though how his parts could be frozen in the process, I wasn't sure.

I briefly wondered what sort of lady Edward *would* choose to marry then shied away from the painful thought. It was then that I realized I was in danger of becoming infatuated, something that had never happened to me before. I knew enough from listening to the Merryton sisters to recognize the signs. I also knew that despite the joyful exhilaration of the new sensations I was feeling, it was the height of foolishness to think they could lead to anything but misery for me...more misery.

"All I'm saying is ye should watch out for Lady Rosalie, Bella...and Lord Edward. He might be lovely to look at, but it doesn't mean he won't chew ye up and spit ye out when he's finished," Angela warned.

I wanted to argue that Edward wasn't like that, to tell her what he'd said about trying to live up to his father's admirable values and standards, but I kept my mouth shut. My sheltered upbringing in Forkston meant my experience with members of the nobility was extremely limited. Other than Lord Carlisle, I'd never actually met a nobleman before. What did I really know?

Lying there staring into the darkness, I missed my father more than ever. Not that I could imagine talking with him about liking a boy...well, a man, in truth. Edward must be as old as twenty-three or even twenty-four.

With my thoughts wavering between sadness at the memory of my distant home and undeniable exhilaration over my brief encounter with Lord Edward, it took me a long time to fall asleep that night, making it all the more difficult to rise before dawn the next morning.

~AFL~

I have to admit to loving it when Edward speaks Italian. And when he strokes Bella's cheek...swoon.

My vamp story, Once Bitten has almost reached 1000 reviews (hovering on 998 all day). I'd happy dance if I had any balance! If you like AFL, I'm pretty sure you'll like OB, so why not give it a try? I've added some of the amazing recommendations it has received from other authors to my Profile Page if you're curious to know a bit more about it. :D

Words: 1237

Unbeta'ed so apologies for any errors in grammar.

Chapter 7 - Outtake

Discomposed

EPOV

My original intention was to forget about the girl altogether, but that was simply not possible. She plagued my thoughts both waking and sleeping. Determined to stay away, I lasted seven days. Seven very long days.

Surreptitious questioning of my valet revealed that the girl was new to the Hall. When he'd offered to learn more about her, I'd begged off, feigning disinterest. I was in no doubt that he saw straight through my ruse, but Jenks was nothing if not discreet, and he made no comment when the next morning I casually requested he determine the girl's whereabouts. It was hardly uncommon for a lord to change his mind, though I was not normally in the habit of doing so.

Once the decision was made, I impatiently awaited the time when I could see her again, needing to know when she would be working alone—and where—information that Jenks delivered promptly as expected.

Approaching her from behind, I chose not to announce my presence but held back, wanting a moment to study the girl unobserved. She was quickly becoming an obsession, and while I could not deny her beauty, it was not enough to explain the attraction. Or so I told myself. Watching her slender form move with innate grace, her delicate hands arranging a large bouquet of flowers—surprisingly ineptly—I was captivated. When she began to mutter under her breath, no doubt berating her lack of skill in the art of floral arrangements, I decided it was time to step forward and put her out of her misery.

"I think they usually put the tallest ones at the back and work forward...or something like that," I offered, unable to keep the amusement from my voice.

Startled, she spun toward me, and I was rewarded by a clear view of her truly lovely face, her cupid's bow lips parted in surprise.

"Oh! mM'Lord, you startled me," she cried, her tone remarkably indignant...for a servant.

Having seriously discomposed her with my presence, and unable to resist teasing her...just a little, it took several attempts for me to ascertain her name...Bella.

How apt? I thought, lapsing into Italian to verbalize the compliment that I wasn't free to give.

Her eyes widened, as if she were reacting to my words.

"You speak Italian?" I demanded.

My receiving an answer to one of the questions I had regarding this girl—her name—had raised many others. Though she denied knowledge of the language, her speech and demeanour struck me as belonging to one with a much higher education than was normally afforded a member of the servant classes. But I did not query her further, knowing our time together would undoubtedly be brief and that my questions would be answered in due time. There was something about this girl that curbed my typical impatience as I found myself wanting to simply savour the opportunity to enjoy her presence...drinking her in with my eyes, as the poets would say.

But then I recalled one of the purposes of my engineering this encounter, to ascertain her reaction to my having had her reassigned from working in the breakfast room. I was expecting gratitude, fervently hoping she wasn't annoyed that I had prevented a dalliance, if one could call it that, with the reprehensible Barclay. What I hadn't expected was her feisty indignation at my implied criticism of her work.

"So you were offended," I mused, though not for the reason I had feared...thankfully.

Modifying her tone, she proceeded to apologise, thanking me for saving her from having committed a far greater faux pa than the ones she'd already committed that memorable morn.

"Ah, Bella," I sighed. "You misunderstood. I wasn't concerned about your ability to serve the coffee. I'm sure you're aware of my father's unusual standards concerning the treatment of his staff?"

Running my fingers over the satiny smooth finish of the side-table, I found myself imagining it was her silky-looking skin, and the desire I'd held barely in check this past week, roared to life full blown. With my sudden arousal straining against my trousers, I angled my body so that she would not see the effect she had on me...or be embarrassed as I suspected she might. There was something about this girl...an aura of innocence that my honour demanded be protected.

The sobering realisation cooled my ardour—a fraction.

"We're not like others of our class," I explained, proceeding to inform her of the reasons why she need not fear me...reminding myself in the process.

Her lashes fluttered endearingly as she shyly asked if I followed my father's creed.

"As much as I can," I agreed, inexplicably drawn towards her despite the content and intention behind my words. I approached her cautiously as she watched me, her expression reminding me of a startled fawn.

"I try my best to honour my father's wishes, Bella, especially in his own home, though my efforts sometimes come at...personal cost." If she knew the pain my self-imposed restraint was causing me, this most beautiful of girls would have realized that my words were an almost comical understatement. Unable to resist, I reached up and ran my forefinger down her blushing cheek.

A shudder ran through me. Her skin was just as I had imagined...soft...silk...perfection.

Her pupils dilated at my touch, and the beast I held barely contained strained for release. Swaying toward her, my intentions unknown but suspected, my eyes fell to her soft, plump lower lip and the place where it glistened from a darting foray made by her tongue. I wanted to touch my own tongue to that very spot and no doubt would have considering that I seemed to have lost all reason and control, but Rosalie arrived, her untimely interruption dragging me back to my senses. My intentions refocused immediately on one thing and one thing only...to protect Bella from my cousin-in-laws vicious attentions.

I was not successful, and my apology to Bella while heartfelt, echoed hollowly in my ears.

How the hell was I supposed to protect this sweet girl from Rosalie's machinations when she fell under the woman's purview as interim head of the household?

Surprised, I assumed, by the oddity of receiving an apology from one of my standing—the chances of her having experienced such an occurrence at her previous place of employment was slim to say the least—Bella stared at me, wide eyed. Then she smiled, and for a fleeting moment my thoughts took on a decidedly poetical cast, as I compared the stunning vision before me to sunsets, sunrises...the sun, no less! But then my mind went blank, the unusual occurrence accompanied by the oddest sensation, as if the hallway had begun to slowly rotate. And I realized

that, along with all rational thought, the blood had drained from my head as my body required it...elsewhere.

Unable to ignore such a compelling siren call, I was about to move towards her once more when the lovely girl who had managed to disturb my normally unflappable composure at every encounter, dropped her head, bobbed a quick courtesy then turned and ran. Watching her flee, I was left to the dubious companionship of the twin voices of my outraged conscience, appalled at how close I had come to dishonouring both the girl and my father's standards, and the infuriated howling of my thwarted desire.

~AFL~

Shiver... I'd love to hear what you think of their first, one-on-one encounter.

xxx TLSue

The Rescue

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks so much to the hundreds of readers who have reviewed these last few chapters - you guys are my heros!

Thanks to my betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for their tireless work and for putting up with my craziness.

Updated: Wednesday November 3rd, 2011

Words: 2160

Chapter 8

The Rescue

BPOV

After breakfast, I was assigned to work with Chef Peters baking pastries as part of the preparations for the hunt being held the following day. Even without the Duke's presence it was still a noteworthy and prestigious event, one not to be missed. Guests began arriving early in the afternoon, swelling the number in residence to over sixty. Few of the neighbours lived within easy riding distance, so most chose to enjoy Worthington Hall's considerable hospitality and stay for several days. Edward's presence ensured that every family within fifty miles with a remotely marriageable daughter had finagled an invitation to attend.

I spent the day on tenterhooks, waiting and worrying that Lady Rosalie would seek to cause me harm. To my relief, nothing happened, and I saw no one other than the kitchen staff. I felt rather proud of myself at the end of the long day when I tallied how much I had contributed towards the feast prepared for the morrow.

The next morning saw the staff up and working even earlier than usual as there was much to accomplish before the hunt began at eight-thirty. I wasn't the only servant to speculate that Lord Edward had chosen the early start to encourage some of the more frivolous female guests to remain abed. He was only partly successful, though there were some clearly fractious tempers to be observed amongst the young ladies all vying for his attention...or so I heard from the unfortunate servants

assigned to their service.

I didn't expect to escape the kitchen, and so was surprised to be told to deliver a heated tray of fruit pastries to the courtyard where the household members and guests who had chosen to ride out were indulging in a light repast and shots of brandied tea before the hunt began. The day was fine but very cool at this hour, and I shivered in my coat-less uniform when I exited the warm kitchens.

Momentarily taken aback by the organized chaos, I stood staring, transfixed by the large number of highly strung hunters and their impeccably dressed riders. Here and there, I saw liveried footmen bearing trays of refreshments, scurrying to meet the imperiously issued demands of the riders. When I located the tables that had been set up for the food and beverages further around the vast courtyard, I headed in their direction, carefully hugging the wall to keep out of the way...and out of danger. I'd almost reached my destination, relieved not to have stumbled or embarrassed myself in any way, when I heard my name called from the direction of the crowd. Balancing my heavily laden tray with difficulty, I looked up in the direction of the command, warily scanning to see who had called me in such an authoritative tone.

"You girl, over here...now. Don't dawdle." Dismayed, I recognised the speaker as Lady Rosalie, mounted on a large chestnut right in the midst of a group of riders. Chewing on my lower lip, I hesitated, glancing over to Henson who'd been watching my cautious approach. Unfortunately he was busy issuing instructions to a young footman and was no longer looking my way. Surely Lady Rosalie didn't expect me to walk out amongst the restlessly mingling animals that towered above my head?

"Bring the tray...immediately," Lady Rosalie called, her tone giving me no choice but to obey.

Swallowing hard, I took a hesitant step in her direction, then another, slowly moving away from the safety of the grey stone wall and out amongst the horses with their steel shod hooves. Surrounded on all sides by the huge beasts, my heart began pounding furiously in my chest, the sound of its beating drowning out the noise around me. Glancing back to safety, I was startled to see Edward on foot and moving quickly through the crowd. His eyes locked with mine, his mouth shaping words I couldn't hear as he shook his head briskly from side to side.

Inexplicably relieved, I took a step in his direction, but then Rosalie called to me again, her voice brooking no argument. Conflicted and with fear gripping my stomach, I reluctantly continued towards her.

Having almost reached her side, I began to breathe a little easier, beginning to hope that I would accomplish this task successfully. But then one of the horses nipped at his neighbour, and the startled animal reared up on his hind legs. Swinging around, the beast's hindquarters knocked the tray from my hands, sending pastries scattering and the tray clattering to the ground. My heart caught in my throat as I was jostled and bumped one way and then another by the fractious horses, their riders struggling to maintain control. Then my feet slipped out from under me, and my head hit the cobblestones with a crack.

Pain exploded behind my eyes a fraction of a second before everything went dark.

When I regained consciousness and my eyes fluttered open, it was to see large, metal-shod hooves striking the pavement within inches of where I lay. Whimpering in terror, I covered my head with my arms and rolled into a ball in anticipation of being trampled. The horse's hooves crashed around me, missing my body by mere inches and the vagaries of chance. But just when I thought that what little luck I had was all used up and I would surely be crushed, strong hands grabbed me around the waist, hauling me out of the way, my rescuer taking the blows that would have otherwise landed on me.

Amidst shouts and cries, the horses scattered as I was half dragged, half carried to safety. With my eyes squeezed shut, I held tight to the arms that lifted me, eventually finding myself lying on the ground again, held firmly against a hard, muscular body.

"It's all right; you're safe now. Open your eyes, Bella...please."

I obeyed, looking up to find myself in Edward's arms, his emerald gaze boring down at me with even more intensity than usual.

"You saved me," I whispered.

Edward closed his eyes for a moment and squeezed me tighter, pulling me close against his chest. "Thank God I reached you in time."

Despite the terrible fright I'd just received, I couldn't help but note how wonderful it was to be held in Edward's arms. The warmth of his large body wrapped protectively around me, the firm musculature I felt beneath his clothing, and his heady, masculine scent all combined to make me feel safe and yet oddly...*aware*, though of what, I couldn't quite say. But then a particularly sharp stab of pain captured my attention, and I winced, lifting my hand to the side of my head. It was wet...sticky. Puzzled, I brought my fingers before my eyes and saw that they were

red...with blood! I'd never liked the sight of blood or the smell, and I felt myself growing faint.

"Bella...Bella look at me!" Edward ordered, giving my shoulders a gentle shake.

My eyes refocused and I saw his face before me, even closer than before, a frown marring his handsome brow.

"Are you all right?" he demanded.

"Yes, but...but there's *blood*!" I cried indignantly, and he chuckled, his frown transforming into a half smile that I suppose one could call a smirk. I didn't take offence, though my breathe caught in my throat at the sight.

"I don't think it's too bad," he reassured me, running his hands up and down my arms. The warmth of his hands easily penetrated the thin cotton of my blouse, but I couldn't stop shivering. "But let's get you inside and warm."

Lifting me easily in his arms, he tucked me against his body with my head beneath his chin, and I clung to him gladly.

"Edward, what do you think you're doing?" Lady Rosalie's strident tone cut through the noise of the milling crowd. "Leave her to one of the servants; you'll get blood on your jacket."

I cringed away from her harsh words and barely controlled mount, tucking my head even tighter against Edward's shoulder. Standing firm, he did not seem the least bit intimidated.

"Rosalie, if you have any idea what's best for you, you'll shut your mouth this instant," he growled, his words slicing the air like a sword.

Rosalie gasped amidst the murmurs of those ladies, gentlemen, and servants close enough to hear Edward's harsh rebuke.

"How dare you speak to me in such a manner?" she hissed, outraged.

"How dare *you* put an innocent servant in harm's way because of your selfishness and spite!" he roared in response.

I flinched at Edward's shout but couldn't resist looking up to see Rosalie's ashen expression.

"Edward, what's going on?" Lord Emmett approached, manoeuvringmaneuvering his horse through the shocked crowd. "Good God, man, you're bleeding. What happened?"

"Why don't you ask your *wife*, Emmett?" Edward hissed, his voice dripping venom.

Emmett looked worriedly to where Rosalie sat, conspicuously isolated from the crowd.

"We'll talk later," Edward continued, modifying his tone. "I need you to lead the hunt. I'll catch up when I can."

Emmett nodded, and Edward turned and strode toward the house with me in his arms, Henson and a bevy of footmen scurrying to clear the way. It was only once he had laid me on a long couch in one of the ornate sitting rooms that he let out a groan and gripped his leg. It was then that I saw his breeches were torn all down his right thigh, a dark bruise emerging and blood trickling from a nasty-looking graze.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I gasped, attempting to sit up but forced back against the cushioned couch by my throbbing head and the suddenly spinning room.

"It's nothing, Bella," Edward murmured reassuringly, kneeling beside me despite his injury. "I've had far worse playing polo at Eton."

Smiling gently, he reached to stroke his hand down the side of my face, and I smiled shyly in return.

"I have to go," he said, sounding reluctant. "But I'm leaving you in good hands. You'll be all right?"

I nodded, speechless, at his words and tone. Swallowing against the lump in my throat, I raised a hand to where his still cupped my cheek, and he gripped it briefly before releasing me.

Standing abruptly, he turned to face the waiting staff. "Henson, fetch Mrs. Harrison to care for Bella and Dr Caruthers if she deems it necessary," he ordered. "I'd best hurry and change if I'm to catch up with the hunt."

"As you wish," Henson nodded and then hesitated. "Are you sure you shouldn't wait to see Caruthers yourself, m'lord?"

Edward shook his head. "Jenks can wrap the leg; better to keep it moving than let

it seize." Pausing at the door, he looked back to where I lay.

"Make sure she's well cared for, Henson. I'll check in later today."

"Very well, m'lord," Henson acknowledged as Edward left the room. Then he turned to me and sighed. "Well you've had an eventful morning, young lass. Let's get you to the servants' quarters, and we'll see about cleaning up that gash before you get any more blood on His Grace's nice brocade."

The rest of the morning passed in a blur of fussing and gentle scolding, though all agreed it was easier said than done to ignore a direct order from the likes of Lady Rosalie, even when the order was blatantly dangerous.

Fortunately the cut on my head was not deep, but the bump that accompanied it gave me a sizeable headache. Once I was cleaned up and bandaged by the competent Mrs. Harrison, Mrs. Cope insisted I rest on a narrow cot in a room off the kitchen where she could keep a regular eye on my condition. I slept fitfully the rest of the day, happy to keep a cool cloth over my eyes and even willingly sipping the bitter-tasting brew Mrs. Harrison, the head cook, prepared to ease my headache.

To my frustration, I slept through Edward's visit when he came to check on me in the early evening. When I awoke, Angela was sitting beside me.

"At Lord Edward's orders, Bella. He didn't want you left alone," she explained, her tone awed. "I heard he just about stripped the hide off Lady Rosalie for her folly and told Lord Emmett if he didn't pull his wife into line, he'd do it for him!"

"Truly?" I sat up gingerly, relieved that the room at last remained stationary.

"Aye, honest to goodness, Bella," Angela nodded and rubbed my cold hands between hers. "I just hope it means Lady Rosalie will leave ye alone now. I can't imagine she'll be wanting another tongue-lashing like that, and especially not in front of some of the highest toffs in the country."

"No, I can't imagine she will," I murmured, hoping Angela was right. But even my limited experience warned me that a woman scorned—and embarrassed—was not one to take lightly.

~AFL~

I'd love to hear what you thought of my 1800s interpretation of the 'Parking Lot/Van' scene from Twilight.

xxx TLSue

Not Her!

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

I'd like to say an extra special thanks to one of my wonderful, faithful reviewers, fish525, for posting AFLs 500th review.

Thank you very much to all the wonderful readers taking the time to review. Yay! Your support and encouragement have made my week, putting a much needed smile on my face.

To answer a question that has been raised by quite a few reviewers regarding just how nasty Rosalie is in this story and how honourably or otherwise Edward's behaviour towards Bella is going to be: this is a 'redemption tale' which means that some of the characters - make that 'all' of the characters - are on a learning journey of sorts, Rosalie and Edward included. As promised in my profile page, I can guarantee a very, very happy ending. However...expect some angsty times ahead. And I did mention that AFL is rated M for a reason. ;)

Posted: Thursday October 3rd 2011

Words: 1845

PS: This is an unbeta'ed outtake, so apologies for any rogue apostrophes, randomly located commas, or other grammatical irregularities. Squeaky and CC - please forgive me!

Chapter 9

Not Her!

EPOV

I was expecting Rosalie to make trouble and tried to keep abreast of events amongst the servants, but it was difficult without making my interest in Bella publicly known. Jenks kept his ear to the ground but heard nothing of great import other than the unsurprising news that the 'new girl' had a number of young footmen, kitchen-hands and a grooms-men or two all vying for her attention. One could hardly blame them. I was pleased to hear that she had so far done nothing to encourage

any one individual, though that didn't stop some of the young braggarts from making empty boasts. At least, I hoped they were empty.

The morning of the hunt, I was so busy with arrangements and issuing orders to make sure the event ran smoothly, that thoughts of the girl's safety were pushed to the back of my mind—though not banished entirely. Upon sighting Rosalie on horseback a short time before we were due to head out after the hounds, I let myself relax, falsely assuming that any threat to Bella would be suspended with Rosalie's occupation. I couldn't have been more wrong. If I'd been atop Sabre, I could have gotten to Bella's side more quickly, but my groom was making a last minute adjustment to an ankle bandage, and I had dismounted. So when I saw Bella outside, unsuitably attired for the early morning chill and carrying an obviously heavy tray out amongst the horses and their riders, my heart lodged in my throat.

I ran, shoving man and horse aside, desperately trying to attract her attention. Catching her eye, I called for her to stop and go back to the safety of the perimeter, but Rosalie saw my approach and reissued her command. What happened next was the stuff of nightmares, unfolding before me as if in slow motion.

Lady Kendleton's big bay, as obstreperous as its owner, bit the horse being ridden inexpertly by one of the Misses Winthrop and the grey gelding reared, spinning away from its attacker...and right into Bella. The tray she was holding went flying, and I lost sight of her in the ensuing melee.

"No!" I shouted, forcing my way through the crowd, the words *Not her!* screaming in my mind. Closing in on the unfolding catastrophe, I could just make out Bella's crumpled form lying unconscious on the ground and at imminent threat of being trampled, as the incompetent riders struggled to move their now frantic beasts out of the way.

Just missing a vicious kick by one panicked animal, and ducking under the flying hooves of another, I dove for Bella who, upon regaining consciousness, had the presence of mind to make herself as small a target as possible. Covering her with my body, my relief was so great I barely felt the blows that rained down upon my back and leg. As quickly as possible, I dragged her to safety and then cradled her in my arms.

"It's all right; you're safe now. Open your eyes, Bella...please," I pleaded, ignoring the calls and queries of the guests and servants who'd come running.

Bella's long, dark lashes fluttered open, and to my relief, I saw recognition in her eyes.

"You saved me," she murmured, and disregarding my audience, I pulled her into a tight embrace, exceedingly grateful that I'd reached her in time. She'd been hurt, a fact that infuriated me, but not too badly, I hoped.

Lifting a slender, shaking hand to the gash on her forehead, she then brought it before her eyes which widened and then rolled back in her head.

"Bella...Bella look at me!" I ordered, attempting to forestall another dangerous loss of consciousness. She obeyed me, and her beautiful brown eyes, clouded by shock, focused on my face.

"But...but there's *blood!*" she cried, her indignant reaction drawing a relieved chuckle from my lips, and I did my best to reassure her that all would be well.

Lifting her into my arms, I ignored the pain in my leg and back and held her tight, savouring the feel of her slender form as she clung to me: vulnerable, injured, and in pain, a servant of the lowest class yet somehow...very dear. My conscience—my *honour*—demanded that I protect this mysterious, contradictory girl who by working in my father's household came under his protection—and *mine*: from vindictive ladies of so-called nobility, from accident, and, if necessary...from myself.

In no mood to placate my cousin-in-law or to protect her from public scrutiny, I did not hold back in my condemnation of Rosalie's behaviour. In my fury, I cared little if the lashing of my tongue caused her to be ostracised, well knowing the situation would only be temporary. The power she wielded as Emmett's wife and a leading member of my father's household meant that few members of society would dare to criticise or condemn her...to her face.

If I had my way, she would have received a very thorough—and *painful*—chastisement for her cruel and dangerous action. But that was Emmett's decision to make, not mine, and considering the way Rosalie had him wrapped around her little finger, highly unlikely to occur.

While that thought in the forefront of my mind, I watched my cousin approach as he forced his mount through the ogling crowd. More determined than ever to protect Bella from the curiosity and unwelcome advances of my house guests, I made sure her head was tucked in against my shoulder, her lovely face hidden from view.

Emmett took in the scene—Rosalie furious and set apart by the crowd, the servant in my arms though he would not have been able to ascertain her identity, and the injury to my leg—and responded accordingly, demanding to know what had

occurred.

"Why don't you ask your *wife*, Emmett?" I replied, breaking the unspoken rule that existed between us and refusing to ignore Rosalie's behaviour for his sake any longer.

While we'd never spoken of the events that had led to his unfortunate betrothal, Emmett was no fool—except where Rosalie was concerned—and knew full well that he had been her second choice. But he'd courted her regardless, as the man that I counted as friend as well as family, had done the unthinkable and fallen in love with the woman he would eventually marry. It was the height of folly for one of our station to do so and the height of misfortune that the object of his profound desire and affection was one such as Rosalie. The lady was the epitome of Society's image of perfection with the most noble of bloodlines...and ice in her veins. Any hint of passion had been well and truly bred out of her, just as a disproportionate sense of entitlement and superiority and an acute aversion to physical intimacy had been well and truly drummed in.

I pitied Emmett his emotional attachment to a woman who was intrinsically unable to return his affection. Love made one weak and had no place in the marriage bed, and I would not be making the same mistake as my cousin.

After directing Emmett to lead the hunt, I strode away with Bella in my arms, eager to escape the scrutiny of the crowd and see her injuries attended to. There would be talk, no doubt, but just as my father was well known for his remarkably egalitarian treatment of his staff and tenants, I was also gaining a reputation for following in his eccentric footsteps. While my actions would make little sense to our guests and neighbours, I hoped that they would interpret the events based upon the public knowledge of my unpopular political leanings. If I was careful in my words and actions from this point, no one need know that Bella was someone of personal significance.

But it was hard to hide how I felt. The beast that I kept ruthlessly chained behind a façade of gentleman-like civility, paced restlessly. The feel of Bella's lithe, feminine form nestled trustingly in my arms brought out the worst of my true, animalistic nature. For while the centuries long 'breeding program' undertaken to produce the empire's ruling class had resulted in the current generation of refined, emotionally suppressed females, the males of my class were a different breed entirely...and I hungered to make her my own. Yet despite the dark passion this particular girl evoked, I could not deny the tenderness that seeing her slight form laid out upon one of my father's chaise lounges aroused within me.

I knelt beside her, annoyed that I was unable to stifle the grimace of pain triggered by the action.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she cried, her eyes fixed on my injured leg as she tried to sit up, clearly unready to do so.

"It's nothing, Bella," I murmured, attempting to lighten her concern with a mildly teasing approach.

With her safety ensured, I should have left her...walked away and not looked back. Anything more would increase the damage I must surely have already done with my extraordinary reaction to her having been placed in danger...but I stayed. Wanting to reassure her further, I smiled, drinking in the loveliness of her face still remarkable in its beauty despite her increased pallor. Her wide brown eyes stared up at me, trustingly, captivated and captivating. Unable to resist, I reached to stroke my fingers gently along the side of her jaw before cupping her cheek with my hand. Her shy smile and the blossoming of a faint but undeniable blush in her cheeks were my rewards...as well as being positive proof that despite her obvious intelligence and unusual level of education, it was assuredly *common* blood that flowed in her veins. With no hope of alliance or ulterior motivation, and even while lying injured and in shock, she was aware of me and responded to my touch, *her* passion neither sublimated by generations of careful breeding and rigorous training, nor far below the surface.

Knowing that she would respond, it was all I could do not to lean down and kiss her then and there, the desire to do so almost overwhelming. But my conscience, the part that ensured I maintained my veneer of civilisation at all costs, reasserted itself just in time.

"I have to go," I told her, unable to completely hide my reluctance. "But I'm leaving you in good hands. You'll be all right?"

She nodded, her pale, slender hand rising up to where I still cupped her cheek, and I grasped it briefly. In danger of falling prey to inexcusable temptation, I released her and stood, forcing myself to turn away.

After issuing instructions pertaining to Bella's care and safety and dismissing Henson's concerns regarding my own injuries, I strode from the room. Or that was my intention. Unable to resist, I hesitated at the doorway and turned back for one last look at the girl who, through no overt action or fault of her own, had set my normally well-ordered existence on its head.

"Make sure she's well cared for, Henson. I'll check in later today," I found myself saying words that revealed altogether too much of my inner turmoil. Then finally, I turned and left with a variation on the words from earlier echoing in my mind...

Why this girl?

Why now?

Why her?

The hunt was not affected by the events preceding and came to a successful conclusion. After thanking the Master of the Hounds and turning Sabre over into my head grooms-man's faithful care, I attended to the guests, in all appearances the attentive host...which couldn't have been further from the truth. My impatience to leave and check on Bella's well being—and to see her again—was difficult to hide.

It was to be late in the afternoon before I was finally able to make my escape. Unsure as to where I would find Bella, I asked Henson to lead the way and made one of my rare visits to the kitchens. As a lad growing up in Worthington Hall, I'd been a frequent visitor. But times had changed, though Mrs Harrison, the Head Cook, appeared exactly the same...a little broader around the middle maybe. Nanny had always said one should never trust a skinny cook. Mrs. Harrison's cooking ability was, indeed, legendary, and I allowed myself to be briefly side-tracked by one of her hot, apricot tarts.

Then Mrs. Cope led me through to the small, cupboard-like room where Bella lay still and silent on a narrow cot.

"Who is watching over her?" I asked in a hushed but determined tone.

"I am, m'lord. I check on her periodically in between my other duties," Mrs. Cope responded, clearly puzzled by my prolonged interest. She'd already given me her thanks for 'rescuing the girl,' and clearly thought I was going above and beyond the call of duty—and my realm of responsibility—with my further enquiries.

"You're a busy woman, Mrs. Cope. Between the wedding, the guests staying on, and now the hunt, you have done an exemplary job of keeping the household running smoothly...for which you have my heartfelt gratitude."

My words brought a rarely seen smile to the Head Housekeeper's face, one she did her best to suppress, but I was reasonably confident I had achieved my aim. While I had spoken with all sincerity, I had hopes that her cooperation would now be

more easily obtained.

"I'd hate to think we might lose the girl due to complications—she did receive a rather nasty blow to the head—so I think it prudent to have one of the junior members of staff sit with her until we're confident she is out of the woods," I offered with all solemnity. I'd order it done if necessary but hoped not to have to resort to such blatant methods.

"Well...if you think that's necessary, m'lord," Mrs. Cope eyed me curiously but complied. "I'll arrange for young Angela to sit with the girl. She's a thoughtful lass, and they share a room, so they're well acquainted."

"Thank you. I appreciate your diligence," I nodded my thanks and then stood waiting while Angela was summonsed, determined to see my request-come-order carried out before I left. My preference would have been to sit with Bella myself, but that was out of the question.

Angela, the young, shy girl who served at breakfast, stared at me in awe before bobbing a belated curtsy.

"You'll watch her closely and report if you have any concerns?" I asked, my tone firm but kind, and she nodded her head briskly.

"Yes, of course, m'lord. Bella's my friend and I've been worried about her...we all have. Thank you so much for rescuing her."

The girl's words ran together in her nervousness, and I hid a smile behind my hand.

"Thank you, Angela. I have complete confidence in you," I assured her, and she stumbled a second curtsy before scurrying to sit beside Bella, fussing with the blanket and taking one of Bella's pale, limp hands between her own.

After one last look at where Bella lay, so small and quiet beneath the coarse grey blanket, I turned and left, satisfied that I had done all I could...but dissatisfied in ways I preferred not to examine.

~AFL~

I'd love to hear your thoughts if you'd like to leave a review. Any bets on how long he'll be able to stay away...or if he'll even try?

xxx TLSue

The Library

Thanks, as always, to the wonderful Stephenie Meyer for allowing us to share her creation.

Thank you so much to all my wonderful readers. Your support and encouragement for this story has been phenomenal. I'm sorry if I missed anyone when I was replying to reviews. Replying to 200 reviews for last chapter was quite an undertaking! Not that I'm complaining. :D

To my wonderful betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, thank you always seems a little inadequate.

A little bit of A Forbidden Love housekeeping for those who are interested

-

As some of you will be aware, I've not been true to the time by using the lord's first names, eg - Lord Edward, Lord Jasper, etc. Strictly speaking, they would have been known by their title, eg - Lord Masen, Lord Whitlock. Their friends and acquaintances would have called them by their titles without the prefix, 'lord.' Only their closest family members and usually, but not always (talk about cold,) their wives would have called them by their Christian name. However, I've tweaked things a little and am using the Cullen lord's first names as they're what we know and love.

I also found out from a reviewer (so sorry I can't remember your name. I've scrolled through a zillion reviews and can't find the right one!) that Edward wouldn't have been riding a Percheron as they aren't a breed of Warm-bloods as I'd assumed - but a type of draft horse! LOL! I laughed so hard when I found out, picturing Lord Edward lumbering around on a ruddy great cart horse! I promise to do better with my research in future. #sheepish smile#

Posted: Sunday November 6th 2011

Words: 2753

Chapter 10

The Library

While Mrs. Cope was the epitome of competence and brooked no nonsense, she could be kind and made sure that I was taken well care of over the next few days while I recovered from my injury. Though I couldn't help noticing her studying me with a quizzical air on occasion or the looks and murmured comments of the other staff. The fact that Lord Edward had gone to such lengths to see to my rescue, to the point of his being wounded in the process, was not seen as overly remarkable by the servants of Worthington Hall considering both his and his father's characters and reputations. It was the way he had gone about it, with next to no concern for his personal safety and an excessive concern for mine, which engendered scrutiny.

He'd been seen holding me close—closer than was strictly necessary—and while a polite inquiry as to my condition or the state of my recovery after the event would not have been unexpected, his insisting on my supervision and checking in person as to my well-being was far from the normal response of a lord—even a *Cullen* lord—to a servant being injured.

"I'm not surprised that Lord Edward went so far out of his way on yer behalf," Angela admitted the morning of the fourth day after the hunt as we dressed for the day.

"Oh...and why is that?" I asked, curious. Mrs. Cope and the staff of Worthington Hall were not the only ones to question Edward's behaviour. He'd said he was interested in me, which had been exceedingly flattering, but with time to ponder I found that possibility quite inexplicable.

"Because he's taken a right fancy to ye," Angela replied with a worried frown. "I told ye he liked ye after that day at breakfast."

"And it's a bloody good thing too," Jessica grumbled from where she was struggling to button her skirt, her liking for the decidedly delicious puddings provided for the staff having wreaked havoc on her waistline even in the short time since I'd known her. "Otherwise ye'd 'ave been trampled underneath all those 'orses, and Mrs. Cope'd be lookin' for a new maid."

I was beginning to believe the girl would never forgive me for attracting the attention of a lord she'd set her sights on, though what she'd hoped to achieve by gaining Edward's interest or affection was beyond me. I couldn't help but agree with her sentiment though. It was a good thing that Edward had cared enough to rescue me, but now I was left trying to decide if that meant I could trust him with the secret of my true identity.

I'd promised my father that I would speak to no one but Lord Carlisle, but I'm sure he would have modified that demand if he'd known I would be facing a delay of several months. It had been almost two weeks since I arrived at Worthington Hall, and while I had managed to secure a place for myself, maintaining the charade for another two to three months was an exercise of daunting magnitude...and quite possibly not necessary. If I confided in Edward and he *believed* my version of events, then I was sure I would have his protection until his father returned and could see to matters in Forkston. But if Edward did *not* believe me, then all would be lost, as I would be handed over to the local magistrate and returned home to the not so tender mercies of Lord Hunter.

While Edward appeared in all ways a gentleman of exemplary character and good breeding, it was a huge risk to take, as once the truth was revealed there would be no going back. Strangely, on a personal level, my feeling was that I could trust him...with my *life*. But a betrothal was virtually as binding as a marriage, and if there was any chance, however slim, that Edward would choose to believe that I was Lord Hunter's runaway fiancé, there was little doubt in my mind that he would feel honour bound to return me to my rightful place...at James' side.

A shiver ran through me at the thought, and I decided that the safest option was for me to remain as 'Belinda Brown' for at least a while longer.

"Bella, since you seem much better today I've decided to assign you to cleaning the library." Mrs. Cope passed me a bucket containing a feather duster, cloths, and a bottle of polish, her mundane words sending a tingle of excitement coursing through my body.

I'd been restricted to light duties for a few days after the accident as my headache and dizziness slowly subsided, and I was looking forward to returning to the kitchen. But this...this was even better than baking.

A library.

Books.

It had only been a few weeks since I had left home, but oh...how I missed my books. Trying to imagine what the library would be like here at Worthington Hall, I refused to allow my mind to take me back to my beloved collection of books and cosy sitting room in Forkston. I knew it was probably futile, but I didn't want my grief or the stresses of the previous days to spoil this unexpected opportunity.

"Just don't overdo it, and make sure you inform me immediately if your headache

returns. Mike can show you the way." Mrs. Cope nodded in the young footman's direction.

He'd been hovering as usual and seemed inordinately pleased to be assigned the task, practically grabbing the bucket from my hands. Grinning, he motioned me to precede him out of the kitchen and towards the stairs. I turned to leave and then, remembering, nodded politely to Mrs. Cope. At home I'd never insisted on the staff bowing and scraping, not that Mrs. Waters would have put up with such 'airs' as she would have called them. But here I had to remember to stand and nod to almost everyone, including the housekeeper, cook, and butler.

"And Mike," Mrs. Cope called after us, "You come right back once Bella is settled. No dilly-dallying. You've work to do."

"Yes, ma'am." Mike's expression soured momentarily but brightened as soon as we were out into the servants' hallway. The corridor was surprisingly wide considering it was used solely by the staff. It ran between the family and guest hallways that led to the vast rooms with their impressive views of the lake and grounds of the park and the bedrooms that overlooked the rear gardens. I guessed this was to accommodate the hectic toing and froing that occurred when the great mansion was teeming with guests all needing to be fed and cared for by the army of servants employed for this purpose.

I smiled to myself. It was bemusing to observe what an incredible amount of work and fuss was required to maintain an acceptable standard of living for a handful of privileged nobility. My father and I, floating on the very fringes of the *ton*, had managed rather well with far less help.

"So, is that lovely smile for me then?" Mike asked, nudging me on the shoulder with unexpected force. I staggered sideways, tripping over my feet, which he took as an excuse to steady me by pulling me close to his side.

"Stop! Don't do that." I pushed away, flustered.

"Just trying to help." Mike feigned surprise at my reaction, the hand not holding the bucket held out in a gesture of innocence.

"I'm perfectly capable of walking unaided, especially when tall lads avoid striking me with their wayward arms," I retorted with more humour than asperity. His puppy-dog eagerness reminded me a little of Jacob when he was younger, so I was inclined to be forgiving.

"Ooh. Ye think I'm tall then." Mike grinned again and then did a strange wagging thing with his eyebrows.

"Well, it's not hard to be taller than me," I scowled, nonplussed. I hadn't meant to encourage him.

"How much farther to the library?" I asked a little warily.

"Why? Eager to get me alone so ye can have ye wicked way with me?" He did that strange eyebrow thing again, and I slowed to a stop.

"Whatever do you mean?" I blurted.

"Oh, come on! A gorgeous creature like you out in the world on your own? Don't tell me you're innocent? Most serving lasses have been tumbled and rolled umpteen times by the time they're your age."

I gasped, stepping back. Mike's words weren't as offensive as those of the horrid men I'd encountered on the journey from Forkston, but they reminded me of their lewd comments and puzzling threats. I should have insisted Jacob and Leah explain to me whatever they knew about such things. All I had to go on was the titbits of gossip I'd overheard at various social functions arranged by other society families in our area, and some rather incomprehensible instructions I'd been given in preparation for my eventual betrothal. I knew a lady's reputation could be irreversibly damaged if she were to engage in what I'd heard described as *scandalous or lascivious* behaviour, but what exactly that entailed was a mystery to me.

Well, maybe not a complete mystery. My cheeks coloured as I recalled the strange and unsettling way I felt whenever Edward was near...like a dozen butterflies had taken up residence in my stomach. Being held in his arms was not an experience I would have forgone, even though it had come at the price of a rather nasty blow.

I ducked my head, grateful when Mike said nothing further and indicated we'd finally arrived at our destination.

"Allow me, Miss Bella," he said with a sweeping bow as he opened the narrow servants' entrance into the library.

With a hesitant smile, I stepped through into Lord Cullen's library and then stumbled to a halt. Leather-bound books housed in dark mahogany shelving stretched along three sides of the room, two stories high, with periodic sliding

ladders to access the upper shelves. Three enormous fireplaces, spaced evenly along the windowed southern face of the library, stood ready to be lit at a moment's notice. Leather couches, sofas, and single seats with matching stuffed ottomans were grouped around the room, offering enough seating for fifty people, I guessed at a glance. Velvet curtains of deep burgundy and gold were partially drawn against the chill, cloudy day. They perfectly complimented the burgundy, navy, and gold design of the rich, patterned carpeting creating a surprisingly cosy feel to a room of palatial proportions.

"Oh, my..." I whispered in awe.

"Yeah, it's something, ain't it?" Mike agreed, briefly scanning the room before closing the door behind us. "Not that I'm overly interested in books meself, not having much time for reading and the like. More a man of action...that's me."

Mike's words barely registered, unable to compete with my total absorption in the wonders around me. That changed when he suddenly grabbed me by the shoulders, forced me back against the nearest row of shelving, and attempted to press his lips to mine.

"Mike, no!" I cried, squirming and ducking to avoid his unwelcome attention. He ignored my protest, pushing himself against me and tangling his hands in my hair.

"Ah, come on Bella, ye know ye want it," he growled the words into my ear as his mouth pressed against my cheek and neck.

Panic rose in my chest as I struggled to catch my breath. Then my father's advice about how to handle what I had always considered the unlikeliest of circumstances surfaced in my mind. I went limp, sagging against Mike's body. When he stepped back a fraction, checking to see if I'd fainted, I brought my knee up between his legs as hard as I could, following quickly with an elbow to his stomach.

The elbow was probably unnecessary.

Mike collapsed in a heap, cupping his private area with his hands and howling like a hound on the scent of a fox. I hadn't expected such a dramatic reaction but couldn't suppress a moment's satisfaction as I struggled to regain my breath. But when a couple of minutes had passed and he continued to writhe and groan on the ground, I began to worry I'd done him some sort of irreparable harm. Panicked anew, I raced from the room and straight into the arms of Henson, the butler.

"What's going on? Who's making that dreadful ruckus?" Henson demanded,

catching me by the elbow and directing me back into the library.

I pointed, my hand shaking along with the rest of my trembling body.

"Oh, it's like that, is it?" Henson muttered, reaching down to haul Mike up by the collar of his shirt. "That'll teach you to leave the lasses alone, my lad. You'll be lucky to have a job when His Grace hears about this. You know his views on fraternization amongst the staff, let alone harassing unwilling girls."

Mike groaned a garbled protest as he stumbled from the room, a forceful shove in the middle of his back from the curmudgeonly butler sending him on his way.

"Are ye all right, lass?" Henson asked once Mike was out of sight.

"Yes, sir. Thank you so much for coming. I don't know why he thought he could..." I swallowed hard, biting down on my lip to stop it from wobbling.

"Aye, it's all right, lass. I've been watching you since you arrived, as I was a bit worried that you'd be trouble, but you've done naught to provoke the men. You can't help your appearance or the delusions that fill a feckless young man's head. Mind you, seems like you can handle yourself well enough when needed, which should encourage the rest of the lads to mind their manners." Henson smiled kindly and reached to pat me awkwardly on the shoulder. "Do you need some time to collect yourself, or will you be right to continue?"

I nodded politely. "No, thank you' sir, I'll be fine."

Henson nodded, rubbing his chin. "Very well then, but do let me know if young Mike or any of the others gives you trouble. We pride ourselves at Worthington Hall on providing a safe environment for the staff; the Duke wouldn't have it any other way. And I don't think the Marquis would be too impressed if you came to any harm either...has a soft spot for you' I think, after coming to your rescue. Not that you've got anything to fear from Lord Edward...as honourable as his father, that one."

With that, Henson turned and left the library, leaving me to regain my composure and consider his comments. Shaken by my struggle, it took a while for my heart rate to return to normal. As soon as I felt better, I collected my discarded cleaning utensils and began dusting the nearby tables and shelves. What I really wanted to do was explore the treasures on the shelves all around me, but I had work to do before I could risk such an indulgence. I'd almost finished dusting and was about to allow myself the treat when I heard a noise.

My heart began to race.

"Mike, is that you?" I called scanning the room, though it was difficult to see into the shadowed corners and past the drapes and shelving. He'd seemed awfully cowed after I'd dropped him with my knee, but I didn't know how long it would take him to recover. I highly doubted I would get the opportunity to best him the same way twice.

"If that's you, Mike, you'd better stay away, or I'll give you some more punishment," I threatened, the tremor in my voice betraying my fear. "I mean it! I don't want you touching me or, or...kissing me. Just leave me alone!"

A sound from my right had me spinning in that direction, just in time to see Edward stepping forward from a shadowed doorway.

My relief was palpable. "Oh, it's you," I cried, then smiled hesitantly. Edward didn't return my smile. His scowl was clearly visible all the way across the room, and I quickly lowered my head, dropping into a curtsy.

"I'm sorry m'lord. I...I didn't mean to disturb you," I stuttered, my relief at seeing Edward fading in the face of his obvious displeasure. Looking up through my lashes to see him stalking towards me, his hands balled into fists at his side, I gulped at the furious look in his eyes.

~AFL~

Hmmm...I wonder what's got Edward so hot and bothered? ;)

Reviews are read (and reread! LOL!) and receive a reply if humanly possible.

xxx TLSue

Allure

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. (Isn't she lucky?) No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks so much to orpheuschick for her insights and information regarding historical accuracy for terms of address, etc.

I'll do my best to reply to all your awesome reviews tomorrow, but in a nutshell -

*** So glad you all enjoyed Bella's slightly OOC self-defence ability. I was worried you'd think it was a tad inconsistent with her supposed level of innocence - it is, but I couldn't resist!**

*** You've all got great instincts with almost everyone guessing why Edward is upset...or close to it. I especially loved the review from forbiddenluv (what a cool pen-name!) that said "Yes it's so hard to know because Edward always seems to be upset about something :)" How true! But you all agree he's hot when he's angry, possessive, breathing...so we're on the same page.**

*** Many of you want Bella to tell Edward who she is as you think he would believe and protect her. I think you're right (that he would protect her - especially now) but that would totally stuff up my story so...probably not going to happen. ;)**

*** What is it with you guys and libraries? You have very naughty minds! #snicker#**

Finally, I just received a very exciting email from The Lemonade Stand telling me :

"One (or tons) of your readers recommended A Forbidden Love for Fic of the Week over at The Lemonade Stand. The top five stories of the week will be featured in The Award Winning Fic collection and added to the "Recommended Reading List" on the side bar. It's a weekly poll and is open for two more days. So, let your readers know if you can so they can show you some love. And we're tweeting, updating our statuses, hitting up tumblr, and getting it out there any way we can, too!"

If you feel like heading over to [thelemonadestand dot blogspot dot com](http://thelemonadestand.blogspot.com) and voting, that would be cool. And thanks to whoever nominated AFL. :D

Posted: Monday November 7th 2011

Words: 1261

Just a reminder that this outtake is unbeta'ed, so apologies for any errors in grammar.

The Library Outtake

Allure

EPOV

Jenks' surreptitious enquiries made sure I was kept well informed of Bella's recovery. My instructions, carried out with Henson's customary discretion, ensured that she was given what was probably considered an extraordinary level of care and consideration for a maid. But it was necessary. Keeping Bella safe had become an unexpected priority, absurd though my concern might be. She was a servant, for God's sake!

While I endeavoured to support my father's uncommon moral stance on the treatment of staff and the working classes by their superiors, for the first time in many years, I found myself resenting it acutely. There could never be anything between Bella and me...and yet, I couldn't get the image of her fragile form lying unconscious on the ground out of my mind. The thought of something happening to the girl, of her being injured or, heaven forbid, killed, was completely untenable.

If I were younger, weaker, more impressionable, I may have owned to an infatuation with the girl, but I was not of the mind to succumb to such foolishness. It was physical attraction that I felt and nothing more: a base, primal desire that had little to do with the recipient and nothing at all to do with the gentler sensibilities. I'd been too long without a woman...that was all. If Bella had been older, experienced in the ways of the world, and not employed by my father and consequently falling under his protection, then an uncomplicated and no doubt short-lived dalliance would surely suffice to resolve the situation. A lord indulging himself with a maidservant was an occurrence so common and unremarkable amongst my peers that if it had become known, it would have barely raised an eyebrow.

But Bella was young and clearly vulnerable, and I was neither so depraved nor so desperate that I was unable to control my urges, though I could not deny that my self-control was sorely tempted by the memory of her sweet and powerful allure.

My determination to deny my wants and see the girl protected did not, however, stop her from occupying an unconscionable number of my thoughts...or assuage my curiosity where she was concerned. I was still determined to discover the secrets behind her quality of speech and gracious manner. But few answers were forthcoming, despite Jenks' best endeavours. Mrs. Cope was not one to gossip, and I was not yet exercised to make direct enquiries.

What I *did* know was that I was far from alone in my fascination, as almost every single male member of staff below the age of thirty was similarly affected...a fact that did not sit well with me. Jenks had supplied me with a list of their names and household positions, and young Seth, a kitchen-hand turned stable-hand with a nature both ingenuous and garrulous, had filled in the rest. While I knew it should not matter—*could* not matter—the thought that Bella may choose to enter into an alliance, or form a bond, or whatever it was that servant's called a flirtation, rankled more than I was willing to admit.

Forcing myself to keep my distance, I was well aware that was the only way my self-imposed boundaries would remain intact. But then Jenks informed me that Bella had been assigned to work in the library...*alone*...and my best intentions evaporated. I quickly finishing up the letter I was writing in reply to my estate manager's latest flurry of urgent enquiries. Then I made my way via my apartments to the library, unable to resist the temptation of a few unaccompanied and uninterrupted moments with Bella. It would give me an opportunity to discover the answers to the questions I had regarding her background, I mused, doing my best to silence the irritatingly persistent voice of my conscience that scoffed at the blatant justification.

As I strode the corridors of Worthington Hall, my thoughts turned to the increasing tension between my cousin and myself. While Emmett could not deny his wife's behaviour was unacceptable on the day of the hunt, he'd not appreciated my publicly humiliating her and would take no further action to bring her into line. That the lady was no longer communicating with me was not a source of concern. Ignoring her was something I was quite comfortable with, even knowing it was not the way a true gentleman behaved.

Despite my determination to treat Bella with honour, I had never been more acutely aware that behind my highly educated, aristocratic, and civilized exterior lurked a beast that was barely leashed.

Standing in the shadows, I watched her work, savouring the moment. Her innate grace, the natural, uncomplicated beauty that not even a utilitarian servant's uniform could hide, the curve of her neck, the gentle sweep of her waist...everything about this girl appealed to me on so many levels. I particularly liked the way she hummed tunelessly while she worked, her lower lip occasionally catching between her teeth.

She'd passed right by me more than once, dusting with meticulous care, but was at the far end of the library to where I stood hidden in an alcove when something alerted her to my presence.

"Mike, is that you?" she called looking around the vast room, her expression worried.

Scowling, I wondered which Mike she was referring to—there was more than one vying for her attention, though I'd put my money on that braggart, Newton. Why she was calling his name was of even greater concern. Had she arranged for an assignation once she'd discovered she would be working in the library alone?

"If that's you, Mike, you'd better stay away, or I'll give you some more punishment," she called again, the unmistakable tremor in her voice alerting me to another, far more disturbing, possibility.

"I mean it! I don't want you touching me or, or...kissing me. Just leave me alone!" she called, visibly trembling even as she attempted to imbue her words with authority.

My vision faded, as I was momentarily blinded by a red haze. Bella's words required little interpretation. I should have known there'd be a boy or man—quite possibly more than one—that wouldn't take her disinterest as the final answer...or accept a 'no' from the newest and most vulnerable member of the household. But I'd been so busy protecting Bella from my *own* inappropriate interest and the lechery of members of my class, that I'd not considered the risks to her safety from members of her own.

So much for my keeping her safe by staying away!

Furious with myself for the self absorption that had led to my missing something so obvious and appalled by the look of fear that marred her lovely features, I broke cover and strode toward her.

Bella spun toward me, her fearful expression transforming to one of relief.

"Oh, it's you," she cried, a sweet, shy smile lightening her expression even further.

My expression grew darker at the knowledge that a member of my father's staff had frightened her in the first place.

Bella's head lowered and she bobbed a curtsy as I approached, reminding me once again of our differing status.

"I'm sorry m'lord. I...I didn't mean to disturb you," she murmured, looking up at me from beneath the long, dark lashes that made a man think of things he ought not...things that *I* ought not.

As I closed the distance between us, I tried to remember that my priority was Bella's protection: from those of my class, from other servants, and if necessary...from myself.

~AFL~

Hmmm...will Lord Hotness remember, or won't he?

xxx TLSue

Hidden Talents

Thanks as always to Stephenie Meyer who owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

I normally love replying to reviews - your comments and insights are so interesting - but real life has been a bit difficult and 295 reviews is a lot! Umm...please don't let that stop you from leaving them though, as I'll get back to replying as soon as I can. I promise I read them all...several times actually. :D

Special thanks to engelboi for posting A Forbidden Love's 800th review! Sorry I can't thank whoever posted the 600th or 700th as they popped up too quickly. LOL!

Thanks to lvk1978 for the updated information regarding the correct use of titles. Apparently (I had read this before but got a bit confused) 'm'lord' was a slightly mocking term used by Europeans for English 'Lords,' so My Lord is actually the correct term. At this stage, I've decided to stick with m'lord, but I might go back and get it all sorted correctly later. ;)

To MK543: well done for picking up on the whole 'upper class breeding compared to common blood in relation to passion' plot line. Where does Edward get these ideas indeed?

To CrimsonRose003 - Banish Rosalie and let Emmett have Angela? Really? Hmmm...while I think Rosalie has a particularly steep learning curve ahead of her, Emmett does love her. Actually, they both have a lot to learn.

And to all the 'lurkers' and newbie first time reviewers who've come out of hiding to post a review for AFL - thank you so much! I realise it was in response to a bribe #snort# but now that you've taken the plunge, I'd love to hear from you again.

Extra special thanks as always to my wonderful betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar. Mwah!

Oops - almost forgot! Thanks so much to True Cullen Spirit for nominating A Forbidden Love for Fic of the Week over on The Lemonade Stand! Yay! The poll is now up and voting closes Thursday if you'd like to

give AFL the nod. Welcome to all the new readers (and reviewers - bless your hearts!) from The Lemonade Stand. :D

Posted: Tuesday November 8th 2011

Words: 2218

Chapter 12

Hidden Talents

BPOV

My mind raced as Edward approached.

Why was he so angry? Had he discovered my link with his friend, Lord Hunter?

As he strode closer, I saw he was limping slightly from the injury he'd received when he'd rescued me. *That* must be the cause of his anger, I realised...regret at putting himself at risk over a mere servant.

Twice in the same morning, I found myself backed up against the bookshelves.

Edward halted, crowding me against the wall. When he reached towards me, I flinched, my hands rising up in front of my face.

"Bella..." He froze, sounding shocked. "You think I would strike you?"

Slowly I let my hands fall, as I shook my head hesitantly from side to side. "No. It's just...you're so angry with me," I whispered.

"Why would I be angry with you?" He sounded genuinely puzzled.

"Because of your leg. If you hadn't come to my rescue you wouldn't have been injured."

"You think I regret saving you?" Edward's eyebrows rose, his tone incredulous.

I nodded warily, and his face darkened. "If you think I could ever regret saving you, Bella, then you really don't understand...anything," he murmured. As he did so, his hand continued its journey towards my face. I forced myself to keep still as he reached for a long strand of hair that had come loose during my tussle with Mike.

When he carefully tucked it back into the bun at my nape, his fingers brushed against my neck, and a tingling sensation radiated across my skin. I gasped, and then bit my lip to stop from making any further sound.

"The 'Mike' you were threatening—I'm assuming that's the footman, Newton—the one who's been shadowing you?" Edward spoke softly, but there was no disguising the menace in his tone.

I nodded jerkily, averting my eyes from his piercing green gaze.

"It's not hard to guess his transgression, but I'm curious, Bella. How exactly did you...*punish* him?"

My eyes shot up to Edward's face. His head was tilted slightly to the side, his brows furrowed, and I gulped, temporarily mesmerised.

He raised one eyebrow and I started, recalling his query.

"Um, well you see I...I remembered some advice my papa gave me and I um, raised my knee up and um...hit him...er in..." I shrugged, unable to put the events into words, so I demonstrated with my knee and gestured towards Edward's private area. He winced and stepped back, causing me to realise the incredible inappropriateness of my actions. Sucking in a sharp breath, I covered my flaming cheeks with my hands.

Edward chuckled. "So, you *do* have hidden talents. I'll have to keep that in mind."

Peeking up at him through my lashes, I was both relieved and mortified to see the humour in his expression. "I'm so sorry, m'lord. I didn't mean to...to..."

"No need for apology, Bella," he murmured, reaching to lower my hands from my cheeks. As he rubbed his thumbs softly over my knuckles, the strange sensation I'd experienced in his arms the day of the rescue spread languorously through my body, threatening the integrity of my muscles. It was a good thing I wasn't prone to fits of fainting.

"I'm glad you were able to defend yourself, though it should *not* have been necessary," Edward continued, his tone hardening. "You won't have to worry about Newton bothering you again. He'll be gone by nightfall."

I gasped and pulled my hands free to place them against Edward's chest in supplication. "Oh please, m'lord. Please don't dismiss Mike on my account. He's just

a silly boy who thought I was someone that I'm not. I mean, I am a serving girl, but not like the ones he's known before. I've only recently come into service, and I'm not used to the way things are done and..." I ground to a halt. How could I possibly explain without giving myself away?

Edward captured both my hands in one of his own, holding them tightly in his fist.

"You're defending Newton? Why? Did you invite his attentions and then change your mind?"

"No! I didn't want him to touch me. I told him no, but he wouldn't listen." I shook my head as tears sprang to my eyes.

Edward's expression softened, and he loosened his grip, reaching up to brush a tear from my cheek. "It's all right, Bella...shhh...I believe you."

Breathing a sigh of relief, I resisted the temptation to lean into his touch.

"Come, sit," he ordered, leading me to a nearby group of chairs. "I'm not sure you should be up and about so soon after your injury."

"No, I am quite recovered, m'lord...but thank you," I demurred, a little dazed by the sudden change of topic.

"Tell me why you're new to service. Where is your family?" Edward asked once he was seated across from me.

Sitting gingerly on the edge of my chair, I squeezed my eyes shut. I hated having to lie, but since I had decided not to risk revealing the truth of my situation to Edward, my future and security depended on my ability to mislead. Edward cleared his throat, and I opened my eyes, studying my hands as I told him the same story I'd used with Mrs. Cope, attempting to keep my fabricated tale as simple as possible.

"I'm an orphan. My father died very recently, my mother when I was younger." With difficulty, I kept the grief that lurked just beneath the surface contained, as I found myself wishing that Papa was here to explain and protect me. Of course, if my father had accompanied me on a legitimate visit to Worthington Hall, Carlisle would surely have been in residence, and I would not be having this conversation with his handsome but quite intimidating son. I most definitely would *not* be alone with him in the library.

"I've always worked in the inn my parents...*managed*, but with Papa gone, I had to

leave," I continued. "Having heard good reports about Worthington Hall, I decided to come here and seek employment."

"Good reports? From whom?"

"Oh... guests, staying at the inn? Workers who'd been employed here?" Hunching my shoulders, I silently prayed he wouldn't ask me for specific names. Risking a glance, I saw that Edward was studying me intently with one elegantly-clad leg crossed over the other, his hessian-booted foot rocking slightly. His pose of studied relaxation seemed at odds with the tension exuding from his well-built frame and the frown that marred his handsome brow. When his jaw clenched, my eye was drawn to its chiselled perfection, and I felt the speed of my breathing accelerate.

Quickly dropping my eyes, I stared at my wringing hands; a safer, less distracting proposition.

"So tell me, Bella, what did you hear to cause you to make the journey to Worthington Hall from...where exactly did you say you were from?"

I gulped. I hadn't said, and I struggled to remember if I'd given Mrs. Cope a specific location. I didn't dare say I was from Forkston or any of the surrounding locales, so I picked the town I'd stayed in with Papa when we had been on our trip to the seaside. Several days' travel from Forkston, it had boasted some pleasant hostelries catering to well-to-do tourists.

"Mayverley. I came from Mayverley because I'd heard that Worthington Hall was a safe place for a girl like me."

Edward's eyebrows rose. "That's quite a journey you undertook. Alone?"

I shook my head. "I was accompanied by friends who travelled with me and then returned home once I was settled," I explained.

Edward nodded thoughtfully. "There's no way you would have made it this far otherwise. Mayverley isn't located on any major travel routes. It's a wonder you heard of Worthington Hall at all, let alone from both guests and employees."

"Yes, quite a wonder," I whimpered.

"And your accent doesn't exactly fit the locale, or any other that I know of. Your speech and vocabulary are exceptionally refined for one of your class."

Edward's words were phrased as a statement, but the question was definitely implied. His expression reminded me of one of our barn cats stalking a mouse...or rather toying with it before closing in for the kill.

"My mother was French," I blurted and then winced at having revealed such a telling piece of information. Would Lord Hunter have mentioned that about me?

Edward raised a brow, indicating I should continue.

"She insisted I receive an education, regardless of our station," I said, doing my best to hide my wavering confidence. Even though I'd used this story with Mrs. Cope and the other servants, I'd begun to seriously question its feasibility. I certainly couldn't recall meeting any multilingual, classically educated commoners, regardless of their heritage.

"Your mother..." Edward nodded, studying me from beneath a hooded brow. "She wouldn't have fled Paris around the time of the *Terror* by any chance?"

The blood rushed so quickly from my head at Edward's words that the room began to spin. How could he have guessed? Had he already worked out I was the runaway bride his friend James was tracking?

"Bella! Bella look at me," Edward demanded. His voice seemed to be coming from a long distance away, but when I opened my eyes I saw that he was kneeling beside me. He'd placed an arm around my shoulder, the warmth of his hand seeping through the coarse cotton of my uniform where he stroked my back. I could smell his intoxicating, masculine scent and was unable to resist the urge to breathe it in deeply.

"It's all right...the war is over. No one will hold your mother's origins against you here."

I blinked several times as his words slowly registered. He'd interpreted my distress in an unexpected but unsurprising manner. Mama had been well-loved in Forkston; the story of her heroics and the fact that she'd saved my father's life an oft-told tale. But I knew that French refugees were not always welcomed so warmly.

Reaching out with his free hand, Edward brushed a stray lock of hair back from my face. Then he ran his hand across my shoulder and slowly along the length of my arm, before lifting my hand to turn it one way and then another, examining it closely.

"That certainly explains a few things," he murmured, his extraordinarily handsome face close to mine. "This delicate bone structure, for a start; and your incredibly soft, flawless skin."

A shiver ran through me, as Edward's fingers gently stroked the back of my hand, and a slight smile quirked his lips.

"Did your mother tell you much of her heritage?" he asked abruptly, his gaze boring into mine.

I shook my head. "She didn't like to speak of it," I answered quite truthfully. Mother's childhood in the company of royalty was not a time she remembered fondly. The *Terror* had come when she was barely into her teens, and she'd been forced to flee with only a few faithful family retainers to protect her.

"Mmm, understandable, I imagine. And your father: good English stock I suppose? He must have been an exceptional man to capture her attention. They met when he was serving his country?"

I nodded mutely and slowly exhaled a sigh of relief. He'd come dangerously close to the truth but had fortunately interpreted the information through the filter of the role I was playing.

"And so here we have the lovely Bella: a sweet little commoner with the grace and beauty of a budding debutante. What a deliciously enticing contradiction you present."

Drawing in a ragged breath at Edward's huskily spoken words, my eyes lowered to where his mouth hovered close to my own. I licked my suddenly dry lips, and he groaned, leaning in so close we were almost touching.

"Bloody hell," he suddenly swore and pushed himself to his feet, striding a few paces before halting with his back to me.

I stared, bewildered by his reaction.

"You need to stay away from me, Bella," he ordered harshly before turning to face me. "I've never found it so difficult to resist temptation before in my life, but giving in would rather defeat the purpose of your travelling all this way to find safety." He laughed without humour, running his hands roughly through his hair.

Swallowing hard, I rose slowly from the chair.

"Would you like me to leave?" I asked with a trembling voice, unsure as to what I'd said or done to offend him or what my misdemeanour had to do with temptation. "I'm supposed to be cleaning the library but I've almost finished. I can come back later."

"No...I'll leave. I'm going to arrange for Stephens to escort you in future. You're not to walk the halls or enter rooms without him."

My mouth fell open, as I stood stunned by Edward's directive. Stephens was one of the most senior footmen in the household.

"That's hardly necessary," I answered stiffly, my pride stung. "I'm quite capable of staying away from you and have no need of an escort. I won't bother you again...m'lord."

Edward growled low in his throat and took a step toward me.

"Stephens *will* accompany you for your *own* protection, Bella. I will stay away from *you*."

With that he turned and stalked from the library, leaving me staring after him, thoroughly confused.

~AFL~

Okay, fanning myself here. I have to admit, I love me some hot, angry, possessive Lordward. Swoon...

At first, I thought this chapter didn't really suit an EPOV, but then I got to wondering what was going through Lord Hotness's mind when he was sitting so close to Bella - or Lord Sex on a Stick if you prefer. Thanks to the lovely reviewer who coined that one. Sorry I couldn't find your review again to credit you. - and I decided an EPOV was warranted after all. He was so close to succumbing, and I can't believe he didn't imagine what it would be like...a little. ;) The EPOV should be up by Thursday.

I really appreciate your reviews so please leave one!

xxx TLSue

Fantasy

Despite all the PG rated abstinence stuff and the 'fade to black' scenes, I blame Stephenie Meyer for getting me involved in this crazy fanfic world of writing lemons! Yet I still adore her for the wonderful world of Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks so much to all the readers of A Forbidden Love who are taking the time to review...even without a bribe. LOL! You guys are wonderful. :D

Special thanks to Kitty Vuitton from The Lemonade Stand for giving AFL its 900th review. Wow!

Extra special thanks to my wonderful friend, Content1, for prereading/beta'ing my first ever posted Edward and Bella lemon and for reassuring a novice lemon writer that I'm not as lame as I feared.

All credit to Sussex Belle for her awesome "Lord Sex-on-a-Stick" We all love it. ;)

Thanks Teamswitzerlandmom. I just love your "Servant-in-Disguise, Naivella" #snicker# So true.

Finally...thanks to everyone who voted for A Forbidden Love over at The Lemonade Stand. I don't think it will make the Top Five, but it was great to be nominated. Welcome to all the new readers who found me on 'The Stand'.

Posted: Thursday November 10th 2011

Words: 3154

Hidden Talents - Outtake

Fantasy

EPOV

My fury at hearing that Bella had been accosted was only surpassed by my perplexity at her reaction to my attempted touch. She thought that I would hurt her...that I was angry with her? It was incomprehensible that she didn't understand

the effect she had on me.

Realizing that she had somehow bested the lout who had attacked her roused my curiosity—and admiration—and I requested an explanation. Once again, Bella did not disappoint. In the short time since I had come to know her, and at every encounter, she never ceased to surprise me. Her father must be an interesting fellow if he had thought to teach his daughter such potentially debilitating tricks, I mused. But her apparent defence of her attacker when I threatened his dismissal caused me to see red for a moment; until I was assured that she had not invited his attention. He would not be bothering her again.

The opportunity to finally have my curiosity assuaged regarding Bella's unorthodox background was too great to ignore. While a part of me knew full well that I was playing with fire—spending time with her alone, learning more about her, getting to know her in a way that I suspected would only increase her allure—I was wholly unable to resist the opportunity.

Bella's tale was one of woe but also remarkable strength of character and determination...on both her parent's parts and her own. Her mother was quite possibly of the French aristocracy though more likely the bourgeoisie. Her mother's father had probably been a diplomat or bureaucrat close enough to the deposed crown to have been in danger when the revolution came. Her father, an innkeeper and retired soldier, must have been quite impressive to have attracted the attention of a woman considerably his superior in breeding and education. But then, my father had oft warned me not to underestimate the intelligence and latent potential of the common Englishman, having served with some exceptional individuals during the war.

The fact that Bella had even heard of Worthington Hall, let alone been able to make the arduous journey across the country while grieving the death of her remaining parent, was also noteworthy. Her explanation for her refined speech and manner, while a tad unusual, was not without precedence. Britain had its own bourgeoisie to contend with, with some members of the middle classes making considerable fortunes in trade and the growing diversity of business and mining opportunities overtaking the nation. With wealth came a desire for acceptance and recognition, and while no amount of money could account for centuries of breeding, an education could be purchased at a price. A willing, flexible mind—even the mind of a commoner—could be greatly improved if enough effort was applied to the process.

Bella's potential was further enhanced by having one parent of superior breeding—political downfall and turmoil could not erase such advantage—and the

other parent, while undoubtedly of common blood, blessed with an uncommon degree of sense.

I was pleased to have the conundrum that was Bella resolved, and gladly took the opportunity to touch her again. Indulging myself shamelessly, and caressing her in the process, I studied first the feminine line of her shoulder, then the slender length of her arm which I could clearly feel beneath the coarse cotton of her blouse, and finally the delicate and most elegant structure of her hand and long, tapering fingers.

"That certainly explains a few things," I murmured, thoroughly enjoying my examination. "This delicate bone structure, for a start; and your incredibly soft, flawless skin."

Bella shivered at my touch, her pupils dilating, and I smiled. Oh yes...this lovely girl had just enough common blood in her to counteract the effect of her mother's heritage. Though of course, the French had never quite managed to breed the passion out of their noble or aristocratic classes, undoubtedly contributing to their downfall.

"And so here we have the lovely Bella: a sweet little commoner with the grace and beauty of a budding debutante. What a deliciously enticing contradiction you present," I murmured, the beast within me growling softly and having no intention of releasing the hand that lay trustingly in mine.

Bella gasped and swayed towards me, bringing one of the many fantasies I'd had involving the two of us to the forefront of my mind.

I'd pictured her seated, much as she was now, on the similarly designed and padded cub chair in my suite. In my fantasy, she wasn't clothed in the unflattering uniform of a maid, but the silks, satins, and laces I would dress her in if that were my prerogative. Not that she remained clothed for very long, and my thoughts skipped forward to the part where Bella sat demurely perched on the chair—with me kneeling before her, just as I was now—completely naked.

Overlaying what was before me, I revisited the stunning, if only imagined image, of Bella, all perfect, pale cream flesh, womanly curves, and naked desire. In my fantasies, there was no denying that Bella wanted exactly what I intended giving her. Reality was proving to be likewise. The way her breath came in short pants, her soft, plump lower lip having fallen away from the cupid's bow of the upper...eagerly inviting my kiss, and in particular, the way her aroused and erect nipples could be seen clearly through the thin cloth of her blouse, gave me all the confirmation I

needed.

Bella wanted me every bit as much as I wanted her.

She might carry an air of sweet innocence about her, but I highly doubted she was still a virgin. Despite her father's no doubt best intentions, her class and occupation would have made holding onto her virtue for this many years highly improbable. Yet...there was *something* about her, and I suspected that whatever common lad—or *lads*—had been privileged enough to rob her of her innocence, they'd not taken the time or had the skill to ensure she'd come away from the experience having reached her fulfilment.

While I could not allow myself the indulgence of rectifying the situation, in my fantasies I took the time to bring Bella to the peak of her passion, to hold her there on the edge of sweet, torturous ecstasy, and then to release her to tumble into the blissful abyss...repeatedly. The imagined sounds of her finding her sexual completion were music to my ears, and on several occasions now had brought me the relief I sought from the agony of wanting—and not being able to have—that which I desired so very, very badly.

For now my mind was intent on reliving this particular fantasy, and I imagined myself reaching out to cup one of Bella's full, firm breasts in my hand. In my daydream, she moaned and arched toward me, pressing her breast eagerly into my palm as I weighed and moulded the delightful flesh. To add to her pleasure, I teased and tormented the distended nipple with my thumb, rolling and tweaking it with practised expertise.

With only one of her beautiful breasts receiving their rightful attention, my free hand quickly rose to the challenge of making sure the other did not feel neglected. Bella's soft moans and whimpers and the way she wriggled in the chair, indicated that I was doing at least a passable job, though clearly she needed more...as did I.

With great pleasure, in my fantasy I set myself to the task and leaned down to flick my tongue over one, pretty pink nipple. Of course, I had no idea of their true colour, but I chose to imagine them in the same dusky hue as the blush that stained Bella's cheeks in the delightful reality before me.

In my mind, Bella's nipple distended even further, as if it reached for my caress. Being a true gentleman, I was all obliging and repeated the stroking of my tongue over the tender, sensitive flesh, interspersing the action with gently blown puffs of air across the now damp, glistening nub. Bella's moans grew increasingly frantic, and her hands buried themselves in my hair, holding my head in place. I smiled

against the warm, heaving curve of her breasts, and rewarded her enthusiasm by engulfing her entire nipple in my mouth...suckling hard.

My imagination made sure that it was bliss—for us both—as I spent long minutes savouring, tasting, and ministering to the sweet delectation of Bella's breasts and nipples, doing my utmost to give each exquisite mound and peak their due consideration. When we were both quite frantic with need, I sat back on my haunches and grasped Bella's bare knees, raising and separating them and pulling her bottom closer to the edge of the seat in one, deliberate movement.

Her hands reached to grasp the chair's padded armrests as her body balanced, perfectly positioned to receive my own equally eager flesh.

"Oh...yes please," my fantasy Bella pleaded, and I was more than ready to accommodate her.

Caressing every bare and wanton inch of her with my eyes, I eventually reached the erotic sight of Bella's sweet, pink sex partially hidden by the dark glistening curls that practically begged for my exploration. Slowly, seductively, my hands passed over the smooth, silky skin of her thighs, squeezing and claiming the sweet flesh that I traversed, until they reached the juncture of her thighs and hips, and my thumbs rested tantalisingly close to their ultimate destination.

Bella's breathy whimper was all the encouragement that I needed, and I dipped my hands lower, allowing my thumbs to caress the tender folds of her exposed sex in long, slow strokes. Her back arched, her bottom lifting partially off the seat, and I took the opportunity to plunge first one and then two fingers inside her hot, wet sheath, before setting up a deep, stroking motion.

Even in my fantasy she was tight, and my cock strained for release, envious of my questing fingers and highly frustrated at the delay. But I wanted to savour the moment, and make sure that Bella was well and truly ready for our mating.

If the way her head thrashed from side to side against the backrest of the chair, and her hips undulated in time with my stroking, my prerequisites had already been met.

When I found the little nub hidden in the soft curls of her sex, Bella's cry was one of pleasure but also shock, and I looked up to see her stunned and wide-eyed gaze fixated on the place between her thighs where my fingers continued to work their magic.

"Oh...my..." she whispered, and I chuckled. She might not be a virgin, but I *was* going to claim a first, of sorts...her first climax. It was close, and it would be all mine.

In my fantasy, I withdrew my hand, grappling with the buttons on my breeches and gratefully releasing my exceedingly engorged manhood. It sprang free with eager abandon, straining toward the glistening entrance to paradise that lay pink and invitingly open before me.

"Keep your knees raised," I ordered, my voice a hoarse rasp, and Bella obliged, lifting and widening her legs, opening her sweet sex to my gaze and imminent penetration.

Grasping the firm globes of her bottom, I pulled her even closer to the edge of the seat, aligning our bodies perfectly. Then taking my thick, rigid shaft in hand, I stroked the equally glistening head up and down Bella's sex, my groans mingling with the sound of her cries. While there was pleasure to be had in such teasing foreplay, I was too impatient to wait, and gladly forced the head of my cock past the tight entrance to Bella's body. She gasped, her eyes shooting to mine, and I imagined she'd be wondering how on earth something so large was supposed to fit into something so exquisitely tight. But since this was *my* fantasy, explanations and reassurance was not required, and she did not resist as I slowly rocked my body against hers, inching my way inside.

My imagination took flight, and I could almost *feel* her hot, pulsing sheath squeezing me tight. In reality, I would take the time to make sure her body had adjusted to my invasion but since this wasn't real, there was nothing to stop me withdrawing and thrusting back inside her body...hard...fast...and very, very deep.

At this point my fantasy would diverge along several erotic paths depending on my preference and the time I had available in which to find my pleasant, but never fully satisfying, release. But here and now, all I could think was that if this were real, I would have demanded Bella wrap her naked legs around my waist and cross them at the ankles to anchor them in place, so that I could thrust with fevered and fervent abandon. My hands would alternate between caressing and teasing her breasts, stroking her smooth, creamy thighs, and holding her hips firmly in place so that I could penetrate deeper...higher...harder.

God how I wanted to bury myself inside her!

My cock ached at the thought, but without the surcease of my hands mimicking the action of Bella's body or the privacy to indulge my appetite, I was resigned to

the world of imagination. What had begun as a remembered fantasy had quickly transformed into current torment. Yet, I was not ready to deny myself the image of a naked and writhing Bella, her body open wide to me as I plunged inside her silken sex, her creamy breasts swaying in rhythm to my thrusts. I pictured her with her head thrown back, her features slackened with desire, and the sound of her moans filling the air and increasing my pleasure exponentially.

If I was alone, I would let the scenario play out for long, lust-filled minutes...savouring every imagined aspect and storing it for future use and reference...like now. I would picture the look on Bella's face as she neared the peak of her passion, and I would plunge my body into hers, increasing the speed and strength of my thrusts until her body had no choice but to surrender to the bliss she'd clearly never experienced before. The combined look of shock and ecstasy on her face and the sound of her cries would be my reward...that and the release that would shake my body like a thunderbolt, as I pumped my seed deep inside her.

But Bella was not sitting before me naked, open, and wanting. While she was clearly aroused and would no doubt welcome my kiss...I dare not. Kissing Bella was something I refused to allow myself to indulge in, even in fantasy. On an instinctual level, I knew that the feel of her lips beneath my own as I plundered her mouth with my tongue—just as I'd pictured myself plundering her sex with my cock—was not something that once imagined could possibly be resisted.

Then Bella—the real, clothed girl sitting almost demurely before me and not the fantasy creature I had ravished repeatedly in my imagination—licked her lips. Her small, pink tongue slowly swiped a glistening path along her plump lower lip...and my resolve came close to cracking.

Groaning, I leaned toward her, the ache in my groin matching the one in my chest as the pain of my self-denial taunted me.

Damn my father! Damn honour! Damn the sweet, wide-eyed girl who'd traversed half the country in search of security only to encounter my monstrous self at her purportedly safe destination.

"Bloody hell," I swore, rising suddenly and immediately turning my back to Bella before striding a few paces away. There was no way she could have missed seeing my erection straining futilely against the placket of my breeches, but she made no comment. When I turned back to her, her eyes never left my face, but we both knew what had almost happened—what would *inevitably* happen—if we were not to keep our distance.

"You need to stay away from me, Bella," I ordered and she flinched. I hadn't meant for my tone to be so harsh, but surely she understood the necessity? "I've never found it so difficult to resist temptation before in my life, but giving in would rather defeat the purpose of your travelling all this way to find safety." The bitter laughter that accompanied my words was completely devoid of humour, though of course, the words had needed to be said as a timely reminder to us both.

Bella rose slowly from the chair, offering to leave me to the use of the library while she found work elsewhere. Her voice trembled badly, and I could only imagine that she was plagued with the same frustrated desire that caused my own muscles to shake.

"No...I'll leave," I offered. "I'm going to arrange for Stephens to escort you in future. You're not to walk the halls or enter rooms without him."

Bella's mouth fell open, and she appeared surprised by my command.

"That's hardly necessary." Her stiffly spoken reply was accompanied by a decided straightening of her shoulders and almost imperial tilting of her chin. Good Lord she would have made a stunning member of the French court—of any court for that matter—and for a fleeting moment I wondered what it would have been like if Bella was my peer, and I was free to court her.

I dismissed the thought immediately, as the likelihood of an aristocratic or noble Bella being in any way similar to the passionate woman before me was slim to say the least. If that had been her station in life, she would have been well trained and no doubt as cold and *dispassionate* as all the other young ladies of that godforsaken but elite class of females.

Intriguingly, Bella seemed almost offended by my plan to ensure her safety, going so far as to say that she would refuse to comply with my edict.

Enough was enough. Did this slip of a girl not realise how close to the edge she had pushed me by her very existence? The monster within me growled, desperate to stake his claim and show her who was boss—along with a host of far more pleasurable endeavours—and I moved toward her. Calling on every ounce of self possession I contained, I froze after only one step and held myself in place, the words proceeding from my mouth practically bitten off by my teeth, my jaw had clenched so tightly. "Stephens *will* accompany you for your *own* protection, Bella. *I* will stay away from *you*."

Unwilling to risk another word or endure one more of Bella's outrageously

endearing looks of wide-eyed innocence and confusion, I turned and strode from the library...refusing to look back.

~AFL~

Okay...trying not to cringe here. I'd love to hear what you thought of my first posted Edward/Bella fantasy lemon. To be honest, I'm a little terrified and can't quite believe I'm doing this. A Forbidden Love was only ever meant to be my own little "naughty fantasy," not something that I had any intention of letting anyone else read. Then I shared it with one of my lovely prereaders, and she talked me into posting it online, and here we are...

Reviews would be appreciated...I think!

xxx TLSue

The Pastry Chef

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks to my betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar for beta'ing the chapter.

Thanks for all the lovely reviews. I'm glad I didn't disappoint with my little fantasy lemon. ;)

Posted: Sunday November 13th 2011

Words: 4269

Chapter 14

The Pastry Chef

BPOV

The more time I spent with Edward the less I understood him. One minute I thought he might like me, the next he was banishing me from his sight. I'd even entertained the thought that he might want to...well...*kiss* me with the way he'd looked at me for such a long, fraught moment while kneeling before me in the library. Of course, his next words had quashed that foolish notion. I was still seething over the impossible man having the audacity to set a guard on me so that I would stay out of his way.

He had come upon *me* in the library, and *not* the other way around!

His explanation that the head footman accompanying me was for my own protection could be valid, I supposed, but it was still a considerable complication.

It seemed my aptitude for discretion was non-existent. No matter how hard I tried to be inconspicuous, I seemed to do nothing but draw attention to myself. Now, wherever I went—with Stephens stoically in tow—I was met by not so subtle murmurs and raised brows, the result of understandably roused curiosity. Henson and Mrs. Cope must have been informed of Lord Edward's directive, or they would never have allowed a senior footman to waste his time in such a manner. But the puzzled and at times disapproving looks they sent my way let me know that they

were far from pleased by Edward's inexplicable plan for my protection.

Surely there must be an easier to way to survive working in such a grand and distinguished environment without molestation? I mused, returning from a quick visit to the water closet...under escort, of course. One good thing that had come of my new working conditions was that I was now assigned permanently to the kitchen under Chef Peters' bemused and watchful eye, as that meant Stephens could carry on about his work almost as per usual, just with regular checks to monitor my..well-being. I had no idea what the taciturn footman thought of his guard-come-escort duty, as he neither commented nor complained. I, on the other hand, found the experience thoroughly humiliating.

"So are ye going to explain wot's goin' on?" Jessica demanded at the end of my first day of working with my new employment conditions.

"Ooh...aven't ye 'eard?" Angela, bless her kind and generous heart, stepped in to answer for me. "Lord Edward found out about Mike's gettin' fresh and after dealin' with 'im, set Stephens to make sure Bella is not put at risk like that again."

I was surprised by the accuracy of Angela's explanation, considering the way gossip twisted and turned like whispers on the wind in this place. But I was taken aback by the wail of misery that poured from Jessica's mouth, as she threw herself down upon her pillow and began to sob in earnest. It seemed that her feelings for Mike ran a little deeper than her flirtatious words and manner had led me to believe. Sympathy rose within me for the at times trying girl, as it appeared she had given her heart to a less than worthy recipient. It was not unexpected, however, when she attempted to blame me for the impertinent footman's misdeed, accusing me of deliberately soliciting his affections. I did not even attempt to argue in my defence, as I was well aware that Jessica would believe what she wanted to believe.

It was hardly surprising when the candles were doused and my head settled on my thin pillow that my own tears began to flow...albeit quietly. The business and strangeness of my new life had combined to keep my grief and fears at bay, but in the quiet of the night I could not help but think of my poor murdered Papa and my friends and family back home in Forkston. Questions flooded my mind, and I wished I had a way to answer them.

Sometimes one should be careful what one wishes for.

Breakfast in the servant's dining hall the next morning brought with it a flurry of answers but a complete paucity of truth. My father's death and my disappearance had made the papers.

"Ooh...did ye 'ear about wot 'appened to Lord Carlisle's friend...the one who rescued 'im during the war?"

"Aye...killed in an accident and 'is body burnt beyond recognition. They say it was a lucky thing the lord's manor didn't go too!"

"Not a lord...he was a knight: *Sir Charles*...an honourable before that and a true 'ero from what the paper's sayin'."

"It's a tragedy all right. The Duke's gonna' be ever so upset when 'e 'ears."

Snippets of conversation flowed around me as my head began to swim. My father's body burnt...beyond recognition?

"The worst of it is the scandal with 'is daughter. A right trollop by the sounds. Some think she might even be involved in his death."

My head snapped toward the speaker, a matronly woman who worked in the laundry.

"*Apparently*," the woman leaned in, speaking in a conspiratorial tone, "her father had it all arranged for her to marry 'is heir, the new squire or wot-'ave-you, who was visiting at the time of 'is death. But she ran off to meet some fella, or so they're speculatin'—*and* she stole the family jewels...some priceless heirloom—on the very day her father was killed!"

I was on my feet and running for the door to the servants' courtyard before I'd even registered my intention to move, only just making it to a scrubby hedgerow before I lost my breakfast...and anything else my stomach could contain.

Lord James' evil knew no bounds!

To my relief, Angela came to assist me...alone. Once I was cleaned up, I couldn't resist the indulgence and spent a moment crying on her shoulder. She really was a good friend, allowing me the excuse of an attack of homesickness, and didn't poke or pry excessively. I supposed a young maid utilising the shrubbery in this way first thing in the morning was not overly exceptional, as Jessica had been similarly afflicted several mornings in the past week herself. I could only guess she was still upset over Mike's betrayal.

~AFL~

For the next few days I kept my head down, concentrating on my work and drawing as little attention to myself as possible. My thoughts and emotions were in a complete quandary, but I did my best to keep them hidden.

What else could I do? Lord James' powers of deceit and persuasion far exceeded my worst imaginings. It was clear to me that only someone with Lord Carlisle's position and authority would be able to disentangle the web of lies that had been woven regarding my character and actions...if he believed me. I *was* comforted by fact that my father's relationship with Lord Carlisle appeared to be common knowledge even amongst the servants, raising my hopes that he would be inclined to assist me.

As difficult as it was to wait, the dreadful news served to solidify my conviction that I'd done the right thing keeping my identity a secret. While a part of me wanted to rush straight to Edward, reveal all, and beg for his assistance, his moods and temperament were so mercurial that I did not dare take the risk. He *was* Lord James' friend, after all.

Consequently, it was with great trepidation that I found myself on my way to Edward's office, a tray of pastries balanced precariously in my trembling hands, not four days after our encounter in the library.

~AFL~

"Well, Bella, it seems your chocolate croissants have been a great success," Chef Peters approached where I was sitting icing a batch of petit fours, and I looked up to see him smiling at me.

"Oh, I'm so pleased." I smiled shyly. Despite all the insanity that had become my life, it was nice to be able to accept credit for my efforts. Not having to hide the fact that I enjoyed creating culinary delights was one of the very few benefits I'd discovered to masquerading as a servant.

The day that Edward had left me in the library, I'd been mightily tempted to throw myself down and have a good cry, which would have been quite out of character and not particularly helpful. Instead I'd sniffed back my tears, set aside my anger and confusion, and searched for the French language section of the library.

It hadn't taken long for me to find it. At first, I'd been distracted at finding so many of my favourite authors represented amongst the wonderful collection, but then I'd located what I'd been looking for—a journal of French recipes. Without paper or writing utensils, I was limited to memorising ingredients for just a couple

of recipes that I had previously assisted our chef, Louis, with at home. I wasn't surprised the croissants had generated a positive response, as they were truly delicious.

"The Marquess himself has asked to meet the new chef and pay his compliments in person." Chef Peters' smile widened while mine faded away.

Edward had made it plain that he didn't want to see me again, and while his rejection hurt, I couldn't deny that it was for the best. I may have briefly harboured the faint hope that the attraction I felt for him was mutual, but what good could come of it? My secret desire, that upon discovering my true identity, Edward would ignore my limited position in society and offer for my hand, could only ever be a fantasy. He was equally out of reach, whether I was a servant or a lowly member of the gentry on the very fringes of the *ton*.

Of course, returning to my limited position in society was totally dependent on Edward's father being both willing and able to assist me in bringing my father's murderer to justice, and clearing my name in the process. Even if he was successful, I had no home to return to as, of course, another heir would be found, a very modest dowry, and a reputation that would be somewhat tarnished at best. It was a depressing thought, as I found myself wondering just what sort of future lay before me.

Not wanting to disobey Edward's directive and hoping to avoid further rebuke...and disappointment, I suggested that Peters—as head Pastry Chef—attend in my place. But he insisted I take the credit. It said a lot for Peters' good character and generous nature, but he did me no favours. After a quick tidy up, I found myself on the way to Edward's study, a tray of recently baked croissants in my hand and the ubiquitous Stephens at my side.

Walking the halls reminded me of the last time I had ventured into this part of the hall on my journey to the library. To my relief, Mike had not been dismissed from the household, but the few times I'd seen him in the days since our encounter in the library he'd kept his distance, avoiding eye contact. I didn't know if that was because he was embarrassed that he'd been bested by a girl two-thirds his size, or because Edward had threatened him in some way. I wasn't about to inquire.

We eventually reached the study and Stephens knocked on the door. I swallowed when I heard Edward's muffled command to enter and stepped hesitantly through the door, pausing just inside. Edward was seated at a large oak desk on the far side of the room, his head bent over a pile of papers and his quill moving rapidly.

"I'll be with you in a minute," he barked gruffly, continuing to write before piling the papers to the side. "I wanted to say how much I enjoyed those delicious French pastries..." he said, finally looking up to see me standing, waiting anxiously.

"Bella!" he exclaimed, his expression both shocked and severe.

Flinching, I glanced back toward the open door where Stephens waited, wondering if I should leave.

"What are you doing here?" Edward demanded.

"You asked to see me, for me to bring more..." I raised the tray with the plate of croissants to his attention.

"I asked to see the new *pastry chef*," Edward clarified, one eyebrow arching high.

Blushing profusely, I ducked my head.

"Would you care to explain why you're here instead?" he continued, his tone cool and unsympathetic.

I swallowed hard. "I...I *am* the new pastry chef. Well I'm not a *real* chef, but I am the one who baked the croissants...m'lord," I murmured, keeping my eyes down.

Edward was silent for so long that I eventually chanced another glance in his direction. He'd pushed his chair away from his desk and was leaning back, his legs stretched out before him, feet crossed at the ankles, while he tapped the fingers of one hand on the gleaming desktop.

"Stephens, you may leave." Edward waved a hand towards the footman who closed the door behind him with a soft but decisive click.

I jumped, rattling the plate on the tray in my hands.

"You may as well come in." Edward nodded in the direction of a low table surrounded by leather chesterfields. A silver tea-service sat on the table, steam rising from the teapot.

I walked stiffly across the room and placed the tray of croissants beside the tea-service, *without* rattling the plate this time. When I looked up, Edward was pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He stayed that way for a long moment, before sitting up and running his hands through his hair.

"I've been trying very hard to do the right thing, Bella, but it would seem fate is conspiring against me," he said cryptically. Rising, he came to stand on the other side of the low table, eyeing the pastries with a bemused expression.

"You baked these?" He inclined his head.

I nodded, gripping my now trembling hands together.

"And the profiteroles? The crème brulee?"

I nodded again at his mention of the other dishes I'd baked and been credited with as the new pastry chef...not by name, of course.

"Mmm..." Edward murmured and then took a seat on the long, leather couch while I remained standing across from him. "Your *French* mother brought her *French* chef with her when she came to England?"

I gaped, astonished at his powers of deduction.

"And while a lady would be...*discouraged* from participating in such activities, as a commoner you were not so hindered and took the opportunity before you to learn an admirable trade."

"Yes, m'lord, something like that," I answered, stiffening at the back-handed compliment.

Edward sighed and sat forward.

"You constantly manage to surprise me," he said, shaking his head.

I wasn't sure if the words were meant as compliment or rebuke and chewed on my lower lip, trying not to fidget...and failing.

"What am I going to do with you?" he said softly, looking up at me through his exceptionally long lashes. "Succumbing to temptation is beginning to feel inevitable. One can only resist for so long."

He gestured for me to take a seat, and I frowned. It wasn't done in a household of this standing for servants to fraternise with their masters. In truth, I knew that even minor households held staunchly to segregation based on class and station. My father was the only member of the gentry I knew to have blurred the lines to such a degree.

"Come, Bella, sit," Edward ordered when I continued to hesitate. "It would appear that at least *some* rules will be broken. Best we begin with the innocuous ones, don't you think?"

I sat gingerly on the couch and placed my hands in my lap. "Would you like me to pour your tea, m'lord?" I asked to break the silence when he seemed content to just sit and stare...at *me*.

One side of his mouth lifted into a smirk. "Do you think you can manage without scalding yourself?"

I blushed and nodded. I'd been practicing but wasn't about to admit it to Edward, who gestured for me to proceed. It was a minor thing, but I was proud to accomplish the task without mishap. There were two cups and he motioned for me to pour tea into both.

"Pour for yourself as well," he answered my unspoken question. "I've a great many questions where you're concerned. Maybe receiving some answers will assuage my interest."

My blush deepened at his words, and Edward groaned.

"But I doubt it," he muttered under his breath.

"What would you like to know, m'lord?" I asked shaken. Edward's interest in me was incomprehensible but undeniably exhilarating, especially coming atop the dreadful news and tension of the previous few days.

Edward's smile lit his face, and the breath caught in my throat. He really was the most handsome man I'd ever laid eyes on: from the glints of gold in his coppery hair, the wide plane of his forehead, the perfectly arched brows, and piercing emerald gaze, to his sculptured cheekbones, chiselled jaw, and perfectly shaped lips. Everything about him was utterly appealing.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach in a way I'd only ever experienced in his presence.

"What would I like to know? Anything...everything," he answered with a shrug, sitting back. "Who are the friends who travelled with you from Mayverley? Do you have other hidden talents besides baking and bringing impertinent young men to their knees? What is your favourite colour, flower, author? Do you have siblings?"

I gasped and then broke out laughing at Edward's rapid-fire questions and unexpected curiosity.

Hesitating for a moment, I wondered how to answer. Thankfully, there'd been no mention of Jake's or Leah's names in the news reports, making me believe that the lies Lord James had told were based more on conjecture than fact. I could rest assured that no member of my father's staff would say anything that would put me, Jake, or Leah at risk. So, taking a deep breath I decided to stay with the truth. "My best friend, Jacob, and our, er...workmate and friend, Leah, accompanied me on the journey."

Edward tensed, though his voice remained calm. "Your best friend is a man?"

My smile faded. "Um, yes, m'lord. We've known each other since we were small children. Our parents...*worked* together. He's actually a little younger than I am but seems older in many ways."

"And why is that?" Edward leant forward again, his expression intent.

I tilted my head to the side, considering my answer. "Jacob's led a less sheltered life than I have, I suppose. He's an apprentice blacksmith as well as a skilled carriage driver." At least my friendships with Jacob and Leah gave weight to my claim to being a commoner, something it seemed more and more important that I succeed at considering the dangers I faced if exposed.

"And this best friend of yours was willing to let you go rather than protect you when your father died?" Edward's tone was mocking, and I bristled.

"It was my decision to come to Worthington Hall," I defended. "Without Jacob's help, I would never have made it here safely."

"You wouldn't have preferred to remain in your home village and become the local blacksmith's wife?" Edward ground out, his jaw clenched.

I shook my head, puzzled by Edward's tone. "Marriage to Jacob was never an option for me. My hope is that he and Leah will form an attachment."

"Ah...your other friend and coworker. A fellow maid at the inn?"

I nodded, and Edward's expression lightened.

"I can only imagine the girl's chances have greatly increased now that you are no

longer on the scene."

I blushed, again, cursing my fragile complexion and inability to hide my feelings or reactions. "I hope so," I murmured. Edward had an uncanny ability to strike right to the heart of a matter.

"What of other hidden talents?" Edward asked, sitting back, sipping his tea and clearly enjoying his chocolate croissant. He seemed mollified by my response.

"Mmm..." I considered his question, wary of giving too much away. I was a reasonably accomplished horsewoman, though I much preferred riding astride than side-saddle. The more acceptable mode of riding for young ladies stretched the limits of my ability and balance. But I didn't imagine that many serving girls—or junior pastry chefs—had the opportunity to learn to ride.

"I like to sketch?" I offered, a little embarrassed.

Edward smiled and nodded. "Your creativity extends beyond the culinary arts. Do you also paint? Oils? Watercolours?"

I preferred watercolours and pen and ink washes to oils, but was fairly certain neither options would have been accessible to a girl working in an inn.

"Just pencil, charcoal, and occasionally ink." I allowed instead.

"And what do you like to sketch? Still life, landscapes?" Edward's persistence surprised me.

"Portraits, mostly," I answered shyly, looking down at my hands. "People, animals...life drawing they call it." I tensed, wondering if I'd said too much. Could a girl from my supposed background know such details?

Edward didn't react adversely but seemed genuinely interested in my disclosure.

"I'd very much like to see some of your work, if I may?" he asked.

It was difficult to believe that he was being anything other than polite, though that made no sense. *He* had absolutely no reason to try and impress *me*.

I shrugged and then tensed before shrugging again. Young ladies were not supposed to shrug. Miss Brewer would have been appalled by my lack of decorum, well...that and the fact that I was sitting conversing with a gentleman without a

chaperone in a room with a closed door.

"I haven't done any drawing since arriving at Worthington Hall," I answered honestly. "I wasn't able to bring many possessions with me when I left home, and I have no access to paper or pens." *And absolutely no time or energy to indulge in a hobby with the hours I work*, I thought wryly, but kept that piece of information to myself.

Edward immediately stood and strode to a cupboard against the wall. Rummaging in the drawers, he soon returned with a pile of paper and an assortment of pencils, charcoals, pens, ink, and the like.

"There, that should get you started," he offered as he placed the material on the table, pushing it towards me.

"Oh no, I couldn't accept, m'lord," I said shaking my head. "I really don't have the time or anywhere to store and use them."

"What about the evenings in your room or on your days off?" Edward persisted.

I chewed my lip for a moment and wondered how to answer, before deciding to be honest. From my own experience, I suspected that Edward's knowledge was limited regarding the living arrangements and working conditions of the staff that served him.

"I share a very small attic room with two other girls, and I am generally too tired to do anything but sleep when I reach it at night. I get half a day off a week, but so far all I've managed during my free time is to take care of personal chores and catch up on some rest." I shrugged, deciding the gesture was warranted. I knew that Lord Carlisle provided some of the best working conditions for staff available, and yet I still felt utterly overwhelmed most of the time.

Edward scowled, and I wondered if he was offended by my honesty.

"How...inconvenient," he murmured thoughtfully, his expression grave.

I decided to lighten the mood, as drawing attention to my lack of endurance and experience as a servant didn't seem like a very good idea.

"So my 'talents,' if you can call them that, are baking, drawing, and defending one's person under limited circumstances," I said, listing the items off on my fingers. "To which I can now add 'pouring hot tea. I like the colours blue and yellow

and certain shades of green"—namely the emerald shade of Edward's eyes though I kept that piece of information to myself—"roses, freesias, poppies, daffodils...well, flowers in general, I suppose. As for authors, the list of my favourites is long and eclectic."

Edward smiled, the expression lighting his eyes. It was a surprise how comfortable I felt sitting talking with him. I felt...*safe* for the first time in a long time, and I found myself smiling in return.

He cocked his head to the side, clearly thinking. "What about siblings, family? Have you no one remaining with your father gone?"

I shook my head, my smile fading. "My mother and father were both only children, so I have no aunts or uncles. My parents wanted more children but..." I looked down at my hands. "Mama died giving birth to my baby brother. He only lived a few days." Tears stung briefly at my eyes, and I blinked them away. How different things would have been if my brother had lived. Lord Hunter would have had no reason to visit, and my father would still be alive, for a start.

"Come," Edward ordered, standing and breaking the mood. He gathered up the drawing materials from the table and then extended his free hand. Staring at it blankly for a moment, it took me a moment to comprehend that he wanted me to take it. I stood and hesitantly reached out to Edward, who smiled and took my small hand in his much larger one. Then he tugged gently and led me towards a different door than the one I'd entered.

~AFL~

Hmmm...where could he be taking her?

Reviews are always appreciated even if I don't manage to reply to every one. This posting schedule I have set for AFL is a tad insane, but it's fun to keep the story moving along.

xxx TLSue

Special Requests

Stephenie Meyer created our wonderful playground. Less than two days until BD1! Who cares what the silly critics say - I know I'm going to love...love...love it! Anyone else planning on watching it more than once?

Sorry I couldn't reply to all your lovely reviews this week, but real life got in the way. So....I've taken a few moments to reply to some specific questions and comments -

PINKSAPPHYR - Glad you liked the French pastries. I still get a thrill imagining someone reading my little tale in France. Sigh...It's a dream of mine to visit one day.

Elidunbigboot - I loved the nick name you came up with for Edward, 'Sherlockward' for all his questions and investigations. #chuckle#

Banshee713 - I'm with you, Chocolate croissants and Lordward...yum!

Oblivious24 - Time period for this tale is post Napoleonic wars/early Regency - I'm keeping it a bit vague as despite researching away, I know just enough history to get myself into trouble. ;)

Envymetwilight - (and all the other readers begging me to have Bella tell Edward who she is) - unfortunately that would require a complete rewrite of this story and a very different tale. Maybe I could write an AU of A Forbidden Love when this one's finished? (Just kidding.)

Olive - Thanks for being such a faithful reviewer. Obviously I can't reply as you're not logged in, but you're a sweetie. ;)

Pamcamcris23 - My goodness you are astute! Your guesses are getting awfully close me thinks. I love The Little Princess too! It was one of my daughter's favourite stories when she was growing up.

Ridesthebeast - you do too have a great way with words. :D

Witchykitty13 - thanks for voting for AFL over at The Lemonade Stand. :-)

Cullenmother05 - thanks for reminding me I needed to have Edward deal with Mike in my next EPOV. I'd forgotten!

Elana86 - you're so right. Writing is very healing.

Sgordon7228 - Carlisle's honeymoon is expected to last about 3 months

Cbzoo - thanks for being an absolute sweetie and reviewing every chapter on your read through.

To my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, - thanks for all your help...and for putting up with me.

Posted: Tuesday November 15th 2011

Words: 2149

Special Requests

BPOV

Uncertain but unable to suppress a thrill of excitement, I went with Edward, glancing over my shoulder to where Stephens waited in the hallway. Chef Peters would be wondering what had happened to me, as I'd been absent from my work for much longer than I expected.

"Don't worry; I'll make sure you don't get into trouble." Edward smiled reassuringly, accurately interpreting my expression.

He opened the door and led me along a wide hallway, past well appointed rooms, a large sitting room, a masculine bedroom, where I glimpsed an enormous bed, and other rooms with closed doors.

"These are my quarters when I stay at Worthington Hall," Edward explained, noticing my curiosity.

I stared up at him, startled by his disclosure. I'd never walked hand-in-hand with a man before, let alone entered his private quarters, and I had a feeling that this act alone would constitute 'scandalous behavior' if it ever became public. Swallowing hard, I considered questioning why he'd brought me here, when he led me through another door and then along the main corridor to the library, the scene of our last encounter.

"There's a sitting room over there where you can set up a studio for drawing, and *painting*, if you'd like to try it." Edward pointed to a door almost hidden in one

corner of the vast room. "It's rarely used, and Stephens can that see you're not disturbed. I'll make sure you have everything you need."

"A studio?" I said, frowning. So much for fitting in as a servant and avoiding undue attention...as if Edward's assigning me a chaperone hadn't already wreaked havoc with that aspect of my plan. "But, m'lord..."

Edward ignored my interruption seeming somehow energized, as he strode to a section of the library and began to pull various books from the shelves.

"These should give you some inspiration," he said, walking to a low table and spreading the books out, motioning me closer. "My father keeps a collection of the latest anatomy volumes, as well as works on all the great artists. Not to mention one of the best private collections of artworks in the country, alongside a multitude of family portraits. Can't turn around in this mausoleum without coming face-to-face with one of the ancestors," he finished wryly.

Walking slowly to the table, I came to stand beside him.

"But I don't have time to indulge a hobby," I said, shaking my head. "I have to *work*, m'lord."

"Yes, well... something needs to be done about that, you're clearly being worked too hard."

"No more than any other servant." I spread my hands in confusion.

Edward frowned and tilted his head, his expression bemused.

"Wouldn't you appreciate a few hours off each day to relax and pursue an interest?"

More than you can imagine, I thought wearily. Less than a month had passed since I was forced to leave my home, but it felt like I'd been working from before dawn till after dusk for much longer. I reached out to gently caress the cover of a beautiful book containing illustrations by the great masters. It was very similar to one I'd pored over in my library at home with my art tutor Master Gregson.

"Of course, m'lord, but as you are aware, I'm a servant. It's not...possible."

"Well maybe it should be," Edward growled.

Intimidated by his fierce expression, I lowered my eyes.

"Why do you care?" I asked quietly, when the silence that followed his words stretched uncomfortably.

Edward remained silent for another long moment. When I looked up he was staring out a nearby window, one hand gripping the back of his neck.

"M'lord?" I prompted.

He shrugged and turned to face me.

"I don't know really. I...I just want you to be happy." He seemed embarrassed by his answer. "Foolish of me. You're obviously quite content with your lot and don't need me interfering. What would I know about the life of a servant?"

With that utterance, he collected the art supplies and bundled them roughly into a nearby cupboard.

"Leave the books." He gestured and began walking towards the door. "Someone else can return them to the shelves."

Worried and unsure, I stared after him, not wanting him to leave thinking I was unappreciative of his efforts and attention.

"M'lord," I called.

Edward stopped but did not turn to face me.

"Thank you...for your kind offer."

He shrugged a shoulder, and I plucked up the courage to continue.

"There is something you could do for me—grant me permission—if you wouldn't mind?"

After a moment's hesitation, he turned toward me, his expression quizzical.

"I don't want to be seen to be shirking my duty, but I would dearly love to borrow some books to read. Even if I could only read for a short while before bed, it would be such a treat. I'd be extremely careful and return them as soon as I was finished." I ended in a rush.

Edward smiled and moved closer. My heart felt lighter seeing his expression, and I realized how important *his* happiness had become to me.

"Of course, Bella, take as many as you like." He laughed briefly. "No doubt you'll surprise me with your choices. You did mention eclectic tastes; maybe I can help to broaden them? Or quite possibly you'll broaden mine."

I smiled in return. "Well since you studied at Eton, and I merely had the educational benefit of a retired governess, I doubt you will find my tastes particularly enlightening."

"Let's see shall we?" Edward gestured for me to precede him towards the teeming shelves.

The next half hour was spent in delightful exploration of the various sections of the library, comparing favorite authors, genres, poets and playwrights. I tried to hide the extent of my knowledge—not very successfully—but fortunately Edward was willing to excuse all manner of irregularity. He seemed happy to accept my fictitious background without examining the details too closely.

The time passed quickly, and I couldn't believe how relaxed I felt in his company. Then I made the mistake of glancing one too many times toward the French language section of the library.

"Bella, parlez-vous français?" Edward asked casually.

"Oui, mon seigneur," I replied automatically and then gasped, whirling to face him.

"It's all right; there's no need to be afraid." Edward's tone was reassuring. "I suspected you'd speak the language, that your mother would have taught you when you were a child."

"Yes...yes, of course." I nodded, cautiously relieved. It wasn't such an outlandish disclosure after all.

Edward grinned and launched into a discussion comparing various French authors and poets...in fluent French. Smiling back, I was more than happy to challenge some of his opinions and thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to use what sometimes felt like my 'first' language.

It was a while since I'd had someone to converse with in French, as Miss Brewer

had left my father's employ just after my seventeenth birthday. My education was considered complete, and she was keen to spend some time with her younger sister who'd just had another baby. Papa's procrastination about interviewing for a companion to accompany me during my upcoming debut in London had been an unexpected bonus, allowing me considerable freedom and independence—until Lord James' arrival had changed everything.

Forcing aside my thoughts of home, I focused on Edward's passionate defense of a poet I considered overly sentimental. Our tastes overlapped more often than not, but it was mentally stimulating to debate our differences. Then to my acute embarrassment, my stomach grumbled. It was well past lunch and heaven only knew what Peters and Stephens thought had become of me.

Edward frowned, brushing aside my apology.

"Thoughtless of me to keep you from your midday meal...and your duties, I suppose. Don't worry, Bella, I'll make the proper excuses. I promised you wouldn't be scolded and you shan't, but I'd best let you go."

He seemed reluctant to end our time together, a fact I found immensely—and *foolishly*—flattering.

Nothing can come of this, I reminded myself for the umpteenth time.

"One last thing?" I asked impetuously but feeling suddenly shy.

Edward nodded encouragingly, moving closer.

"There's a French language journal I discovered the other day, full of the most amazing recipes. It is handwritten, and I wouldn't want to risk it being damaged, but I wondered if I could sit and write out some of the recipes into English."

"Of course; that's a wonderful idea," Edward enthused. "Is that where you found the recipe for those chocolate croissants?"

Smiling, I nodded before withdrawing the journal from the shelves and placing it carefully on a nearby table. When I'd opened it to the recipe in question, Edward came to stand behind me, close enough to read over my shoulder. He leant forward and began to leaf through the pages, his chest brushing against my back, his arm touching mine.

I froze, absorbing the feel of him around me, the overwhelming nearness of his

presence. Slowly, deliberately, I inhaled a deep breath, drawing his spicy, masculine scent deep into my lungs. It was intoxicating, and I swayed a little against him. He steadied me with his spare hand on my shoulder, and I could have sworn I felt him breathe in against my hair.

"Mmm, strawberries," he murmured.

"Pardon?" I asked, in a belated attempt to regain my composure.

"This recipe," Edward's voice sounded hoarse beside my ear as he pointed to the page. "Strawberry Flan with Cognac."

"Oh yes, I've baked that before at home." I nodded and then paused, realising that Edward was standing so close that my hair brushed against his cheek when I spoke. Turning my head to the side, I looked up into his eyes, enthralled to see little flecks of gold in his emerald green irises.

"Would you like me to make it for you?" I asked breathlessly.

Edward smiled slowly, and I stopped breathing altogether.

"I'd like that...very much," he murmured.

Once more, I swayed on my feet and Edward grasped both my shoulders, pulling me back to rest against his solid form. I closed my eyes, allowing the feel of his body and the languorous sensation I was coming to associate with his touch, envelope me in a cloud of warmth...and the comfort that I so desperately needed. Then I turned just enough to meet his gaze, our bodies brushing against one another.

"Is there anything else you'd like?" I asked, my voice sounding breathless. "Any special requests?"

Edward's eyes widened and then he closed them, groaning as if he were in pain.

"Special requests?" he asked, looking at me through his lashes, his voice strained.

"Umm...a favorite recipe?" I elaborated, biting my lip.

"Oh," he said with a dry chuckle, dropping his hands from my shoulders and stepping away. "Yes...well...I am quite partial to Cream of Truffle Sauce. I've had it with poached salmon but I imagine it would go well with other dishes."

I nodded thoughtfully. I'd only ever cooked with truffles a few times as they were notoriously difficult to obtain, but I wouldn't let that stop me, smiling at the thought of being able to do something special for Edward.

Leaving me happily writing out some recipes from the journal, he promised to inform Stephens of my whereabouts. I felt almost giddy with delight when I finally made my way back to the kitchens and a very late lunch. Chef Peters seemed a bit put out at my prolonged absence, and I wasn't sure he believed my reasons for being delayed at first. But when I showed him the recipes I'd translated, his reserve dropped, and we began discussing the possibility of sourcing black truffles this late in the season. There was a travelling merchant who visited Worthey on occasion, whose son's scoured the region's oak forests for the lucrative fungi. Whether they'd been successful of late was a mystery. When Chef Peters told me how much the truffles cost, I gasped. It would take me months at my current wages to afford even the smallest piece.

"Don't ye be worryin' about the cost," Peters reassured. "It's a bit of a thrill, ye discovering the Marquess has a favorite dish. The household budget will cover the costs, though I'm not sure who to send to market to try and find them. There's a bit of an art to choosing a quality truffle."

"I've had experience," I offered. At Peters' startled look I quickly qualified my statement. "I learnt what to look for from the last chef I worked with."

Peters nodded, his expression musing. "It's market day tomorrow. How'd ye like a trip into Worthey?"

"I'd like that very much," I informed him, exceedingly grateful that I'd be spending my half day off doing something to repay Edward for his kindness—and something other than laundry.

~AFL~

Hmmm, I wonder what special request Edward had in mind?

Next up will be the EPOV for the last two chapters so we might just fine out what he was thinking...along with having a few other questions answered.

Thanks for all your lovely reviews and words of encouragement. :D

xxx TLSue

Restraint

Stephenie Meyer makes a wonderful cameo in Breaking Dawn 1. Best movie ever! Oh...and she owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

No spoilers, I promise, but I just had to tell you how absolutely wonderful BD1 was! After all the miserable, rotten, cynical reviews I'd psych'd myself to expect a fairly dull, slow, nothing much of a movie - but of course, I wanted to see it anyway. But it was funny and romantic and sweet and sexy and waaaay scarier than I expected with lots of tension and all the really cool things from the book that I thought they'd miss - AND THEY DIDN'T!

Best Twilight Movie Adaptation so far! It was so true to the books, and they really had the time to explore and include all the little things that made the story so fantastic. No, the honeymoon scenes weren't x-rated, but they were wonderful - just enough I reckon for the target audience and in fitting with the rest of the series. But hot! I'm still swooning and smiling like a giddy loon and planning on seeing it twice more this weekend with my daughter and then my sister. This is one I will see again and again and again. Squeeee!

Thanks to TineSoes for Lord Hot and Bothered. LOLOL!

This outtake is unbeta'ed so apologies for any grammatical errors.

Posted: Thursday November 17th 2011 (BD1 Day!)

Words: 3164

Special Requests - Outtake

Restraint

EPOV

Dealing with young Mike Newton was not as satisfying as it might have been considering that I was impeded by certain irritating ethical constraints. Legally, a man in my position could get away with a great deal when it came to disciplining a recalcitrant servant; a good thrashing was no less than the lout deserved. But I

exercised restraint, limiting my violent inclinations toward the youth to holding him up by his scrawny neck—the one that my base nature would have dearly liked to throttle—and lashing him with my words.

"If you ever...ever...so much as *look* at Bella inappropriately again...or for *any* reason," I hissed, the absolute fury in my tone having the desired effect if the look of abject fear that appeared on Newton's face was any indication. "I will take great pleasure in removing the skin from your extremely worthless hide...every...last...inch of it!"

Releasing him with a shove, the now terrified looking footman crumpled before quickly regaining his feet, though not his composure. The worm didn't even have the courage to look me in the eye while I dressed him down.

"As much as I would like to see you thrown from Worthington Hall without reference, the young girl you accosted so rudely has advocated on your behalf." Newton *did* look up at my disclosure, no doubt counting his lucky stars. I still couldn't quite believe I'd given Bella my tacit agreement not to dismiss her attacker outright, and hoped it was not a decision I would come to regret.

"But you can rest assured that I will be watching you," I continued, glowering down on the now thoroughly cowed and sorry individual before me. "And if you so much as put one foot out of line...in *any* way...you'll be out on your ear. Do you understand me?"

The memory of Newton's ashen face brought me some small satisfaction, yet still...I worried about Bella. The girl was too beautiful for her own good, certainly for one of her station. Her instincts had guided her well to make the journey to Worthington Hall. Of course, it would have been better for all concerned if her father had remained amongst the living and continued to offer her his direct protection, though I doubted even that would have been enough to keep one such as Bella safe indefinitely. Working in a public inn she would have eventually come to the attention of patrons superior in rank and position to her father's, and he would have been hard pressed to hold them at bay.

I could only imagine that Bella's father must have intended an early betrothal for his lovely daughter in an endeavour to keep her safe. He may have even been considering prospects...taking offers, possibly even from those of a slightly elevated standing. But if there'd been a fiancé—or potential fiancé—in the wings; it was inexplicable that the man had not staked his claim upon her father's death.

But no one had stepped forward to protect her, and Bella had been forced to make

her way to Worthington Hall to safety...and to me.

Putting aside thoughts of the girl who already absorbed far too much of my attention, I returned to the far from pleasant duty before me. Informing my father—while he was on his honeymoon, no less—of the death of one of his oldest and most valued friends, was not a task I relished.

The morning that I'd first heard of James' good fortune, I'd been distracted and couldn't recall the details that were mentioned. If Sir Charles Swan's name had been mentioned, or even Swan Manor, I'm sure my attention would have been redirected despite my fixation on the then new girl...Bella. I certainly wouldn't have been so cavalier in my assessment of the situation.

Sighing...I sat back in my chair and took a deep breath. My father would be very saddened by the news. I'd never met the man who had served with and saved my father's life during the war, but I'd heard stories of his bravery and highly esteemed common sense on numerous occasions. Unfortunately, it did not appear that these characteristics had passed down to his daughter, though something about the story did not appear to gel. I was sure her name was something other than the 'Elizabeth,' the papers reported, though my father had only ever mentioned her in passing. A skinny young thing, he'd said, with eyes too big for her face or some such nonsense. But he'd seemed to think she had potential and spoke of her fondly.

"Liza? Beth?" I tried to recall the name my father had used for the girl, and then realized it must have been a derivative of her Christian name...a pet name.

Well...whatever she was called, she was in a world of trouble if she were caught, though my money was on her and her paramour having already fenced the jewels and being halfway to America or Canada by now with their ill-gotten gains. *That's* if the story of her having an accomplice was correct. If it wasn't, then after this much time having passed, there was little chance that a young girl of good family and minimal experience would have survived her impetuous foray. A ruined reputation was no doubt the least of the girl's problems, depending upon which tragic end had befallen her.

Foolishchild, I mused.

It appeared that her father had been in the process of attempting to provide for her future via a rather convenient and most advantageous marriage to his heir, but if the girl was too stupid to realize when she was well off...

My conscience prickled a little at my harsh judgement of the girl when, of course,

her side of the story was as yet unknown. If I was honest, there was something about James that I'd always found a little off-putting, not that I'd spent time with him other than an occasional game of cards at my club or in passing at social events. And then there were the rumours that said his tastes ran towards the unsavoury. Maybe the girl had had genuine cause for concern and a legitimate reason to want to avoid the betrothal? But if, as they were saying, she'd already developed a *tendre* for another, then surely that was a matter she should have discussed with her father who by all accounts *was* a reasonable man.

Shaking my head, I returned to finishing the letter before me, wondering which post forward address would be likely to reach my father soonest. His occasional letters indicated that he and his new bride were enjoying taking a circuitous and somewhat impromptu route in their travels, and I was saddened to have to be the bearer of such distressing news. Contemplating my options, I considered holding off sending my letter, as there was nothing my father could do to change the unfortunate series of events. Sir Charles' memorial service would have been held long since, and the girl would be found and dealt with...or not. *Not* that she was any of my father's concern.

Coming to a decision, I addressed the letter to my father's Italian estate. It would arrive weeks in advance of him and Lady Esme, giving him more time to enjoy his travels before being burdened with such a tale of woe.

~AFL~

A knock at the door interrupted my musings, and I hurried to finish my correspondence. I'd asked to speak with the new pastry chef whose recent offerings had been truly extraordinary and deserving of commendation. Henson had seemed a little perturbed when I'd made my request—it wasn't often I got to see the man discombobulated and was curious as to the reason behind him appearing so flummoxed—but when queried further, he'd composed himself and merely supplied his usual, gruff response of, "As you wish, m'lord."

The man was still clearly put out with me for my demand that Bella be chaperone and protected at all times.

"But Stephens is a senior member of staff, m'lord," had been Henson's not unsurprising response to my edict. "He has duties to perform and can't be expected to spend his days watching over a kitchen maid."

"Stephens can expect to do whatever is needed," had been my terse reply, and while I was fully aware of the exceptional, indeed outrageous nature of my request,

my need was for Bella to be safeguarded at all times. The thought of anything adverse happening to her was simply...untenable.

When I'd looked up to compliment the new chef on the truly delicious chocolate croissants I'd requested a repeat sampling of, and discovered Bella standing there—the recent and almost continual object of my thoughts—I'd been hard pressed to maintain a civil tongue in my head. Was the girl intent on torturing me, or was it her plan all along to form an alliance with a powerful lord? It was not an unreasonable assumption as she certainly wouldn't be the first girl to find safety and financial security in the arms of a wealthy and titled protector. If that was her game, she employed an intriguing strategy, unless her veneer of supposed innocence was the lure that baited this particular trap...most effectively I was forced to admit.

But when Bella had explained the reason why she'd ignored my orders regarding keeping a safe distance, clearly reluctant to be appearing before me, I'd understood my father's typically unflappable butler's discomposure.

I couldn't recall the last time anyone had surprised me...and certainly not to the degree that Bella had managed at virtually every occasion we'd had cause to meet. And so I'd found myself once more sitting across from the girl who plagued my thoughts, challenged my conscience, and filled my mind with fantasies both enticing and unattainable.

She was just so damned alluring...or so the construct my mind had created of her informed me.

Maybe if I got to know her a little and discovered the truth behind the pretty facade, I would be able to exorcise her from my thoughts and be done with this ill-advised obsession? She was just a girl—a commoner at that—with no great experience or commendation. A superficial polish imparted by her mother's friend, the retired governess she'd mentioned when explaining how she'd acquired her manner of speech, could not make up for a lifetime of ignorance and common servitude. Or so I thought.

Once again, Bella surprised me on all accounts, and I found myself in the predicament of becoming further enamoured of this charming girl with her bright and cheerful demeanour and appealing unpredictability.

Beautiful...alluring...talented...and likeable. If she turned out be half as intelligent as I suspected, I'd be damned if I knew how I was going to maintain my distance...how any man of taste could possibly resist.

Not for the first time, I found myself imagining what it would have been like if Bella had been born to a position of rank. Of one thing I was certain, her debut would have put the cream of society's mamas into a spin of envy as the girl would have surely swept all before her and been decreed a diamond of the first order.

But, of course, Bella had not been born to high degree, her mother's ambiguous background no longer carrying weight in the modern, post Napoleonic world, especially considering her marriage to a commoner. No matter how bright and beautiful Bella might shine, she could never take a place in a society of so-called betters.

Strangely, more than all of my father's lectures or the impassioned speeches I'd heard delivered by orators of such note as Wilberforce and Pitt, her presence in my life had begun to challenge some of my long held beliefs in regard to what constituted the worth of an individual...and their superiority or otherwise.

Discovering that Bella spoke French had been hardly surprising...but not particularly helpful in maintaining my equanimity. The language of love flowing so fluently from her lips had sent my own thoughts spinning. It hadn't helped that we'd ended up discussing French poetry, though I'd received the distinct impression that Bella may have been quietly amused by my impassioned defence of one whom I considered a master of romantic prose.

Thoroughly stimulated by the conversation, mentally and otherwise, I let the time get away from me, keeping Bella away from her duties—though that seemed like a good thing. A girl like her should be engaged in leisurely feminine pursuits, not worked from dawn until dusk...

Sighing, I pushed my questionable thoughts aside. I had already interfered in Bella's life unconscionably, quite possibly making it difficult for her in the process. But I *had* to know she was safe.

After assuring her that I would make sure she was not scolded for her prolonged absence, I couldn't quite bring myself to go, well knowing this might be the last opportunity I had to enjoy her company in this manner. She would return to her duties as a servant, and it was high time I overcame my obsession and left the girl in peace.

"One last thing?" Bella asked just as I was about to force myself to leave.

Barely stifling my sigh of relief at the reprieve, I nodded encouragingly, unable to resist the urge to move closer to where she was standing.

"There's a French language journal I discovered the other day, full of the most amazing recipes. It is handwritten, and I wouldn't want to risk it being damaged, but I wondered if I could sit and write out some of the recipes into English."

"Of course; that's a wonderful idea," I replied, asking if that's where she'd found the recipes for her exceptional deserts.

She smiled, a breathtaking sight, and then reached up to withdraw a journal from a shelf almost out of her reach. My eyes followed the line of her back and the elegant way her slender arm and hand extended in a graceful stretch above her head. Tugging the journal from the shelf, and almost overbalancing in the process—I couldn't imagine how she'd come to find it in the first place, considering its situation—she then placed it on a nearby table. Drawn like a moth to a flickering lantern, I came to stand behind her, close enough for my chest to come into the lightest contact with her back and for my arm to brush against her shoulder when I leant forward to leaf through the pages.

I was crowding her—deliberately—and my conscience stung, but I did not pull back. Breathing in her intoxicating scent, I thought of all the different ways I'd imagined Bella surrendering to me: her pale, slender and very naked limbs entwined with mine while I plundered her body repeatedly; or semi-naked as if she'd offered herself to me in the course of her day...seeking me out and flattering me with her interest; or submitting meekly to me as her lord and master while I took what the animalistic part of me wished he was owed. Hell, I wanted her anyway I could have her: naked, clothed, long languorous love-making that lasted well into the night, a quick coupling with her legs wrapped around my waist while I took her in an alcove up against a wall.

But there was so much more to Bella than her physical beauty...her desirability...her innate sensuality. I'd been right, and spending time with her was dangerous. My wanting was no less, but now I found myself thinking of ways I'd like to please her...and not just sexually. She deserved more than just to be physically pleased...much more, not that I believed she would be adverse to my attentions.

I could sense her response to me as I all but surrounded her with my body, the way she held herself so still, the deep breathe she slowly inhaled that swelled her chest, pressing her clearly aroused breasts against the thin fabric of her uniform. And then she swayed and I smiled a, no doubt, very predatory smile. Breathing her in, I nuzzled softly against her hair, steadying her with a very willing hand.

"Mmm." She smelled like freesias with just a hint of strawberry.

"Pardon?" she whispered, clearly as affected as I was.

"This recipe," I teased, my voice hoarse with desire. "Strawberry Flan with Cognac." We both knew that wasn't what I'd been referring to.

"Oh yes, I've baked that before at home," she murmured, the ingenuousness in her voice a masterful attempt at innocence. But I was onto her, and when she turned to look up at me, her hair brushing oh so casually against my cheek as her body pressed just that little bit closer against mine, I knew I had her. That's if I was willing to put aside my scruples and...*take* her.

"Would you like me to make it for you?" she asked, her voice a breathless whimper that tugged at both my heart and my loins.

I smiled slowly and she gasped.

"I'd like that...very much," I murmured, even while a struggle raged between my bruised and beaten conscience and my increasingly determined desire.

Bella swayed on her feet, and I pulled her back to rest against me, the feel of her body connecting with mine a sure, sweet form of the utmost torture. Then she turned, angling her head just enough to look me in the eye, her body pressing against mine in all the right places.

"Is there anything else you'd like? Any special requests?" she asked, her eyelashes fluttering, and my conscience threw in the towel. How in heaven's name was I supposed to resist her?

"Special requests?" I rasped hoarsely, a myriad of images crowding my mind, each one more erotic than the last.

"Umm...a favorite recipe?" she explained.

Something about the way she bit her lip—a nervous habit of hers that didn't bother me in the least—the way her creamy cheeks had flushed with a lovely rose blush, and the utterly endearing expression on her face, brought me to my senses. There was no way such sweet innocence could be feigned—so perfectly contrived—and my conscience rose from the mat in one last ditch attempt to subdue my gloating desire.

Forcing myself to step away, I laughed dryly at my arrogance and then ruefully offered suggestions in response to Bella's innocently—I was suddenly sure of

it—posed enquiry. The way she took my reply so seriously confirmed my suspicions, and I left her studiously applying herself to the task she'd set herself of transcribing recipes she thought I might enjoy from French into English.

My conscience took great delight in browbeating me as thoroughly as my old nanny would have...that's if she'd had any idea of the direction of my thoughts concerning this truly delightful girl. Bella deserved so much more...if only it was my place to give.

~AFL~

Hope you enjoyed this outtake. Reviews are lovely and will be replied to as soon as I get the chance...unless I get too busy writing the next EPOV or BPOV or Lemon...in which case I think you guys will forgive me. ;)

xxx TLSue

To Market

Thank you, Stephenie Meyer, for sharing the Twiverse with your adoring fans. I just saw BD1 for the second time today, and I have to say I enjoyed it even more than the first time I saw it! I'm such a sap, I actually cried. I won't say at which part as I don't want to spoil it for those of you still yet to see the movie, but I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

Thanks so much for all your wonderful and encouraging reviews and for the 1400 readers who've subscribed to A Forbidden Love. I know I've got a few of you worried about the direction this story is taking. All I can say is, I did warn you in the story summary, but I can guarantee a very happy ending with lots of romantic, steamy, and admittedly angsty drama along the way. ;)

Thanks to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, for keeping up with my crazy update schedule and for being such encouraging, supportive friends.

Posted: Sunday November 20th 2011

Words: 3407

To Market...

BPOV

To our delight, the next day Mrs. Cope granted Jessica, Angela and me a full day off work and leave to travel into Worthey for market day, starting *after* our breakfast duties, of course. She told us not to expect such liberties on a regular basis and to be grateful she was in a generous mood. I had a fair idea I knew who to thank for her 'generosity.'

As soon as the girls and I were free, we raced upstairs to change out of our uniforms and into our town clothes. Jessica's and Angela's dresses were more brightly coloured than mine, but they immediately recognised the superior quality of my gown.

"It was a gift from a lady who stayed at the inn where I worked," I lied, feeling a little sad at how adept I was becoming at deception.

Mimicking the other girls, I let my hair down from the staid buns we wore for work, Angela loaning me a ribbon and showing me how to braid the sides and tie them back from my face. Mrs. Cope loaned me a few coins in advance of my wages, which I tucked in a pocket. A considerably greater sum of money I tied inside my skirts along with a stern warning from Chef Peters not to let any of the others know of its existence, or to take any risks. I received the strict impression that the truffles I was to purchase—if I was lucky enough to find the travelling merchant, and if his son's had been lucky enough to unearth them—were worth more than I was in my current role.

We travelled into Worthey in an enormous delivery cart driven by Ben, one of the groomsmen, and accompanied by a couple of other workers, Eric and Tyler, who would be stocking up on produce for the kitchens. Young Seth, the lad I'd first encountered the day of my arrival at Worthington Hall, was granted permission to attend as well under Ben's watchful eye, and I chatted with him a little on the slow, ambling journey. We'd spoken several times now, as there was just something about the boy that drew me to his side. He was such a friendly, open lad with a cheeky smile and an eagerness to please. I was glad for him that he'd been granted his wish to transfer from the kitchen to work with the horses, as he seemed to love his new position. It didn't hurt my interest in the conversation that he was fulsome in his praise of Lord Edward's 'cattle' as he called them...and of his new master.

Jessica began the journey in a sulk as Mike had been given extra duties, denying him the opportunity to join us for the trip into town. I couldn't help noticing the shy glances Angela sent Ben's way and the way he watched her when he thought no one was looking. It seemed there might be a romance budding between my kind new friend and the shy groomsman, and I was happy for them. For myself, I was excited, as I'd visited the markets in Forkston before, but always with a chaperone. My expectation was that this day would be a very different experience.

The girls and I spent what was left of the morning after we arrived in the village exploring the stalls displaying lace, beads, brooches, and shawls, before parting with some of our very hard earned pennies. I bought a lovely yellow-gold ribbon that the girls said went well with my hair and would complement my one and only gown. Jessica picked out a pretty cameo brooch and Angela some lace to trim her only other dress. It sobered me when I thought of my wardrobe of gowns, bonnets, coats and shawls, and the luxuries that I'd always taken for granted back home. I'd never been overly slavish when it came to keeping up with the latest London or Parisian fashions like some of the girls I knew, but being reduced to wearing the dull and sober uniform of a maid and with only one dress to my name was extreme even for me, but all my new friends had ever known.

Lunch was eaten with the young men from the Hall: hot mutton pies bought from a street-side stall and eaten with our hands. They were surprisingly delicious, as were the sweet pastries we ate for dessert. After lunch, the boys invited us to go and watch a travelling puppet show they'd seen setting up on the far side of the market square. I wanted to try and find the truffle merchant but was curious to see the show...a first for me. Since we had to traverse the markets anyway, I decided to stay with the group and make enquiries on our journey.

The Punch and Judy show was entertaining enough, but I found myself somewhat distracted, as I'd got a lead on the truffle merchant who'd been spotted arriving earlier in the day. Jessica and Angela failed to appreciate my enthusiasm for hunting down an 'ugly-looking fungus,' saying they'd much prefer following the boys to where a band of musicians were tuning up near a field to the side of the markets. I hesitated, nervous about heading back amongst the closely packed stalls and alleyways alone, but my determination to fulfil Edward's request overrode my fear.

"I'll meet you back at the inn for supper," I informed the others. Angela seemed a little concerned about my going off alone, but I assured her I'd be fine.

My confidence waned somewhat once I was out of sight of my friends, but I pressed on regardless. It took a few false starts before I found the merchant—a crotchety old fellow and his equally ancient and wrinkled wife—and it took me a considerable amount of time to convince him I was a genuine buyer. Once persuaded, he had to send for the son who kept the family's treasure trove of truffles safely hidden, and then there was the process of choosing the perfect truffle and negotiating a price. After our transaction was complete, the merchant and his wife insisted I stay and share a cup of tea and some fruit cake. While I was grateful for their hospitality, I was a little unnerved when I realized how late it had become as I finally took my leave.

I had no idea which way to go to find the inn. It all looked the same! Seeing my indecision, the merchant's wife asked for my destination and gave me directions in her barely decipherable accent. Heading off the way she pointed, I was both pleased and very relieved when the path began to look at least *somewhat* familiar. But my relief was short-lived.

The silhouette of two large men darkened the end of the alley I was traversing, and my heart skipped a beat. Ducking my head, I slowly backed away, all the while telling myself that there was nothing to worry about. But then the men changed direction and began following me, and my concern increased dramatically. Moving as quickly as I could, I ducked down the nearest side alley, only to be confronted by two more men who whistled and called out when I stumbled into their path. Turning

on my heels, I ran, my heart pounding loudly in my ears. But the first two men had reached the entrance to the extremely narrow alleyway and blocked my escape. Ducking under a low awning, I scrambled through a now empty storage area and ran as fast as I could...but it was not fast enough. The men soon caught up with me, and I found myself in a dark, shadowed area of the market interior, surrounded by the sort of frightening looking men that Jacob had protected me from on the journey from Forkston. Except this time, I was all alone.

I gulped back a sob.

"Hey, lovely lass! What ye runnin' from?" a large man with a dark, straggling beard growled in a menacing voice, as he crowded me against the wall.

"Eh, she's a pretty one, all right." A rough, red-haired man leered, pressing close. "We'll 'ave some fun with e'r."

"Please...don't hurt me," I whimpered hoarsely, fear all but closing my throat.

The men laughed, the sound spiteful and mocking, and I flinched. Pleading for mercy would be pointless.

"Oh, it'll 'urt, I'm afraid," the bearded man said, reaching out to grab my arm and pull me hard against him. He smelt of stale sweat and alcohol. "We're goin' to take our time with ye, girlie, and we won't be gentle about it none."

I cringed away from his rancid breath, my heart pounding. For a fleeting moment, I thought about trying to do him some damage with my knee the way I had with Mike. But even if I managed it, there were three more just like him...waiting.

He gripped my arm so tightly that I cried out.

"Don't 'urt her too much," one of the other men said with a malevolent grin. "If she's still in one piece after we're finished with 'er, we can sell 'er to that brothel in Piedmont. She'll fetch a good price...make 'em a fortune on 'er back."

His threat sent a shiver down my spine, reminding me of the taunting words Lord Hunter had spoken to provoke my father's rage. I didn't fully understand them but knew enough to know I had reason to fear.

Struggling ineffectively against my brutal attackers, tears stung my eyes and spilled onto my cheeks. But it made no difference to the men who continued to paw at me, pushing and shoving me one way then another. They were hurting me,

crowding close and touching me in ways and places that were shocking and fearful. I cried out again when one of the men began to tug at the buttons on the front of my dress, his hands digging into my flesh and his foul smelling breath causing my stomach to heave. Struggling with all my might, I refused to give in to the horrible men without a fight, but I couldn't defend myself against their greater strength and numbers and was close to giving in to despair.

Then suddenly, an explosion sounded, echoing loudly in the confined space. Spinning to face the source of the noise, the men shoved me behind them, and I landed on my hands and knees on the hard cobblestones. Peering up, I was just able to make out the silhouette of a man seated on a very large horse, crowding my attackers back against the wall. In his hand was a pistol with smoke pouring from its muzzle.

"Let her go!" the horseman shouted, and I almost collapsed with relief. It was Edward...I would recognize his voice anywhere.

The bearded man hesitated, and I struggled to my feet, snatching up my bag of hard-won truffles from where it had fallen in a gutter. I edged my way towards Edward, but the red-haired man grabbed me by my aching arm and wrenched me to his side.

"Oh, no, ye don't, girlie," he growled and spat on the ground.

Edward dismounted in a fluid movement and stalked forward, his gun pointing straight at my captor's head.

"I said let her go!" Edward growled, his expression murderous.

The man released me with a shove, sending me stumbling into one of the other men who pushed me back.

"Bleedin' hell, 'e's one of the toffs from the Hall," one of the other men muttered, and they all began backing away.

"Look 'ere, Guv, no 'arm done. We didn't know she was yours," the man with the beard whined, still blocking my way.

"Let...Her...Pass..." Edward demanded, his voice like ice. A gap opened between the men, and I scrambled through, running to Edward who quickly pulled me behind him.

"Leave now, and I won't blow your heads off," he snarled, and the men turned and ran like the cowards they were. Bending over with my hands resting on my knees while I caught my breath, I hid behind Edward whose body continued to radiate fury, his weapon pointed in the direction the men had fled. While I couldn't imagine they'd return, Edward clearly wasn't taking any chances.

Turning to face me, Edward caught hold of my arm and helped me to stand. "Can you mount?" he asked tersely, as he caught hold of the horse's bridle.

"Yes...yes I can." I nodded and tugged my skirt up so that I could get my left foot into the stirrup, but it was too high. Seeing my dilemma, Edward caught me around the waist, lifting me easily so that I could swing my right leg over and settle in the saddle. My skirt wasn't designed for riding and it bunched up around my knees, exposing my stocking-clad legs and ankles above my low boots. I was beyond caring and didn't even blush, overwhelmed with relief at Edward's rescue and a compelling desire to get out of that horrible place as quickly as possible.

After one last check of the area, Edward tucked his pistol into the back of his breeches beneath his fitted riding coat, and then vaulted into the saddle behind me.

"Hold on," he ordered, urging the horse into a canter. I clutched the horse's mane with both hands and ducked down, Edward's body covering mine as we passed under a low awning and thundered down a narrow, cobblestone alley before emerging into an open street beyond the markets. We rode on past startled villagers until we reached a small field on the outskirts of the town, near to the inn where I was to have met the others for supper.

Edward halted the horse, secured the reins around the pommel of the saddle and then wrapped his arms around my waist.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice low. "Did they harm you? Are you injured?"

"No, I'm fine...thanks to you," I answered, my voice shaking. "But I don't know what would've happened if you hadn't come." My last words ended with a sob, and Edward pulled me even tighter against his body.

"Shh...Bella, it's all right. You're safe now," he murmured against my ear.

I nodded, and we stayed that way for a moment more, his warmth seeping into my trembling body. Then with a sigh he withdrew his arms and dismounted, before tying the horse's reins to a tree branch and turning back to me, his expression typically intense but even more unreadable than usual. Catching sight of my exposed

knee and lower leg, Edward's eyebrows rose and his eyes widened. I tugged at my bunched skirt in a feeble attempt to cover myself, but he reached out a hand to stop me.

"Don't," he said softly.

His hand came to rest on my knee, and I flinched.

"Shh, it's all right," he continued in the same reassuring tone, letting his hand slide slowly down my leg before gently encircling my ankle.

"Swing your other leg over the pommel, and I'll help you down," he instructed without looking up.

I clutched my skirt in front of me and did as he'd asked, coming to rest sideways in the saddle, my skirt bunched at mid-thigh. Edward drew in a deep breath then brought both his hands to rest just below my knees, his thumbs drawing circles on my inner calves.

My heart raced, the sensations his touch provoked unlike any I'd ever experienced. I knew I should protest...but I didn't, my lack of reaction as scandalous as allowing a gentleman to see my ankles, let alone calves and knees. But after the incident in the alley and Edward's rescue, I couldn't bring myself to care.

"Lean forward, then put your hands on my shoulders, and I'll lift you down," Edward directed, his voice hoarse. I complied, and he lifted me with his hands at my waist, holding me out from his body to allow my skirts to settle around me. Then he gently lowered me to the ground, my body flush with his. As soon as my feet hit solid ground, I wilted, and he held me close against him.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" he asked again.

"No...well not too badly," I murmured, ducking my head as a long, overdue blush warmed my cheeks. Stepping back, I rubbed my arm, unable to suppress a wince. It had begun to throb where the men had gripped it so tightly. Edward quickly undid the cuff of my sleeve, pushing it back to reveal ugly red welts circling my upper-arm.

He released me and took a step back, his hands forming fists. "I should go back and rip their heads off!" he snarled.

"No!" I cried. "It's just a bruise."

"Just a bruise?" Edward grasped my hands in his and gave them a shake. "Don't you understand what those men were planning to do to you, Bella?"

I didn't understand their threats, not really, other than to know they planned to do me terrible harm. But I nodded, desperate to appease Edward's anger.

"But they didn't hurt me...because you came. Please don't go after them," I pleaded.

Edward's fierce expression softened as he lifted my hands and held them close to his chest. "It's all right Bella, I won't leave you," he murmured, misunderstanding my concern. I was afraid for *him*, not me. Even with a pistol they outnumbered him four to one!

"How did you find me?" I asked, hoping to distract him.

He glanced over his shoulder, toward the inn. "You weren't with the others. They sounded worried, said you'd gone off amongst the stalls. Young Seth gave me your general direction, and I went looking. From my vantage point on Sabre, I saw you through a gap in the timbers...*surrounded*. It took a while to find a way through." He closed his eyes, clearly pained by the admission.

I nodded, blinking. He'd come looking for me specifically; it hadn't been a coincidence.

"Were you...following me?" I asked shyly, not meeting his eyes.

Edward shrugged a shoulder. "I saw you leaving this morning riding in the back of the cart...*without* Stephens." He lifted my chin with a forefinger, forcing me to meet his censorious gaze.

"I...I didn't know he was supposed to escort me away from the Hall," I said in my defence. "I realise that it was unwise to go off by myself, but I really wanted to find..." my voice trailed off as I realised I was about to give away my surprise.

"Find what?" Edward prompted, smoothing my hair back behind my ear with his hand. I must have lost Angela's ribbon in the melee.

I motioned reluctantly to the bag I'd slung over my shoulder, and Edward looked inside. His eyebrows rose, and he glanced at me, clearly puzzled.

"It's a truffle," I explained.

"Oh," he nodded and his forehead cleared of lines, a small smile twitching at the side of his mouth.

"I wanted it to be a surprise. To cook you that cream sauce you like." I couldn't hide my disappointment.

"Ah, Bella," Edward sighed and lowered his forehead to rest against mine. "I don't care about some exotic dish. I'd much rather have you safe, not abducted and injured...or worse."

"Yes, well, that wasn't supposed to happen," I grumbled indignantly.

"No," he agreed, shaking his head. "You're just a magnet for trouble quite unintentionally."

I harrumphed and he laughed, but I didn't take offence. I was just so glad that he'd arrived in time to save me and relieved he was no longer talking about going after those awful men.

"Come on, we'd better let the other servants know you're safe. They'll need to head back straight away to make it home before dark."

"Shouldn't I be going with them?" I asked as he untied his horse and, with his hand in the middle of my back, guided me towards the inn.

"You need to eat," Edward said in a tone that brooked no argument. "And if you think I'm letting you out of my sight after the fright you just gave me, you can think again."

Nodding and walking closer to his side than I knew was acceptable, but incredibly grateful for his presence, I decided it might be wise not to argue.

~AFL~

Hope you don't mind, but I couldn't resist recreating the Port Angeles attack scene in my Regency setting because, let's face it, angry, protective, vigilante Edward is seriously hot!

Let me know if you'd like an EPOV of this scene and I'll get 'write' on it. I know some of you don't like reading the same scene from a different POV (well...I've had one complaint,) but I do try to bring something a little different to the scene. And let's face it, Lord Darkward's thoughts are a hell

of a lot steamier than sweet, naive Bella's. ;)

xxx TLSue

Instinct

Stephenie Meyer created the Twiverse. We just love it!

Glad to hear you all enjoyed BD1 as much as I did. I'm trying to justify going a third time but by myself and in the middle of the day so it's quiet and with less distractions. Hmmm...sounds like enough justification right there!

Thanks to my wonderful betas and to all the lovely readers taking the time to leave a review.

Posted: Tuesday November 22nd 2011

Words: 2783

PS: A Forbidden Love has an awesome Banner created by the amazing Beckaboo924! FFn won't let me post the URL within the story, but you can check it out on my profile page. (It may take a while to show up as I've only just updated the page.)

To Market...Outtake

Instinct

EPOV

"Stephens, what are you doing here?" I demanded upon seeing the footman serving at luncheon.

"M'lord?" The liveried servant cocked his head, altogether missing my meaning.

Thankfully, the dining room at Worthington Hall was almost empty, save for the last few stragglers remaining from both my father's wedding of almost a month prior and the Worthington Hunt: sundry distant relatives and acquaintances of minor attachment to my father or Lady Esme intent on enjoying the hospitality of Worthington Hall for as long as *politely* allowable. If it was up to me, I would have bid them all a fair thee well days, if not weeks, earlier.

Emmett, Rosalie and Jasper were not due to return until the morrow from their

weeklong stay with the Earl of Denali. Lady Carmen's house parties were spoken of with something akin to awe such was her reputation for providing her guests with accommodations and entertainments of the highest standard. But while my cousin, his wife and my closest friend had been content to grace the Denali's with their presence, I had begged off, refusing the invitation on the pretext of pressing estate matters...a prevarication. While the business of overseeing multiple estates could be onerous, I was not without a veritable army of supporters in the form of estate managers, farm managers, lawyers and bookkeepers to assist me. But unlike the rest of the cream of society currently presiding in the district who'd been no doubt eager for an invitation, I simply hadn't wanted to go...for a number of reasons.

Gesturing for Stephens to follow me out of the dining room and away from my small but curious audience, I turned on him as soon as the door was firmly closed, my fury barely contained.

"Where is Bella?" I hissed the question rhetorical. There was no doubt in my mind that I'd seen her leaving the Hall seated on the back of the goods cart headed for Worthey earlier in the day.

"Bella?" Stephens had the audacity to question, his expression blank.

"*Belinda Brown*...the maid that I expressly ordered you to guard and protect...at...all...costs!"

The man paled, finally recognizing the depth of my anger. Not that Stephens was the only recipient of my ire, as a goodly portion was self-directed. I'd been so busy indulging my obsession with an unhindered observation of Bella as she'd sat with her skirt-clad legs swinging over the tail gate of the cart—her beautiful brown hair cascading down her back and a carefree smile on her face—that I'd not thought to confirm that the guardian I'd appointed was accompanying her. I'd only had eyes for Bella.

From the moment the cart disappeared from view, my pleasure at watching the girl who had captured my attention and imagination so completely was replaced by an uneasy feeling. But I'd told myself there was nothing to worry about and to be pleased that Bella was being afforded the opportunity of a day of rest and relaxation—at my behest. Berating myself, I'd determinedly applied myself to my duties, dismissing my apprehension as undeniable proof that I was acting like a besotted fool.

I should have trusted my instincts.

"I'm sorry m'lord." Stephen's swallowed hard. "I didn't realize my duties to safeguard the girl extended beyond the Hall. But I wouldn't worry; the lads will keep an eye on the lasses, Miss...*Bella*...included."

"You'd better hope so," I muttered, turning and stalking down the hallway. Calling for Henson to have Sabre saddled, I ran up the stairs, three at a time, heading for my suite and a quick change into riding attire.

Setting the powerful stallion to a ground eating pace, it was only once I was cantering away from the Hall that I realized how my actions would be construed by the guests that I had abandoned without explanation and the staff I'd left in tumult at my tersely ordered demands. For a lord of my standing to go gallivanting after a serving girl, overtly concerned for her safety when the likelihood of her being in any danger was slight to say the least, was...*exceptional* behavior. At least Emmett, Rosalie and Jasper had not been in attendance, or I'd never hear the end of it.

~AFL~

Not wanting to spoil their obvious pleasure, I kept my distance from the cluster of Worthington staff dancing and enjoying the music of a visiting troupe. Not seeing Bella amongst the crowd, I caught young Seth's eye and signaled him over.

"M'lord! What ye' be doin' in the village?" the exuberant lad queried with a candor that I knew some would consider impertinent, but that I found surprisingly refreshing.

"Ye here to find Bella?" Seth intuited, his words sending a shiver of ice down my spine.

"What do you mean, *find* her?" I demanded fiercely, but the lad did not back away from my gruffness.

"The other's ain't worried, 'cept Angela, of course, but I don't think Bella should have headed off alone like that...She's been gone a long time," Seth continued and dread settled like a stone in my gut.

"Where?" I demanded. "Where did she go?"

Seth blinked up at me, his excitement visibly dissipating at my tone. "I'll show 'ye, m'lord," he offered, his expression now serious.

The boy led me to the place where Bella had disappeared into the maze of

alleyways and stalls, and I swore under my breath. According to Seth, hours had passed since she left the others. She could be anywhere.

"Thank you, Seth." I remounted Sabre, intending to circumnavigate the maze before I ventured in amongst the stalls, my hope being that I might spot something of import from my elevated position.

"Shall I go lookin', as well, m'lord?" the boy queried. "I'm small and I can duck and weave like nobody's business. I could whistle if I see 'er and you could come towards the sound."

"Yes, that could be helpful." I nodded. "I'm sure Bella's fine, just lost track of time admiring the wares, but if you see anything...sense any danger...then I want you to signal me but stay back," I warned and Seth saluted with a quick tug of his fringe before disappearing amongst the crowded stalls.

Ignoring the curious looks of the village folk, and with the briefest nods in response to the greetings I received from local business owners and minor members of the local gentry, I focused my attention on finding Bella...or some clue to her whereabouts. I'd ridden a little over halfway around the chaotic cluster of stalls and makeshift marquees when a faint whistle caught my attention, and I quickly rode in the direction from whence the sound came. Peering amongst the ever darkening shadows and alleyways, a flash of movement caught my eye, and I edged Sabre closer in an attempt to get a closer look.

A flash of long brown hair.

A deep blue gown.

A woman running...being hunted by a pack of men.

Bella!

Scanning the surroundings, I searched for the best way to reach her. She was being herded towards the market interior, and I briefly considered heading in on foot, but I feared I would not get to her in time. Wasting precious minutes backtracking, I located the wider, central alley I'd seen on my ride past, and urged Sabre beneath overhanging awnings, around sundry obstacles and past gawking onlookers.

More minutes passed as I forced Sabre onward, the seconds keeping time with my pounding heartbeat. If they hurt her—if they so much as touched her—they were

dead men...they just didn't know it yet.

The scene I came upon, with Bella crowded against a wall, the filthy lechers pawing at her dress and making crude threats, was like something out of a nightmare...though I knew it could have been worse. Torn between wanting to thrash each one of the vile miscreants personally and my desire to see Bella to safety as quickly as possible, I fired my weapon. Dismounting, I stalked forward when the fools did not take my initial threat as seriously as they ought. They eventually ran, like the cowards they were, but not before I'd memorized their features to report them to the local authorities. But it wasn't until Bella was mounted on Sabre and I'd carried her away from the scene of the attack, that I could focus on my primary concern.

"Are you all right?" I asked with my arms wrapped around Bella's waist as I held her gently, but firmly in my embrace. "Did they harm you? Are you injured?"

"No, I'm fine...thanks to you." Her voice trembled, and I could tell she was close to tears. Her courage astounded me, as I could not think of a single young lady of my acquaintance who wouldn't have fainted at the first sign of threat and been of no assistance whatsoever in orchestrating her escape...unlike the brave, beautiful girl cradled in my arms.

"Shh...Bella, it's all right. You're safe now," I murmured, nuzzling my lips against the soft cloud of hair near her ear...for my comfort and hopefully hers.

I could have stayed that way indefinitely, just holding her. But expediency and common sense—something I'm sure that many of my peers would accuse me of sorely lacking—dictated we dismount and that I ascertain more thoroughly if Bella had been harmed in any way. She must certainly be suffering from shock, and with the cool of the evening chasing away the warmth of the spring afternoon, I needed to make sure she was warmed if I was to care for her properly.

Reluctantly withdrawing my arms from around Bella's body, I dismounted and secured Sabre's bridle to the branch of a nearby tree. He was skittish after his unexpected foray amongst the village markets, and I wasn't about to risk Bella being accidentally trodden on or bumped.

Turning back towards she remained seated atop the stallion's back, my eyes landed on a most arresting sight. Her skirt, not designed for riding, had bunched up above her knees leaving her shapely lower leg exposed to my view. The breath caught in my throat, and I froze...captivated. Noticing my response, Bella ineffectually attempted to remedy the situation by pulling on her skirt, but I reached

a hand to stop her.

"Don't," I whispered. She would not be successful in restoring her modesty while in her current position, and if only for a few, fleeting moments, I would not be denied the most beguiling—and *arousing*—sight of a part of her I had dreamed about but not expected to see for myself.

Unable to resist, I reached out and let my hand come to rest lightly on her stocking clad knee.

Bella flinched, but I did not withdraw.

"Shh, it's all right," I murmured, using the same gentle tone I would take with an as yet unbroken filly. Shaping... caressing...memorizing the contours of her knee, calf and shin, I let my hand slide slowly down her leg before carefully, deliberately encircling her ankle. While a part of me wanted to look up and gage her reaction to my touch—a touch that far exceeded propriety—I could not drag my eyes away from the mesmerizing sight before me.

My conscience berated my base nature for taking advantage of a girl who had not even begun to recover from an ordeal at the hand of monstrous men. "Swing your other leg over the pommel, and I'll help you down," I forced myself to utter, ruthlessly suppressing my own monstrous desire.

Or so I thought.

When both of Bella's shapely legs came into view, I drew in a sharp breath. Her skirt having bunched at mid-thigh revealed even more of her legs than had been visible before. As if of their own accord, my hands came to rest just below her knees, my thumbs drawing circles on the gentle, alluring swell of her inner calves.

Erotic images, wild imaginings, and the many fantasies I'd indulged myself with a naked, wanton Bella responding eagerly to my advances, flitted briefly through my mind.

I'd not done her legs justice, I mused, before brushing the licentious thoughts aside.

While I still believed that Bella was receptive—and would be highly *responsive*—to my touch, I'd begun to see her as so much more than just an object of desire. The revelation did not make me want her any less, but the timing was wrong, and her care and well-being was my current priority.

"Lean forward, then put your hands on my shoulders, and I'll lift you down," I ordered, unable to disguise the hoarseness of my voice.

Bella reached for me trustingly, and I felt an unaccustomed ache around the region of my heart as I lowered her carefully, considerably to the ground. I was a gentleman, and while Bella was not technically a lady, she deserved to be treated as such...and that was my intention...within reason. But when she all but collapsed against me, I could not resist the urge to hold her in a close and intimate embrace.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" I eventually thought to ask. While I'd been glorying in the feel of her soft, feminine form nestled trustingly in my arms, Bella was no doubt in shock and pain, potentially injured as a result of the ordeal she had just suffered. Inwardly cursing my insensitivity, I was unsurprised when she denied any serious hurt. But her grimace and the way she rubbed her arm informed me otherwise. When I exposed the vicious bruising those animals had inflicted on her long, slender limb, all manner of hell broke loose within me.

"I should go back and rip their heads off!" I hissed, imagining doing so with great and brutal pleasure. But Bella cried out, pleading with me not to go. Her fear that I would leave her unprotected was the only thing that stopped me from acting on my primal instinct to hunt down and deal with her attackers in the most fundamental way. I could not leave her alone and afraid, but the men who had harmed her would be dealt with...just not today.

"It's all right Bella, I won't leave you," I reassured her, drawing her close and holding her hands clasped against my chest. The shock must be wearing off, for she seemed genuinely alarmed.

"How did you find me?" she asked, her long, dark eyelashes fluttering as she gazed at me, wide eyed and altogether too pale.

I told her of Seth's assistance, then berated her, *gently*, for having left the hall without Stephen's to guard her even though I'd made my wishes regarding her protection abundantly clear. The horror of the fate that would have surely befallen her if I'd not arrived in time provoked my ire but also stirred an even greater sense of purpose within me.

When Bella disclosed the reason for her foolhardy escapade—her sweet intention to do me a simple kindness and honour a casually spoken desire—I was reminded once again of her innocence...and the tragedy that had almost befallen us both.

"Ah, Bella," I sighed and indulged myself by allowing my forehead to rest against

hers for a moment. "I don't care about some exotic dish. I'd much rather have you safe, not abducted and injured...or worse."

"Yes, well, that wasn't supposed to happen," she muttered seeming more indignant than contrite.

"No," I admonished. "You're just a magnet for trouble quite unintentionally."

A laugh burst from my lips at Bella's far from ladylike response, along with a corresponding lightening in my heart, as a new and very *different* plan for her safety, coalesced in my thoughts.

"Come," I ordered, guiding her with a hand in the middle of her back. The soft fabric of her fitted gown revealed a waist that was naturally slender, without the necessity of a corset, and I swallowed hard. "We'd better let the other servants know you're safe. They'll need to head back straight away to make it home before dark."

"Shouldn't I be going with them?" Bella queried uncertainly.

"You need to eat," I said emphatically, for it was with a renewed determination that I intended to see this lovely girl cared for and kept safe...from her own naivety and occasional foolhardiness, if need be.

"If you think I'm letting you out of my sight after the fright you just gave me, you can think again," I added dryly.

To my relief, my conscience was both mollified by and in agreement with my plan. For once, it was in accord with my more *primal* nature that prowled like a hungry beast protectively—and possessively—at Bella's side.

~AFL~

I hope you enjoyed 'The Market' from Edward's perspective. Not overly steamy, but revealing nevertheless. ;)

Next chapter is one I think you may just recognize, though of course, with a few interesting little twists. Any guesses regarding Lord Edward's new plan to keep Bella safe?

xxx TLSue

Protection

Thanks, as always, to Stephenie Meyer for her wonderful creation. No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks to all the wonderful readers who've been taking the time to review the chapters and outtakes. I read all the reviews even if I don't always get the time to answer - though I do try to make sure I answer your questions. It's so much fun hearing your thoughts, ideas and how much you're enjoying my torrid little tale. :D

Thanks to hotwardfangirl for "Lord Stalkerward" How true!

Thanks to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for beta'ing my BPOV chapters and encouraging me with my writing.

Posted: Thursday, November 24th 2011 - Happy Thanksgiving to my US readers.

Words: 3387

Protection

BPOV

As soon as we rounded the corner, Angela and Jessica came running.

"Where have ye been? We've been worried!" Angela exclaimed, concern clear in her voice. Then she saw Edward and stumbled to a halt before bobbing a delayed curtsy.

"Oi, we would've waited, but we had to eat ye know," Jessica added before almost running into Angela. When she saw Edward her eyes bulged.

"M'lord! 'Eavens above, wot are ye doin' with Bella?" she retorted then curtseyed perfunctorily, clearly bewildered.

Edward looked to me to answer, his eyebrows raised.

"I got lost, and His Lordship kindly showed me the way back," I murmured,

downplaying the incident.

Edward gave me a wry look before calling to Ben, who was waiting near the heavily laden goods cart.

"Yes m'lord?" Ben answered, running over and tugging on his cap.

"Ride Sabre back to the Hall, and tell Jones to send my carriage rigged for night-driving. I'll be at the inn." Edward handed him the reins and began to usher me towards the entrance to the tavern.

The girls stared as we walked past, Angela's expression concerned and Jessica's disbelieving.

"And inform Mrs. Cope that I'll have Bella back later this evening. She needs to eat. The rest of you head back to the Hall before it gets dark."

I stared from Edward back to my friends. It seemed that was all the explanation he intended to give.

"We'll talk to ye later," Angela mouthed insistently, and I nodded, feeling flustered as Edward herded me through the door, his hand at my elbow. A single, young lady dining alone with an unrelated gentleman was unacceptable by society's standards, but as for a *servant* dining with her master? That was a long way beyond the pale.

"I could wait and get something to eat after I've returned to the Hall?" I suggested, feeling suddenly embarrassed.

Edward scowled at me and I fell silent.

The innkeeper approached as soon as we entered the establishment and showed us through to a private dining room. Edward didn't introduce me, and the innkeeper kept sending me sideways glances. After we were seated, Edward ordered for the two of us while I tried my best not to squirm in my seat. When the innkeeper left, Edward studied me, his expression concerned.

"Are you sure you're all right Bella? Should I call for the doctor?"

I shook my head. "No, my arm aches but not too terribly. I would appreciate an opportunity to... er, freshen up though, m'lord," I said, surprised that my cheeks did not flame scarlet at the admission. After the stress of the afternoon, I needed a moment to regain some composure.

"Of course," Edward nodded and rang a small silver bell sitting on the table.

A middle aged woman entered, introducing herself as the innkeeper's wife.

"Could you please show my companion to the ladies' withdrawing room," Edward requested.

Companion—such an innocuous term—but one that could be interpreted in many ways, I imagined.

"Certainly, m'lord," the woman bobbed a curtsy as she spoke. "Right this way," she said, directing me to the door.

To my surprise, Edward stood when I rose to leave the table, and I paused for a moment, tears prickling the corners of my eyes. After my encounter with the men in the alley and the month spent hiding my identity, it seemed incongruous to be shown the courtesy I'd been raised to expect.

I took care of my needs and then freshened up, making good use of clean water, a washcloth, and comb. When I looked in the mirror, I saw that my complexion was even paler than usual, my loose hair a veritable cloud around my face. Remembering the gold ribbon I'd purchased earlier in the day, I searched my pocket, relieved to find I hadn't lost it. Using it to tie my hair back from my face in an admittedly simple style, I felt better for the attempt. Fortunately my dress was still presentable, though I was heartily sick of it and sorely missing my wardrobe of lovely gowns. Edward was finally getting to see me in something other than the ugly uniform I was forced to wear, and the only gown I had with me was my plainest and most serviceable. At least the colour suited me—a deep, midnight blue. It made me look older than when I wore the usual pastel colours appropriate for young ladies my age—well, young ladies who weren't required to work fourteen hour days to earn their keep.

"Foolish girl," I muttered, staring at my reflection. What did it matter what I looked like? Edward might have professed an interest in me, one he couldn't act upon, but that was only because he thought I was a commoner and not someone with whom he could ever form an alliance. If he knew my true status, I'd be lucky to be given the time of day. I'd heard Jessica's and Angela's comments. Edward was in no hurry to marry and that was with a bevy of the most beautiful, wealthiest and highly-ranked ladies in the land practically throwing themselves at his feet. He wouldn't look twice at someone like me.

I was a distraction...nothing more.

Edward rose again when I entered the room and helped me into my seat.

"You look lovely, Bella. The colour of that gown is very becoming on you," he said, smiling softly.

This time I did blush at the unexpected compliment.

"Thank you, m'lord," I murmured, flustered all over again, the effect of my lecturing quickly dissipating. Oh, how I *wanted* to impress Edward, even if it meant and could come to nothing.

We both remained silent while dinner was being served, Edward thanking the innkeeper and his wife as they left us in privacy.

"Eat, Bella. You're far too pale after your fright," he admonished. "We'll have your arm looked at when we return."

I didn't argue. It had begun to throb though I didn't want to complain.

We ate in silence, and then Edward asked me about the friends I'd made since arriving at the Hall and my life back home in 'Mayverley.' I steered away from discussing my fictitious background by asking Edward about *his* childhood and found myself laughing at the anecdotes he told of growing up with Emmett. I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd given their nanny and tutors prematurely grey hair with their antics.

Before I knew it, I'd finished the meal of roast lamb and seasonal vegetables and had made a good start on the apple tart served with a sweet, creamy custard. The food was plain but very tasty, and I was surprised by how hungry I was. But after a while, I noticed that Edward was staring at me, his dessert forgotten.

"M'lord, is something wrong?" I asked.

"I keep thinking about what could have happened today, if I hadn't arrived in time." His expression appeared anguished in the flickering candlelight. He glanced away and took a deep breath, before facing me again. "I feel very...*protective* of you, Bella. God knows I've tried to do the right thing." He laughed humourlessly. "But I don't have the strength to stay away from you any longer."

Then don't, I wanted to say but kept silent. "What about Carlisle...I mean, your *father's* rules?" I asked instead, my voice a breathy whisper.

Edward hesitated for a moment, and then shrugged. "Some rules are destined to be broken," he said quietly. Sitting forward, he reached across the table and took my hand in his. "It doesn't have to be a *bad* thing, Bella. My father's rules are there for a reason—to protect vulnerable young girls from being abused by men with more power than decency."

I flinched at his words, remembering the men in the alley.

"But *you* wouldn't hurt me," I murmured. "I *trust* you."

"You shouldn't," Edward groaned, and squeezed my hand in his. "But it's a moot point. All my good intentions fly out of the window where you're concerned."

"So what *will* you do?" I asked, squeezing his hand in return.

"Go straight to hell, I imagine," he muttered.

My eyes widened, and I sat back, his cryptic words frightening me a little. He stayed silent for another long moment, continuing to gently stroke the back of my hand.

"I have no intention of hurting you, Bella, but I *can't* be without you," he said fiercely, leaning forward. "What I *can* do is take you under my protection."

"Protection?" I whispered. I'd had Charlie's protection all my life and had hoped to have Carlisle's. Edward didn't even know my true identity and believed I was a servant. What sort of protection was he offering?

"We could...we could spend *time* together?" I asked. My cheeks flamed, but I summoned all my courage to keep meeting his unflinching gaze.

Edward's eyes darkened, his nostrils flaring as he drew in a deep breath. "A great deal of time together," he whispered huskily then lifted my hand to brush his lips against my knuckles.

I gasped, that strange fluttery feeling in my stomach stronger than ever. "I think I'd like that," I admitted, licking my suddenly dry lips.

"Oh, I *know* you would." Edward chuckled and reached out to run a thumb over my damp lower lip. Then his expression grew serious again. "I'll take care of you, Bella, very good care...I promise."

I swayed a little in my seat, overwhelmed by his proximity, and Edward stood abruptly, drawing me up to stand in the circle of his arms.

"It's agreed then," he said solemnly.

I nodded, not entirely sure what I was agreeing to but secretly overjoyed that Edward wanted to spend time with me. It was hardly wise; I knew that. I was supposed to be keeping hidden and not drawing attention to myself, but considering how disastrously that had gone so far, I couldn't see that spending time with—being *protected* by—Edward, could leave me any worse off.

The thought crossed my mind that if I told Edward the truth of my identity then I could be assured of proper protection...if he believed me...and as long as he didn't decide that the honourable thing to do was to hand me over to my supposed fiancé, Lord Hunter. Unable to guarantee Edward's response, I wasn't willing to take the risk...or so I told myself. The truth of the matter, a truth I wasn't willing to admit might be affecting my choices, was that I couldn't bear the thought of *not* spending time with Edward.

Pulling me closer into his embrace, Edward leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

"Come, the carriage should be here by now. You've had a...difficult day, and it's time I got you home," he murmured, and I smiled shyly as he escorted me from the inn, his arm around my waist. I should have been mortified by the impropriety, but it felt too wonderful to even consider pulling away. The sky had darkened, and I shivered in the cool evening air.

"You left your coat in the cart?" Edward assumed correctly.

I nodded and he pulled me closer, rubbing my uninjured arm to warm me.

"There will be blankets and a brazier in my carriage," he said reassuringly. "You'll be warm soon."

Edward's carriage was waiting, and he ushered me inside. It was the finest carriage I'd ever ridden in, far grander and much bigger than my father's. I hadn't taken a good look but guessed it required at least six horses to pull it. There was a fire burning in the small brazier as well as a lantern to give light. Edward took a folded blanket from under a padded leather seat and settled it across my lap. Then sitting beside me, he put an arm around my shoulder and nestled me against him, before signalling the drivers to head for home.

"You should try to sleep if you can," he murmured against my ear.

I smiled at his caring tone and tentatively reached a hand to rest on his waist, balancing myself against the rocking of the carriage. He groaned quietly and covered my hand with his, repositioning it a little higher.

"Sleep, Bella; I'll wake you when we've arrived."

I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to stay awake and savour the feel of being tucked securely against Edward's body with his arms around me holding me close. But it had been a very long day, and the movement of the carriage soon lulled me to sleep. When I woke, I was cradled in Edward's lap, my head nestled against his chest just below his chin. The carriage had stopped, and he was gently shaking my shoulder.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, m'lord!" I exclaimed, startled and embarrassed. I was mortified to think I might have crawled onto his lap in my sleep.

"It's fine, Bella. I moved you so you'd be more comfortable."

He felt so warm, but something hard was digging into my hip. It had to be his gun, but I just hoped it wasn't loaded! I wriggled and he groaned.

"Hold still," he ordered, his voice hoarse.

My muscles tensed as I worried I might have hurt him.

"I'm too heavy for you," I said apologetically, and he chuckled.

"That won't *ever* be a problem, Bella. Just keep still for a minute."

I did as he asked, and after a little while, he lifted me from his lap, rising behind me and helping me from the carriage. Moving off to head in the direction of the servant's entrance, I was surprised when Edward led me towards the main doors instead.

"M'lord," I hissed. "I can't go in this way."

"Hush, Bella, it's fine," he said clearly unfazed to be walking in the front entrance of his father's ducal manor with a servant on his arm.

Henson met us inside the door, bowing to Edward and admirably hiding any reaction he might have felt at seeing me.

"I'll have brandy in the green drawing room," Edward informed the butler as he ushered me across the vast cathedral-like foyer. "Send for Mrs. Cope, as I've a matter I wish to discuss with her, and for Stephens to escort Bella to the servants' quarters. I want Mrs. Harrison to check her arm—she's sustained an injury."

"Yes, m'lord," Henson nodded and turned to address a couple of waiting footmen, relaying instructions.

I blushed brightly when one of the footmen eyed me, his expression speculative. But a pointed glance from Edward sent him hurrying on his way.

We reached the empty drawing room, and Edward ushered me inside, his hand in the middle of my back.

"Take a seat, Bella," he instructed, leading me to a grouping of chairs near a crackling fire. I sat and he strode across the room to a long buffet housing crystal decanters where he poured two glasses before returning to my side.

"It's sherry," he said, and I took a sip of the glass he offered me, the liquid sweet and smooth.

Edward seated himself across from me and drank the darker-coloured liquid in his glass.

"Things are going to change for you now, Bella, for the better." There was a familiar intensity to his tone that made me shiver even as I listened avidly. "But I don't want to overwhelm you."

It was a bit late for that, I thought wryly. "How will they change?" I asked, my concern a tad belated. I still had the problem of Lord Hunter to consider as well as staying hidden until Lord Carlisle's return, though surely Edward's protection would be a blessing.

Edward smiled. "To begin with, you no longer need to work. I want you to be happy, not exhausted."

"But how will I spend my time?" I frowned. I could certainly do with a break from the long hours I'd been working, but the thought of days spent idle and alone held no appeal. It wasn't as if I could mix with the gentry and nobles in residence at the Hall. They didn't know who I was and wouldn't tolerate my presence.

Edward frowned, his expression thoughtful. "Well...you can read, sketch or paint,

explore the gardens. I guess it would be easier if you could socialize, but that's not going to be possible here," he sighed and rubbed his chin. "Bella, do you *enjoy* your work in the kitchen...the baking and what have you?"

Edward was typically ignorant of the effort and skill that went into creating the standard of living he took for granted, but I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

"Yes. Yes, I do enjoy my work." I was a little surprised at how confidently I could make this statement, though I knew I'd enjoy it more if I weren't so tired all the time.

"Then I have a suggestion." He smiled again. "You may work in the kitchen in the afternoon, as long as you are available to spend time with me in the evenings and whenever I am free in the morning...say, around morning teatime? For the remainder of the day, I want you to rest or indulge in whatever relaxing hobbies or pursuits you so desire."

I ducked my head to hide my smile, secretly thrilled by Edward's suggestion but amused at his autocratic tone.

"So...are we in agreement?" he surprised me by asking. I wasn't complaining but wasn't at all sure I'd had a choice.

"Yes, that sounds like a workable compromise." I nodded.

We exchanged smiles—mine shy and Edward's triumphant.

Henson entered with Stephens, effectively breaking the mood and reminding me of my precarious position in this household...and how much more complicated it was about to become. I was relieved, and yet oddly disappointed, when Edward dismissed me without any physical show of affection, though heaven knew what I was expecting.

Stephens, stoic as ever, escorted me to the servants' domain where Mrs. Harrison examined my now badly bruised arm, anointing it with a witch hazel and comfrey salve. She gave me a small jar of the ointment and instructed me to check in with her if I had any problems. Then it was time for me to head up to my room and the inquisition I knew would be waiting.

Jessica and Angela pounced as soon as I entered, demanding to know 'everything.' I hesitated but knew I'd get no rest if I didn't give them at least *some* sort of an accounting. So I told them about the events in the market, about the horrible men,

and how Edward had come to my rescue. I skipped over dinner and the conversation we'd shared, giving them just the barest details.

"I slept on the way home, and then Mrs. Harrison put a salve on my arm," I said and began preparing for bed.

"Wot...that's it?" Jessica exclaimed. "Ye didn't do the deed back at the inn or in 'is fancy carriage?"

"Jessica!" Angela rebuked, while I blushed. I wasn't sure what 'deed' she was referring to, but I was fairly certain I wouldn't have objected if Edward had tried to kiss me.

"So, Lord Edward rescued ye and carried ye away on his stallion," Angela sighed, giving me a glimpse of the romantic side she normally kept well hidden.

I giggled at her description. It really did sound like something out of a romantic adventure novel, not that I'd had the chance to read very many. Such stories weren't generally included in the education of refined young ladies.

Sleep did not come easily for me that night. As I lay in bed, my mind replayed the events that had occurred since I'd first seen Edward: every conversation, every glance, every smile, and every touch we'd shared...especially every touch.

Of course I had misgivings about our agreement, but about three things I was absolutely certain: first, Edward was so far out of my reach he may as well have been royalty. Second, there was a part of him that wanted me—though how much and for what end I did not know; and third, despite the impossibility of the situation and the dangers I faced at every turn—I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.

~AFL~

Hmmm....so Bella has agreed to Edward's protection. Can you blame her?

My first thought about this chapter was that there was no need for an EPOV, but then our deliciously dark and domineering Lord Edward's thoughts wormed their way into my mind, and my curiosity was roused.

How did he justify his decision to change his plans for protecting Bella? What was he thinking—and doing—while Bella was sleeping in his arms on the long carriage ride back to Worthington Hall? And then of course, I was

struck by the realization that Bella was sleeping in his arms for over an hour while he watched over her.

Any thoughts about what Bella might have said in her sleep?

My apologies but real life pressures - and the fact that I have to stop burning the candle at both ends and the middle or I'll never recover from being so ill - mean that I have to slow down a little with my updating schedule. Please don't be cross, but the EPOV outtake for this chapter won't be up until Sunday at the earliest.

xxx TLSue

Longing

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT! A Forbidden Love will be removed from Fan Fiction Net on February 24th. My reasons for doing so are detailed in Ch 74.

TLSue

Stephenie Meyer created Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks for all your wonderful, encouraging and so often beautifully written reviews. I'm sorry I am not able to reply to more of them, though I promise that I read (and reread) and appreciate each and every one of them very much.

Special thanks to Angel Unseen for Edward's lovely description of Bella, and KirTwiLover for the 'devil and angel' phrase, both of which I was given permission to use in this outtake and put in the first paragraph.

This outtake isn't very long but any more felt like it would be repetitive. I'm still waiting on the next Bella POV chapter from my wonderful betas, but I hope to have it up on Tuesday.

Posted: Sunday, November 27th 2011

Words: 1225

Protection - Outtake

Longing

EPOV

My meal forgotten, I sat watching Bella enraptured by her intelligence, elegance and wit...and her unmistakeable innocence. More determined than ever to protect her, my conscience had begun to question the path I'd chosen. But my desire would not be silenced...a devil whispering in my ear as I gazed longingly at the angel sitting before me.

Bella's manner and speech all bespoke a level of education far exceeding that of any commoner I'd ever encountered. I could only imagine that her mother's early

influence, along with Bella's innate grace, had led to her father having elevated expectations for his daughter's eventual placement in society. Picturing the life she could have had if tragedy had not befallen her, I frowned perturbed. What I could offer Bella was a far cry from the respectable life her father had no doubt envisioned for his daughter: marriage above her station to a prominent merchant or considering her beauty possibly a country squire or an officer...the younger son of a younger son. That life was no longer available to her, but what I could give her was far more than she could ever hope for as a lowly maid and more importantly...I could keep her safe.

Eventually noticing my distraction, Bella questioned me, her concern incredibly sweet. There was just something special about her...ingenuous...beguiling.

"I don't have the strength to stay away from you any longer," I admitted, and then proceeded to justify the breaking of my father's rules—the very rules that had caused her to traverse half the countryside in an effort to find safety at Worthington Hall. A part of me still couldn't help wonder if it was Bella or myself I was trying to convince.

"But you wouldn't hurt me; I *trust* you," she responded earnestly, and the sincerity in her wide-eyed gaze struck a double blow...to my conscience and my barely controlled libido.

"You shouldn't," I groaned, gently squeezing the slender hand that rested comfortably in mine.

In admitting how she affected me, I managed to frighten her. Doing my best to reassure her, I promised, "I have no intention of hurting you, Bella."

And then I offered her my protection.

Her sweet, blushing acceptance was almost my undoing, but I limited myself to a far too brief embrace and a gentle kiss to the top of her head. When I thought of what those animals had done to her...frightening her...*hurting* her...and what they would have done if I hadn't found her in time, I could barely contain my rage. They would pay, and pay dearly. While Bella seemed remarkably unaffected by the events of the day, I was determined to take care of her—very, *very* good care—starting with her safe return to the hall and a sound night's sleep. My expectations for the two of us would have to wait.

Settling her beside me on the deep, padded carriage bench for our return to Worthington Hall, I heard her sigh as she rested her head on my shoulder. "You

should try to sleep if you can," I murmured close to her ear.

Nestling even closer to my side, Bella rested her hand on my groin, and I drew in a sharp breath. The desire I'd managed to keep at least semi-contained all evening surged to life, leaving me instantly and fully aroused. My eyes shot to her face, but there was no artifice in her expression nor any awareness of what she had done, confirming to me once again the surprising depth of her innocence. Unable to stifle a groan, I carefully repositioned her hand, placing it on higher, *safer* territory. Then I urged her to sleep...also a safer proposition. My intentions—the honourable and the *not* so honourable—were in serious danger of blurring, though I continued to justify the decision I had made regarding her future and our relationship. It was the only way I could keep her safe...and the only way I could have her in my life.

After the events of the day, it was hardly surprising when the rocking of the carriage lulled her to sleep. Her position did not look particularly comfortable, however, and gave me an opportunity that I could not ignore. Smiling delightedly, I lifted her sleeping form to lay nestled in my lap, her head tucked carefully beneath my chin.

She sighed in her sleep, her arms reaching around me, and I pulled her body closer. The weight of her hip pressed firmly against my aching arousal, and I half sighed, half groaned in response. It was well worth the added discomfort to have Bella exactly where I wanted her...in my arms. Though as my thoughts skipped forward to the morrow when I could finally do more than just hold her, my agony—and my *arousal*—increased exponentially.

My eyes scanned the curves and hollows of Bella's form: the graceful line of her back, the rise of her hip and the length of her truly lovely legs. Possessively...indulgently...I let my hand slowly roam from where it rested on her hip, down her thigh, past the slight bump of her knee and along the curve of her calf to the hem of her gown. Unable to resist the urge to repeat the intimate touch that I had so blatantly enjoyed this afternoon, I slipped my hand under her gown, wrapped my fingers gently around her slender ankle and then, inch by careful inch, drew her skirt back up the length of her leg. Sucking in a breath, I gazed at Bella's stocking clad limb, imagining what it would be like when I was finally able to remove her stockings and run my eager hands over her bared legs...and naked body.

Bella moved restlessly in her sleep, and I quickly let her skirt fall back and wrapped the blanket more securely around her. She needed her rest, and now was not the time for me to take what she had so sweetly and willingly agreed to offer...though the temptation was intense. The thought of Bella's naked, or even partially clothed, form straddling my lap while I was buried deep and thrusting

inside her threatened to unman me. Breathing deep, I moved a little to try and ease the pressure of her clinging form where the curve of her hip and bottom pressed against my throbbing erection. But Bella was having none of it and squirmed against me, holding me even tighter than before.

I wondered if she'd awoken, but a glance at her aching lovely face informed me otherwise. Her eyes moved rapidly beneath her mauve shadowed lids, and a soft sound escaped her lips.

Leaning close, I heard her murmur, "No, Edward...no," and I tensed. She was dreaming...and I was the villain? With bated breath I waited to see if she would say anything more.

"Don't leave me, Edward...please...don't go," she softly cried, and I gladly pulled her tighter against me...as tight as I dared.

"I'm here, Bella," I crooned, close to her ear. "I won't leave you...I promise."

Sighing contentedly, she settled back into a deeper sleep, and I held her close for the rest of the journey home. Carefully, so as not to awaken her, I stroked her arm and along her hip and thigh, and gently nuzzled the crown of her head with my lips.

"Tomorrow, sweet Bella," I murmured as we made our final approach to Worthington Hall down the long, sloping drive. "Tomorrow I will make you mine...for always."

~AFL~

Thanks for all your kind words and well wishes. I'm on the mend but it is frustratingly slow.

I don't know about you guys, but I can't wait for the next chapter to be ready to post...and the next...and the next. Is it getting hot in here, or is it just me? ;)

xxx TLSue

Honourable

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight and would probably be appalled at what I am doing with her wonderful characters! No copyright infringement intended.

Thank you so much for all the wonderful and encouraging reviews. I'm glad that most of you are enjoying the EPOVs. Apologies to those who are driven nuts by them, but I'm afraid you are majorly outnumbered. To those of you questioning Bella's level of innocence in this story, I addressed this in my ANs at the beginning of Ch 6 if you'd like to take a look. I know it might seem a little farfetched, but I do believe it is possible, and it also gave me the premise for my torrid little tale.

Thanks to CalMom72 for 'Lord Lustward' - LOL! That is just perfect!

Thanks to Sonia for giving A Forbidden Love it's 1700th review. Wow!

Extra special thanks to my truly lovely and incredibly supportive betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro. If it wasn't for you guys, I'd be hiding behind the couch after some of the reviews I've received this week. Sigh...

Posted: Tuesday, November 29th 2011

Words: 2356

Honourable

BPOV

I arose the next morning filled with a sense of nervous anticipation and wondering about Edward's promise of protection. Despite my misgivings, I couldn't deny that the thought of us spending time together sounded wonderful. But considering our differing stations, I felt apprehensive about how it would actually unfold.

I'd purposefully avoided telling my roommates about the agreement I'd reached with Edward. I wasn't looking forward to Jessica's jealousy, but neither did I want Angela's pessimism and wariness to encroach on the joy I felt at being singled out for his attention. In truth, I had no intention of being dissuaded from spending whatever time I could in Edward's presence. As for the risks...how dangerous could

it be? Edward was an honourable man, of that everyone seemed to be in agreement, and heaven knew I could do with some protecting.

Choosing to ignore my conscience's scolding that I was being deliberately obtuse, I refused to let myself consider what my father's reaction would be to Edward's proposal. There wasn't the slightest possibility he would have approved of my spending time with a gentleman unchaperoned, and as for falling asleep on Edward's lap while alone in his carriage? Well, I didn't think scandalous would begin to cover it.

But Papa wasn't able to protect me any longer, I thought sadly. I might be pushing the boundaries or propriety, but in essence I had not broken my promise, as I was doing my best to stay safe while awaiting Lord Carlisle's return. There was also the little matter of choice. I wasn't at all sure that saying 'no' to Edward's proposition had been an option.

After breakfast, Mrs. Cope called me aside just as I was about to head to the kitchens to begin drying the mountain of dishes I was faced with each morning.

"Leave that, Bella, and go collect your possessions," she ordered severely, as she handed me a hessian bag.

My eyes darted from her face to the bag and back again. "Mrs. Cope?" I asked warily, while wondering if I was being dismissed.

"It will be all right, Bella...or not," she sighed. "It is what it is. Now hurry along, I don't have all day. Some of us have work to do."

I left and did as she asked, the nervous anticipation I'd felt upon waking increasing tenfold as I tried to imagine what Edward had said to cause Mrs. Cope's coolness toward me. Returning with my meagre bag of belongings, Mama's pearls carefully secreted, I waited at the door to her office. When Mrs. Cope noticed me, she stood, gesturing for me to follow. It was soon apparent that we were heading away from the servants' quarters and towards the family wing. The artwork on the walls looked a little familiar, and I wondered if we were anywhere near Edward's suite of rooms. Recognising a painting from the day I'd brought the croissants to his office, my heart began to pound erratically, but Mrs. Cope kept walking before stopping and opening a door further along the hallway. I followed her into a large, well-appointed sitting room, decorated in blues and creams and with a decidedly feminine feel.

"This is the bedroom." Mrs Cope gestured into an equally large room that opened

off the sitting room, dominated by an elaborately carved four-poster bed. "Through here is the bathing room. As you can see, it has been modernised with the indoor plumbing the Duke is so fond of, and through here is the dressing room. There's a small sleeping room for a lady's maid off the dressing room, though I don't suppose that will be needed," she finished with a sniff and eyed me pointedly, waiting for a response.

"Umm...It's lovely?" I responded, hugging my bag close to my chest.

"Yes, well..." Mrs. Cope's expression softened. "Bella, do you know why you're here?"

I shook my head, and she sighed. "These rooms are not completely *private*, Bella." She pointed to the only door we'd not opened. "They connect to an adjoining suite...the Marquess."

"Oh!" I gasped, my eyes widening as I glanced warily at the offending door, half-expecting Edward to come bursting through at any moment. But still, I wasn't sure what this had to do with me.

"Bella, you will be staying *here* now, in these rooms that connect to the Marquess' suite."

I frowned. This didn't seem very proper, but then Edward had promised to protect me. My being situated close by would probably make it easier for him to keep me safe, not that I'd been at any great risk at night in my shared room with Angela and Jessica. It would certainly make it easier for us to spend time together, I supposed.

Mrs. Cope studied me with a bemused expression.

"Bella, do you have any idea what's going on? Do you understand why his Lordship wants you here...in these rooms...connected to his?"

I shrugged and chewed nervously on my lip. "He said he wants to protect me and...and for us to spend time together," I admitted.

"Ah, Bella." Mrs. Cope shook her head. "Is there nowhere you can go? I know your family is gone, but what about friends, people you've worked with?"

I thought of Jacob, Leah, and their families. They would take me in and try to keep me safe, *if* I could get word to them to come and fetch me. There was no way I could traverse the country to them safely alone, and I wasn't even sure they were still

living and working at Swan Manor. But that was not a long-term solution, as I needed to remain at Worthington Hall and await Lord Carlisle's return if I was to keep my promise to my father.

I'd considered confiding in Edward but had discarded the idea as too dangerous. While I worried that he would be upset with me when he found out about the subterfuge, I dare not take the risk of him turning me over to the law or to his friend, Lord James, as I was worried his honour may well demand. Carlisle knew me well enough to trust my word over that of a peer—or so I hoped—which made him my only chance of avenging Papa's death and vindicating my name. If I ran away now, I would have to remain Belinda Brown, and a servant, for the rest of my life.

"No...there's no one, nowhere I can go," I answered, my voice trembling.

Mrs. Cope sighed again and looked away. "Well, there's nothing to be done then. I've always considered his Lordship an honourable man, though clearly not in his father's league," she sniffed. "We can only hope he will do the right thing by you...whatever that may be," she finished cryptically.

Her words left me with an unsettled feeling in the pit of my stomach. I wished I had the courage to ask her exactly what she meant, but the opportunity passed when she began to detail my new schedule.

"Your mornings are now your own Bella, and you may spend them as you wish. Your breakfast will be brought to your room at nine a.m. as per his Lordship's instructions."

Mrs. Cope's tone and expression let me know exactly what she thought of this new development.

"At ten fifty-five, Stephens will come to escort you to his Lordship's study where you will serve his morning tea at eleven. Depending on the, er...*demands* he places on your time, and if you so desire, you may take your luncheon with the other servants and then spend your afternoons working with Chef Peters. You are to rest after supper and be available to *spend time* with the Marquess in the evenings according to his schedule and instructions. Do you have any questions?"

I gulped and shook my head. There was nothing to fear, I told myself when the housekeeper left me to unpack my few garments in a dresser in the bedroom. I didn't bother with the dressing room that was almost as large as my bedroom back home in Forkston, other than to find a secure hiding place for my mother's pearls. When I'd finished the minor task, I stood and hugged my waist against the chill...and

the anxiety that now clenched my stomach like a fist.

A wall clock chimed the hour; eight a.m. I had three hours to fill before Stephens came to collect me. Summoning some courage, I decided to properly explore my new domain.

The sitting room was certainly spacious and beautifully appointed. Moving over to the long windows that looked out on the gardens, parkland and the river beyond, I smiled at the restful sight. Then I noticed a round table, stacked with the books that Edward had chosen for me in the library, and an array of artist's materials that would put a professional painter to shame. There was a note, folded in half and sealed with a wax stamp, my name on the front.

I broke the seal with trembling fingers and read -

Bella,

Make yourself comfortable and take some time to explore your creative side - outside the kitchen. I'll see you at eleven.

EC—Edward Cullen—a handwritten note, and the gift of both materials and the time to indulge my hobby. I felt almost giddy with relief. Of course I could trust Edward; he was the most wonderful, generous, amazing man on the face of the earth. What was there to be afraid of?

With so much time to fill, I decided to indulge myself with a bath; a luxury I would never again take for granted. I'd heard of the sort of indoor plumbing that was available at Worthington Hall, for guests and family only, of course, but had never before had an opportunity to avail myself of the new innovation. I was truly grateful to be able to fill my own bath with just the turn of some taps. Despite my new situation, I could not imagine my calling for servants to lug heated buckets of water to fill my bath would have gone over particularly well.

Ah well, there were worse dilemmas in life, I decided as I lay back in the largest tub I'd ever seen and let the hot, bubbly water sooth my concerns and aching muscles. The bruises on my upper arm stood out like purple rings against my pale skin, a visible reminder of the emotional and physical battering I'd received the day before. What a time of contrasts my life had become, going from terrifying lows to dizzying highs all in the space of scant hours. I promised myself when my life returned to whatever semblance of normality I could find, I would never complain of

being bored again!

When my hair was dry, I styled it in a more relaxed, and hopefully more flattering style than was required for my position as a servant. I could always redo it before heading off to the kitchen, I mused quietly, pleased with how my skill at styling my own hair had grown in just a few short weeks. Angela would be impressed. Leah would no doubt be astounded.

After dressing in a clean uniform, I made the mistake of checking my appearance in the full length mirror in the dressing room, and my confidence faded fast. The cut and colour of my attire did nothing to flatter my rather ordinary looks, and I found myself wondering what Edward could possibly see in me. His interest was inexplicable and surely would not last.

Sighing, my thoughts drifted once again to how Edward would react when his father returned and he discovered my true identity. My only hope was that he would understand the choice I'd made and the reason for my caution. I strongly suspected that my love for him would last far beyond my stay here at Worthington Hall, but it was hard to imagine that he would still want to be my friend...to spend time with me...when he discovered the truth. The difference in our relative positions within society would surely create an insurmountable gulf.

Swallowing hard, I turned to stare out the window once more, fearing that I already knew the answer to my questions.

A knock at the door interrupted my brooding. I hurried to answer and found Stephens waiting, a tray in his hands laden with a tea-service and a plate of freshly made petit fours. With a brusque nod he motioned me to precede him down the hallway.

"Can I help carry something, the cakes perhaps?" I asked, wondering at Stephens' terse attitude. He was hardly a garrulous fellow, but he'd always been polite.

"Not your place," he grunted, "er...Miss."

I flinched at the sarcasm in his tone and stopped to face him. "Is there something wrong?" I asked. "Have I done something to offend you?"

Stephens was clearly taken aback by my calling him out on his rudeness, though my tone was gentle. I had no desire to be at odds with the man Edward had assigned as my escort.

The footman surprised me by blushing.

"Nay, it's naught ye've done, Miss Bella," he answered solemnly. "I'm just worried at the way things be progressing between ye and his Lordship. His Grace wouldn't be happy about it, that's fer sure."

My stomach sank, as I wondered why everyone was so concerned.

"I'm sure everything will be fine." I smiled, though my attempt at reassurance was decidedly wobbly. "Lord Edward is an honourable man. He's just offered me his protection."

"Aye...is that what he's callin' it," Stephens' tone did nothing to alleviate my concerns. I felt the colour leech from my face and his expression softened. "Now don't ye be worryin' your pretty head, Miss Bella...hopefully all will be well."

I nodded, unsure who was trying to convince whom. Taking a deep breath, I came to a halt outside the door to Edward's office, attempting to prepare myself for my first encounter with the man that I had fallen in love with in his new role as my protector...and wondering what in heaven's name I had gotten myself into.

~AFL~

Well...I think we've all got a fair idea even if Bella is clueless. Next chapter and Bella's first encounter with an unrestrained Lord Lustward, will be posted Thursday.

xxx TLSue

Reputation

Thanks as always to Stephenie Meyer for her wonderfully romantic saga. No copyright infringement intended.

Hmmm...how to respond to my reviewer's this week...

Firstly: thank you so much to the 100/150 or so of you who take the time to leave a review each chapter - Wow! I love reading them...even the challenging ones. Thanks also to the the thousands who are reading A Forbidden Love and who have favourited this story or signed up for alerts.

Secondly: yes, Bella is extremely naive (though I still stand by this possibility,) and I agree that she is behaving somewhat foolishly. But she has led a very sheltered life, is only seventeen, has been through one heck of a month, and is caught up in her first ever bout of infatuation...and this is Edward we are talking about. Hell...canon Bella was willing to let her parents think she was dead just to be with him the way she wanted! I also agree that Lord Edward is not thinking with the most appropriate part of his anatomy, and he could have come up with a more respectable way of protecting Bella than making her his mistress...but where would be the fun in that?

Thirdly: if you're after a story about a truly honourable, caring, respectful, self-sacrificing Edward who would do literally anything to put Bella's wellbeing and wishes above his own, go read my Twilight AU story, Once Bitten, where Edward is all those things and more...well, other than the first day when he attacked Bella in biology causing her to be transformed into a vampire against her will and without any prior knowledge. Other than that, he is truly adorable and willing to wait for as long as Bella needs. They don't call me the Queen of UST over there for nothing! (Unresolved Sexual Tension)

Thanks to my wonderful betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro for beta'ing this chapter.

Don't forget to go check out the amazing banner that Beckaboo924 made for A Forbidden Love. You can find the link on my profile page, and if you have any doubts as to the direction this story is heading, it should clarify them for you. ;)

Posted: Thursday, December 1st 2011

Words: 3193

Reputation

BPOV

"Well, I've procrastinated long enough. I'd better not keep the Marquess waiting," I said with a hesitant smile, and Stephens nodded before knocking on the door to Edward's study. His command to enter sounded clearly through the closed door, and Stephens opened it, ushering me through before him.

Edward was standing on the far side of the room by a window, the soft spring light highlighting the reds and golds in his hair. With a nod he directed Stephens to set the tray of morning tea down on the low table. The footman did as he was bid then left us alone, the door closing behind him with a sense of finality.

"Bella," Edward said softly.

"M'lord," I answered, smiling shyly and remembering to bob a curtsy, my fears seeming far less substantial in his presence.

Edward walked slowly over to where I stood just inside the door. When he reached me he extended his hand and this time I didn't hesitate to take it, letting him lead me over to the leather couch where we'd sat across from each other just two days earlier. This time when Edward sat he kept my hand in his, drawing me down beside him.

"Will you pour?" he asked, his half smile just shy of a smirk. "We wouldn't want you losing your hard-won skills due to lack of practice."

Blushing, I refused to take the bait and tugged my hand free so that I could pour tea for us both. I passed Edward his cup and then offered up the plate of cakes.

"Maybe later." He smiled, and I put the plate back on the table then sipped slowly at my tea. Edward hadn't taken his eyes off me since I'd entered the room.

"Are your new accommodations to your liking?" he asked.

"Oh, yes." I nodded. "Thank you so much for the books and paints and...everything. It was very kind of you, m'lord."

"You're welcome." Edward smiled. "Did you make much progress this morning?"

"Not yet, but I'm looking forward to doing some sketching and trying out the paints when I have time."

Edward frowned. "Did Mrs. Cope not take you to your new rooms first thing this morning? I expressly informed her you were not to work until the afternoon, and only if you wished to."

"No, I didn't have to work. Mrs. Cope took me to my room before eight. I just..." I hesitated and caught my lower lip between my teeth, chewing it nervously.

Edward cocked his head to the side. "How did you spend your morning?"

"Umm..." It wasn't appropriate to speak of personal matters with a gentleman.

"Bella?" Edward's tone was insistent, and I relented.

"I er...washed my hair, m'lord," I mumbled, blushing and staring at my hands.

"Ahh...The newly renovated bathrooms are quite something, aren't they?" he responded with a smile. "My father is quite proud of the modernisations, and I can't say that I blame him. I'm in the process of having my own estates upgraded, a good reason to stay away from Masen Park for a while. I look forward to showing you the results when the work is finished."

I stared at Edward, nonplussed but not quite brave enough to ask him what he meant. I assumed Masen Park must be his primary estate as the Marquess of Masen, but I had no idea where it was located or what Edward could mean by his words. Did he want me to accompany him there on a visit? But if so, in what capacity?

"How is your arm?" he asked, changing the subject.

"A bit sore, I'm afraid, and multicoloured, but Mrs. Harrison's salve is helping." I smiled, trying to lighten the mood when Edward's expression darkened at my response.

"I've ordered the bailiffs to hunt down those men and see that they are properly punished," he said fiercely.

"Oh...thank you, m'lord," I murmured, relieved that he was leaving the task to the relevant authorities and grateful that the men would not go unpunished. Maybe then

they'd think twice about accosting some other poor girl who wasn't fortunate enough to have a dashing lord come to her rescue.

Edward fell silent, and despite the ease we'd achieved on other occasions, I felt too shy to initiate a conversation. He continued to study me intently, and I had to resist the urge to squirm next to him on the couch. Things had definitely changed between us, I just wasn't sure *how*.

"Weren't you ever taught that it's rude to stare?" I blurted, shocking us both with my rebuke. Gulping, I cursed my impetuous mouth, as I wondered how to apologise, but then I saw Edward's mouth slowly curving into a smile.

"Ah...but Bella, it would be far ruder to ignore one as beautiful as you. Besides, I've already told you that, where you're concerned, I have no control whatsoever."

After putting his cup on the table, he took mine from my limp fingers and set it aside. My face flamed at Edward's words, and he reached out to run his forefinger gently down my blushing cheek the same way he had the day he'd interrupted my meagre attempts at flower arranging. Once again I felt his touch tingle right through me. My eyes fluttered closed but flew open when I felt his breath on my skin. His face was barely inches from mine, his eyes on my mouth.

Was this it? Was this the moment I had been secretly hoping and longing for?

I held my breath...waiting...anticipating...as his mouth slowly closed with mine. Then my eyes shut again as our lips met in my very first kiss. My stomach clenched with a strange but delightful sensation of pleasure as Edward's warm, soft lips moulded to mine. The feel of his mouth moving against my own was achingly sweet and oh...so...much better than anything I'd ever imagined.

Far too soon for my liking, he ended the kiss, and it was my turn to stare at his beautiful face...stunned.

"God, you're adorable," he whispered. Then he did something even more shocking than kiss me. He put his hands to my waist and lifted me onto his lap, cradling me in his arms just as he had in the carriage the night before.

"M'lord!" I exclaimed.

"Come now, Bella. You sat on my lap for almost an hour last night." Edward chuckled as one hand softly caressed the exceedingly sensitive skin of my neck, while the other moved assuredly down my back, across my hip, and along my thigh.

"Yes, but I was *asleep*! That was different!" I attempted to sound indignant but failed miserably.

"Very different," Edward agreed; his voice as hoarse and husky sounding as mine. "This is so...much...better..." He lifted my chin with his finger and punctuated his words with more of his delicious and tantalizingly soft kisses.

Mesmerised, I did nothing, a long moment passing before I managed even a faint protest. I'd let this go too far—far too far—but, oh...I really didn't want him to stop.

"M'lord, this is wrong," I forced myself to protest, though my voice was the barest whisper.

"Really?" Edward said, pulling back just enough to give me a rueful look. "I thought we were doing rather well...as far as first kisses go."

"No..." I shook my head, confused. "I don't mean you're *doing* it wrong, I...I mean we shouldn't be doing this...at all."

Edward's smile faded, his brow furrowing. "Why ever not?"

There was a reason, I knew there was, but my thoughts were so muddled it took me a moment to recall. "Because... because it's not done. I mean, well, quite clearly it is done because we're doing it, but it's not supposed to be done...this kissing and touching. What if someone were to see us?"

Edward shrugged. "I wasn't planning on an audience, but what do you *think* everyone assumes we're doing...playing chess?"

I stared at him, aghast, my mouth hanging open. "But...but my reputation..." I stuttered.

"Ah, but that's the beauty of being a servant, sweet Bella, you don't have to worry about such boring things as 'reputation.'" Edward had begun to nibble softly on the tender skin of my neck, and I had a very difficult time making sense of his words.

"Don't have to worry..." I murmured, echoing his words. Of course he wouldn't be worried about protecting my reputation; as far as he knew it wasn't an issue. I suppose for Belinda Brown it wasn't, or at least not to the same standard I'd been raised to uphold.

"Which is a good thing," Edward continued as he made his way around the shell of

my ear with his lips, and teeth, and...God help me, was that his tongue? I almost swooned at the amazing sensations his shocking touch brought to life in my unsuspecting flesh. "Because if you had a reputation to worry about, it would be a little late for concern," he concluded as he began to suck on the flesh just below my earlobe.

I whimpered.

"Too late?" I managed...eventually.

"I've moved you into rooms that connect with mine, Bella, and we've already spent a considerable amount of time together alone...in my study...in the library...at the inn...during the carriage ride last night." He chuckled. "I imagine that everyone assumes we've done a great deal more than just kissing...and we will. The only reason we haven't is that I only made the decision last night to give in and do what I've wanted to do since the first moment I laid eyes on you. And I wasn't about to take things further when you were still recovering from your ordeal at the hands of those rogues."

"Oh!" I blinked rapidly as I slowly processed his words. How difficult it was to reason when one was being kissed and caressed in such an extraordinary fashion. No wonder this sort of behaviour was forbidden to young ladies; it could lead to...to...I didn't actually know what, but scandalous sounded about right. If Edward were correct, my reputation was already ruined—well, Belinda Brown's reputation—and with the part of my brain that was still capable of reasonable thought, I wondered if there was a way for me to extricate myself from this situation with my own reputation intact.

Edward's hands continued their roaming exploration of my body, one coming tantalizingly close to my breast. I stiffened, but he hushed me and found my mouth again with his wonderfully warm and mobile lips. Completely unable to resist, I melted against him, and he groaned, the sound reverberating from deep within his chest. In a lightning quick movement he laid me along the length of the couch, half covering me with his body. Then he took hold of my thigh and hitched my leg over his hip, causing our bodies to press together even more tightly as my skirts tangled around us. As his weight bore down on me, I felt that strange hardness I'd noticed the night before in the carriage.

Surely he wouldn't have his pistol on him here in the house?

"M'lord," I whispered staring up into eyes that looked more black than green, his pupils had dilated so widely.

"It's all right, Bella, I'm not going to take you here, not that I don't want to," he murmured as he dropped more kisses along my jaw, curving around the side of my neck and onward to that incredibly sensitive place just below my ear...a place I hadn't even known existed.

Take me where? I wondered vaguely. With his weight pressing me into the plush leather, I could barely move. Of course, I knew that the right thing to do would have been to push him away, or at least make an attempt, but my curiosity and my desire for Edward to continue what he was doing overwhelmed my conscience. Instead, with a will of their own, my hands made a hesitant exploration of the muscular curves and planes of his back as his hands roamed boldly up and down my sides and over my hips and thighs. Edward's mouth found my own, and he kissed me again and again, each kiss a little firmer, a little deeper than the one before.

Oh...my... Had anything ever felt this exquisite before in the history of...everything?

An eon passed, lost in a hazy, sensual world, before Edward eventually withdrew. Sitting up, he drew me into the circle of his arms, where I slumped against him...boneless...breathless...and quite undone.

Capturing my chin with his fingers, he gently tilted my head so that I would look into his eyes, and he smiled. "I told you I would take good care of you, and I mean it. So...as much as I'm looking forward to having you on this couch, I will show some restraint and leave that for another occasion. Our first time—your very first time, I suspect—should be a tad more auspicious than a quick coupling while fully clothed, don't you think?"

I blinked, staring up at him dazed.

"*Have me?*" I puzzled, looking down at the couch where we'd lain.

Edward's smile was slow and dangerous, unlike any expression I'd seen on his face before. "You want to know how I plan to have you?" he asked, and I nodded hesitantly, hoping to finally get some answers to the myriad questions tumbling around in my thoughts.

He closed his eyes for a moment, letting his head fall back against the leather seat. "I've imagined having you every way conceivable, Bella," he whispered hoarsely then pierced me with the intensity of his gaze once more. "Lying on this couch, of course." He gestured with his head. "On my desk...definitely on my desk."

I looked towards his large mahogany desk and frowned, shaking my head. I really had no idea what he was talking about. Glancing up, I saw Edward studying my puzzled expression.

"I'll clear it off," he said by way of explanation, leaving me none the wiser. "Up against the wall," he continued. "On the floor in front of the fire...sitting on the couch...hard, fast, gentle, slow. The possibilities are endless, and that's just in *this* room alone."

I looked around at the places he'd mentioned, my mind spinning. Then I opened my mouth to question him some more before shutting it abruptly, not knowing what to ask. *Should I be afraid?* I wasn't sure. Edward had promised he was going to take good care of me, but what did he mean by his strange words? Was he talking about more kissing? My mouth tingled, and my belly fluttered at the thought. I probably shouldn't, but I couldn't deny I wanted more of his truly wonderful kisses. I'd never known anything like them existed. They were like discovering candied truffles or chocolate for the very first time!

"Bella?" Edward interrupted my musing. "Whatever are you thinking? Your face is so expressive, but sometimes I have no idea how to read you. You're not worried are you?"

"Sh...should I be?" I stuttered, swallowing hard.

Edward smiled and held me close, tucking my head beneath his chin and running his hands warmly over my back. "You've got nothing to worry about, I promise. I'm going to make it so good for you," he whispered huskily and kissed the top of my hair. "But you'd better go now, or all my good intentions will be for naught. My ability to resist you is quite woeful."

He stood, raising me with him, and then held me in his arms. After a long, lovely moment where I rested in his embrace, the feel of his strong, lean body supporting mine. Then he gently lifted my face to his and urged my lips to yield beneath his mouth. This kiss was quite chaste compared to the ones we'd shared lying upon the couch, but my heart stuttered with the joy and love I felt flooding through me.

My only hope was that Edward was right in his assertion that I had nothing to worry about, as it seemed my ability to resist him was actually worse than woeful...it was nonexistent.

~AFL~

I spent the rest of the day in somewhat of a daze, barely able to keep the smile from my face. Ignoring the sideways glances of the kitchen staff and Chef Peters' questioning looks, I did my best to focus on my work. Today was a special day in other ways; we were preparing a special meal including Edward's requested dishes: roast quail with cream of truffle sauce, seasonal vegetables, and the strawberry flan with cognac he'd pointed out from the French journal.

I stayed working in the kitchen until quite late, skipping dinner with the staff. Chef Peters and I had tasted our creations as we cooked, and between the excitement of the day, and my anticipation for what lay ahead, I had little appetite. Spending time with Edward was proving to be even more wonderful than I'd imagined, and I determinedly pushed my fears and concerns to the back of my mind. As to the matter of my reputation, if I was honest, I was too afraid to face the issue head on. Surely Lord Carlisle would understand the reasons for my extraordinary behaviour...I hoped. Taken on face value, I seriously doubted my actions could be construed as anything other than scandalous.

A small voice that I refused to acknowledge pointed out that it may already be too late to salvage my future: I'd traversed the country with no more chaperone than a couple of young servants; slept in the coarsest of public inns; and masqueraded as a servant for almost a month now, unchaperoned. Then there was the time I'd spent alone with Edward. Avenging my father's murder was what counted the most, I reminded myself. As for the rest...

Doing my best to dismiss my disquieting thoughts, I swallowed the hard lump that formed in my throat and focused on the work at hand. Dinner for the household was served at seven. By eight our efforts were rewarded when numerous requests were given to the serving staff to pass on compliments to the chef for the exquisite delicacies. Even Lady Rosalie, who'd arrived along with the lords Emmett and Jasper just that afternoon from their stay at the Earl of Denali's house party, sent her compliments...an almost unheard of occurrence. I could only imagine she would have choked on her dessert if she'd known who was on the receiving end of her praise.

The Marquess sent his particular thanks to the new pastry chef for fulfilling his special request in such a timely and delicious manner, and I was beaming when I left the kitchens and hurried up to my room. My earlier fears and concerns were forgotten, as excitement and anticipation tingled inside me. It was after eight-thirty, and I would be seeing Edward again at nine, though how and where I wasn't sure.

My feet were aching from standing for so long, so I removed my shoes as soon as I entered my new sitting room before walking through to the bedroom, all the while

wondering what I was supposed to do next. It was then that I saw the silky white garments laid out on the huge bed...and the note that lay beside them.

~AFL~

Dun...dun...dun...

I wasn't intending to write an EPOV for this chapter, as really, we all know what's going on inside Lord Lustward's head, and I'm not sure if you want to read another Lord Hotness inspired fantasy involving all the various positions he's imagined 'having' our sweet, naive Bella! But then I thought of a few little concerns that may be bothering him regarding his father's return and his friend's reaction to his decision...as well as some hopefully more, er...tender thoughts he's thinking towards Bella.

If you want an EPOV, let me know, as I don't mind either way. Otherwise the next chapter to move this story forward (I can't wait!) will be up by next Tuesday at the latest; earlier if I can manage. It is away being beta'ed, so an EPOV won't slow things up, it will just 'fill the gap,' so to speak.

xxx TLSue

Quandary

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

I had no idea this story was going to create such a firestorm of outrage. I feel like I've been scorched after the last chapter but then I reminded myself that for every negative review there are at least 20 positive ones. So...I won't quit, though I wish my kidneys could tolerate alcohol because after the last twenty four hours, I wouldn't mind getting drunk for the first time in my life!

Posted: Friday, December 2nd 2011

Words: 1266

Reputation Outtake

Quandary

EPOV

Pacing before the fire in my room, my mind revisited every conversation I'd had with Bella to date...every encounter...every look. Something about the girl had me in knots...and in a quandary. I'd even entertained the ludicrous and fleeting notion that she could be an *actual* member of society masquerading as a servant. I'd known of foolish gentlemen who'd been duped into accidentally compromising a young lady and thereby been forced to the altar, though usually all that was required was time spent unchaperoned with the chit and maybe a stolen kiss. But no young lady of quality would take a ruse this far or carry it on for so long. Besides, any debutante worth her salt would have been made well aware that one cannot *force* a Marquess to marry. Such a lofty title did not come without its ties attached, and mine was an ironclad expectation that only a union approved and sanctioned by the crown could ever be recognised.

Yet something about Bella did not quite add up. Of course, I understood the lengths and expense her father must have gone to in providing her with the education and simulated good breeding that she portrayed so convincingly. Not that she was able to maintain the deception once she was in my arms, of course. There was no denying the way Bella responded to my touch. Such unfettered passion was not something a true lady of gentility would experience...or dare own if she did.

No...It was her level of innocence—or lack thereof—that had me the most puzzled. At times I could have sworn that Bella had absolutely no idea what I was talking about, but that was impossible. Recalling her far from hysterical response to the attack by the rogues in the market, one could only assume that she had seen a great many unsavoury characters and even more unsavoury proceedings whilst growing up in a public alehouse and inn. When I'd asked her if she had any idea what the devils had planned to do to her, she'd acknowledged that she did. Of course, she'd seemed rather concerned when she'd thought I might go off and leave her unprotected after the attack, but that was to be expected regardless of her background or level of understanding.

Her response to my less than restrained ardour of the morning was the most surprising development, as she'd actually *asked* me how I planned to have her...or rather, how I had *imagined* having her. The reality could well be quite different, as I had no intention of forcing Bella to do anything in which she was not a willing and eager participant. My expectation was that she would be a keen pupil as the speed with which she grasped the barest essentials of kissing—something she'd clearly not had prior experience with...an altogether surprising discovery—assured me of her capabilities and the innate sensuality that her superficial gentility could not disguise.

For one who seemed so untouched and ingenuous, she had not seemed in the least overwrought by my admittedly shocking words. Her only reaction had been an obvious pique in curiosity when I'd said that I'd imagined having her on my desk. Whether that was because she was wondering if I would want to take her seated on the edge of the desk with her skirts bunched around her waist, or if she'd envisioned lying back while I knelt on the ground and pleased her with my mouth, I could not be sure. Equally, she may have been puzzled by the lack of space considering the piles of paper, journals and letters that cluttered the desk and had no specific notion or awareness of the various positions or possibilities available to us. Either way, she did not seem overly perturbed by my suggestions and neither had she reacted as if she was anything but pleased to be the recipient of my attentions.

And yet...there was something about Bella that called to my better instincts...a deep and overwhelming desire to protect her...cherish her...God forbid, *care for* her. While I would not even bother to deny that my desire for us to make love was a powerful driving force, it was not the same need I had felt in the past to lay with just *any* woman. This was not an itch that could be scratched by one of the highly skilled girls who worked in the exclusive establishments frequented by young gentleman when visiting London. It was Bella that I wanted—and *only* Bella—and not just for the relief and joy I fully expected to find within her arms.

Admitting it to myself was difficult, but I didn't just lust after Bella, though that was a considerable part of the attraction, I *liked* her a great deal. I was mesmerised by her beauty, that went without saying, but also intrigued by her intelligence and wit. Numerous times during the day, I would think of something surprising and perceptive that Bella had said during our discussion in the library, and I would think of something equally fascinating that I wanted to share with her...and nobody else. Then there was her smile and the way her face lit up whenever she saw me. She did not try and hide her pleasure at being in my presence nor feign disinterest to supposedly pique my interest, and it was refreshing.

I'd known her for but a short time, but I could no longer imagine a life without Bella in it. There would undoubtedly be hell to pay from my father, but my plans for Bella were neither temporary nor insubstantial. I *would* have her in my life and by my side as much as my circumstances would allow. Emmett and Jasper would undoubtedly be both amused and appalled when the events I'd set in motion came to their attention, and I was well aware that they would take great delight in mocking my obvious infatuation with a serving girl...a *commoner*. I was not looking forward to Rosalie's reaction, and I worried as to how I could keep Bella safe from retribution while we were forced to remain at Worthington Hall. The sooner I could take her away with me and establish her in a residence of her own and with staff dedicated to her wellbeing, the better.

Naturally, I had requested Henson to inform the senior staff of Bella's change in circumstance, doing my best to impress upon him my concern that she be treated with the utmost consideration...but there were no guarantees. Bella deserved to be treated with care and above all respect, but I was not naive enough to think that that would necessarily be the case here in my father's home.

In any other household, if I'd taken her to my bed the staff would have turned a blind eye, and the worst she could have expected was the inevitable jealousy of the girls whose place she had either supplanted or pre-empted. But my father's rules and expectations had filtered down through the layers of class and structure since those very rules were designed to protect the staff at the very bottom of the social strata—young lasses in particular—from abuse. It grated that my actions would be construed in such a light when my intentions were to protect Bella and to make a place for her in my life...the only place that was available. But I had already proven that I could no more stay away from her than fly, and I would cherish and guard her with vehemence.

~AFL~

Yep...Edward is arrogant, domineering, possibly a tad predatory though I

think that's more his infatuated and lustful eagerness and determination to claim Bella as his own. But I do not believe he is irredeemable in this tale, regardless of the direction it is taking. Sometimes situations can look utterly hopeless and a character's actions seem quite despicable (New Moon anyone, when Edward lied about not loving Bella and abandoned her to face Laurent and Victoria alone? Or Eclipse, where Bella is in love with both Edward and Jacob and actually kisses Jake?) and yet things turn out in the end.

Just a reminder from my story summary that no matter how angsty (and lemony) this tale may become or appear...I've promised a HEA. Just saying. :D

xxx TLS

Seduction

Stephenie Meyer created Twilight and kindly lets us share her wonderful world. No copyright infringement intended.

Thank you so much for all the kind support, understanding, and encouraging words of the many readers who took the time to review after my little melt down last chapter. Special thanks to those who had never reviewed A Forbidden love before and took the time to let me know I have their support for this story, and extra special thanks to the many readers who said that they had never reviewed before, ever, but felt compelled to do so in my defence. I am honoured. I also promise to toughen up, as I can see that will be essential if I'm to stick with this crazy fanfic writing caper! :D

Thanks to my betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for their ongoing help and encouragement.

Extra special thanks to Content1 who nominated my AU story, Once Bitten, for a Shimmer Award! (It has reached a really, really, exciting part if you're looking for something a little different to read.)

Just a quick reminder that sometimes a hero can look or act a bit like a villain and say things that he or she doesn't necessarily mean - or they grow and change their mind and ways over the course of the journey. For example, Edward told Bella that he didn't love her, that she would never see him again, and that it would be like he didn't exist in New Moon. And yet we forgave him and it all turned out okay in the end. Just saying...

Posted: Sunday, December 4th 2011

Words: 4109

Chapter 24

Seduction

BPOV

I stood for a long time staring at the garments lying on my bed, the note I'd found beside them clutched tightly in my trembling fingers.

The instructions were simple enough: I was to dress in the clothing provided for me, wear my hair down, and present myself to Edward in his study at nine o'clock. The anticipation that had been curling in my belly all afternoon turned to fear as I began to wonder what was going to happen *after* the hour.

Reaching out, I ran my fingers over the silky, white garments. At a glance I could see they were a nightgown and matching robe, but the only thing they held in common with the ones I'd left behind in Forkston was the colour. The material was virtually sheer, and the style would surely reveal as much as it covered. It was also obvious that there were no underthings, no pantaloons or chemise to add modesty to the outfit.

Backing up, I sat on the edge of an upholstered chair near the wall, unable to take my eyes off the scandalous scraps of material.

What was Edward expecting of me?

I sifted through the vague advice I'd received as I'd approached marriageable age but was none the wiser. My time with Edward in the morning had been wonderful, and it was easy to excuse my behaviour on Edward's mesmerising presence. But I was no longer dazed and befuddled. It was one thing to *want* more of his amazing kisses and caresses, but with a cleared head and the resurgence of my previously absent conscience, I could no longer deny that I had behaved scandalously. Lauren and some of my friends at home in Forkston had indulged in the occasional stolen kiss from a beau when their chaperones were distracted, but I'm sure that's as far as it went. What I'd shared with Edward in his study had gone completely beyond the pale, reinforcing what he'd said about my ruined reputation.

We weren't betrothed or even courting, not that either was a possibility. Even if he knew my true identity, a legitimate courtship wouldn't have been an option, the distance between our relative stations insurmountable. But at least I could have counted on genuine protection...*before* I'd let things go so far. Now if he were to find out who I was he would be horrified, and not just because I'd misled him. He may believe that I was...*wanton*. While I was unsure of the full meaning behind the word, I had a vague memory of it being used as an insult in regard to a girl who had fallen for an unsuitable beau.

Oh...*why* hadn't I taken the time to quiz Jessica and Angela and discover what they knew of such things, as I was sure their knowledge was far more extensive than mine? Instead, I'd held my fledgling infatuation to my breast like a talisman, as if my feelings for Edward alone would keep me safe. Maybe if I'd understood exactly what he was proposing, I would not have been so quick to agree...or so reckless in my

behaviour.

Groaning, I held my head in my hands, my thoughts in turmoil. The reality was that I wanted to be with Edward so badly it hurt. I'd never felt this way before, this sweet, delicious longing that overpowered my senses...and my common sense, and I doubted I would have behaved any differently even if I had taken the time to consider or fully understood the risks.

If only our being together didn't have to be so wrong.

A noise from the doorway brought me quickly to my feet. Edward stood in the entrance to my bedchamber dressed more casually than I'd ever seen a man clothed before: loose black trousers hung low on his hips, his white shirt, unbuttoned part way down his chest, revealed a smattering of dark golden hair while the sleeves of his shirt were rolled back to reveal his forearms.

Gaping, I was unable to drag my eyes away. He was without doubt the most handsome man I'd ever seen...but he did not look pleased.

"It's after nine o'clock, Bella. I'm not accustomed to being kept waiting."

I gripped my hands together in front of my butterfly-filled stomach. "I'm sorry, I just...I couldn't..." I stammered, pointing a shaking finger towards the scraps of clothing on the bed.

Edward's expression softened, and he walked slowly towards me.

"It's all right, there's no need to be afraid," he said reassuringly as he came to a halt, his body bare inches from my own.

I stepped back, stumbling against the chair, and he reached out to steady me, his right hand taking hold of my left and the other coming to rest at my waist, the position reminding me of the beginning of a dance. Tears pricked at my eyes as I realised I would never dance with Edward in public. While I still wasn't sure what it was he wanted of me, I knew that our relationship was destined to be over within minutes if I reneged on our agreement, or of a clandestine nature...illicit...shameful...if I were to proceed. Both options sounded horrid, but the thought of being unable to spend time with Edward was almost too much to bear.

Reaching up, he wiped away a tear that had spilled over onto my cheek.

"What is it?" he murmured, leaning in so close that his words seemed to brush

against my cheek.

"I...I can't do this," I stammered.

"This?" He leaned back a little so that he could look me in the eye. One of his eyebrows rose towards his tousled copper-tinged hair, his piercing green eyes threatening to mesmerise me...again. "Do you mean that you can't wear the negligee I chose for you?"

I blinked rapidly for a moment, willing my thoughts to some semblance of order.

"They, they're...indecent," I whispered.

Edward chuckled. "It's not as if I was planning on having you wear them for very long."

I frowned for a moment as I attempted to make sense of his remark, and then I gasped, my mouth hanging open as my imagination grappled with the idea of my being *naked* before Edward.

"Ah, Bella, you really are an innocent, aren't you?" He smiled his gorgeous half-smile, the hand at my waist tightening as he drew me up against his chest. "I thought it might be an act, but you genuinely have no idea what I'm talking about. I can't for the life of me fathom how your father managed it. You grew up in a *public inn*, for heaven's sake," he said, shaking his head before placing a gentle kiss on my forehead.

It took every ounce of self-discipline and the vestiges of ingrained morality I possessed to form the words that came out of my mouth. "I mean, I can't...be with you...like this."

Both of Edward's eyebrows rose almost disappearing beneath the tangled hair that swept across his forehead.

"You're refusing me?" He seemed astounded by the notion.

"It's not right," I managed to utter. The feel of his long lean body pressing against mine did very strange things to my equilibrium...and my nerves...and parts of my body I dared not think about.

"Not right?" Edward sounded more amused than annoyed.

"We're not...not...*married*," I muttered, my eyes lowering with embarrassment, the heat radiating from my face so intense that I felt as if I were aflame.

Edward let his hands drop from my body and stepped back.

"Married," he said flatly, running his hands roughly through his hair. "Bella, you're a servant. Surely you must realise that marriage between us is out of the question?"

"Of course, I know..." I said, chewing on my lower lip while I tried to find the right words to gain his support without betraying my situation. "I'm not your typical servant, m'lord. I was raised...differently."

"I'll say," Edward muttered with obvious frustration. "Look, Bella, you need to face the reality of your situation. I'm sure your father had plans to marry you off to some well-to-do merchant, possibly even a local country squire or retired officer, but your circumstances have changed. You are penniless, orphaned, without support or guardianship and, unless this has escaped your attention, utterly irresistible to the entire male population regardless of their station. I am offering you my *protection*, Bella. Do you have any idea what that entails? I will keep you safe from all the blackguards and rogues who won't care about your feelings, or sensitivities, or gaining your permission before they have their way with you." Edward encircled my wrists with his hands and gave them a shake. "They will *force* you, Bella...hurt you."

"And you won't?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"No, I won't hurt you...but I can't resist you either," he said harshly.

I flinched at his words, and he sighed heavily before pulling me into his embrace. The feel of his arms around me, his hands moving gently over my back, was warm and enticing, but my conscience wasn't ready for me to surrender just yet.

"What if I were to change my mind and...refuse your protection?" I asked looking up into his breathtakingly beautiful face.

Edward's eyebrows rose again. "Do you honestly believe that is an option? That I could let you leave knowing what would become of you?"

"Couldn't I just stay here?" I pleaded softly, my heart pounding loudly in my ears.

Edward groaned and closed his eyes. "I'm not a saint, Bella," he ground out between his teeth, before leaning down to capture my startled gaze with his own. "I'm tired of trying to stay away from you. You need to understand that if you remain

at Worthington Hall, you *will* end up beneath me in my bed. So your options, as I see them," he continued, ignoring my stunned expression, "are to leave Worthington Hall, facing certain ruin, or to accept my offer of protection."

I gasped, astonished by Edward's words. He was right about one thing; I wouldn't survive if I left Worthington Hall without assistance. I'd always had my father, the shield of my position and status, and my friends in Forkston to shelter me. Now I was alone for the first time in my life, and after my experience in the marketplace, I was afraid.

"You would leave me no choice?" I murmured, dismayed. "Is that not force under a different guise?"

Edward dropped his arms from around me and turned away, his hands fisted at his sides. "I would *never* force you, Bella. If you want to leave, I will help you find a position elsewhere, though I won't be there to protect you. I cannot guarantee that you'll be safe working in another household." Spinning back to face me, I saw a look of anguish on his face. "I thought you felt the same way I do...that you *wanted* to be with me," he challenged, his voice sounded so bleak that I shivered.

"I do!" I cried as tears welled in my eyes.

"Then accept my offer," he pleaded, and I felt the last of my resolve falter and begin to fail. With a sick feeling in my stomach, I faced the fact that I'd been in denial, ignoring the reality of Edward's words. But if what he'd said was true, then my reputation was already ruined. When my identity was discovered, society would believe the worst of me, and the truth or motivation behind my actions would matter little. The hope I had held to that Lord Carlisle would assist me to avenge my father's death was also wavering. Who would believe my word against that of Lord James...now?

With my hopes crumbling, I saw my future stretching bleak and empty before me, with no idea what to do or what would become of me. Was it so terrible of me to want to be with Edward while I could, gathering memories that would have to last me for a lifetime?

"What would be required of me if I accept?" I whispered, closing the distance between us and raising my hands to rest them against his chest. I couldn't help but be flattered by the relief I saw in Edward's expression. He so clearly wanted to be with me even if the terms were not ones I would have normally expected...or accepted.

Grasping my hands in his he lifted them to his mouth and tenderly kissed the back of my fingers. "What do you understand of the ways of a man with a woman?" he asked, his tone gentle, and I shrugged one shoulder slightly.

"When a lady, I mean a...a *girl*, is married she must submit to her husband." I hesitated, and he nodded, motioning for me to continue. "She must endure silently in order to become with child and fulfil her duty," I parroted the incomprehensible instructions I'd received which had left me with more questions than answers.

"Good God," Edward groaned. "I thought it was only the upper classes who subjugated their females with such rot. Your father must have been determined to see you wed above your station if that was the sort of instruction he provided."

Of course it was not my father who'd told me such things but the neighbouring ladies who'd taken a motherless young debutante under their wings. The preparations for my first season in London had been well underway before Lord James' arrival had thrown my life and plans into disarray.

Edward frowned for a moment before trying another tack.

"What of lovemaking, Bella? You must have some ideas or experience to draw from?"

I stared at him, nonplussed. The only knowledge I had on the matter had come from listening to the girlish nonsense of the Merryton sisters and their friends. Lauren had been obsessed with attracting the attention of every available young gentleman in the district.

"Umm...lovemaking?" I raised my brows, and Edward nodded for me to continue. "Well, it has to do with courtship, gifts, poetry, flowers?"

Edward's beautifully sculptured lips rose into the half-smile I found so affecting.

"Hmmm...When I take you to live in London I do plan on showering you with gifts: gowns, jewellery, whatever your heart desires. You are going to take the demimonde by storm, Bella. As for poetry, I am well versed, of course. I can even woo you with *French* poetry if you prefer." He quirked his eyebrows. "But since every room in this mausoleum is already overflowing with floral arrangements, I can't quite see the point in gathering more flowers."

I snapped my mouth shut when I realised it was once again hanging open.

London? Gifts? And what or *who* were the demimonde?

My mind spun with unanswered questions, but Edward's next words distracted me from asking them.

"I mean lovemaking, in the sense of a man, making love to a woman...with kisses, touches, bodies."

"Oh," I whispered, my knees going weak, but with Edward holding me so tightly it didn't particularly matter.

"If...if I accept your offer there will be *kisses* involved?" To my embarrassment my voice ended on a squeak.

"You like kisses, do you?" Edward smirked.

"Well, I only have today's experiences to go by, but yes, they were very pleasant."

"Pleasant?" Edward's incredibly expressive eyebrows drew together in annoyance. Before I had a chance to apologise for my inadvertent offence, he pulled me back into his arms and leant down and captured my mouth with his own.

This was a very different kiss than the ones we'd shared that morning. Where they had been mostly tender and sweet, this was intensely passionate and somehow...consuming. One of Edward's hands held my head firmly in place while the other pressed my body tightly against him as he deepened the kiss, his warm lips moulding mine to his first from one direction and then another. When something soft and wet pressed against the seam of my lips, I gasped, and he took immediate advantage, invading my open mouth with his tongue. With determined, questing movements, he explored my mouth from the inside while his lips continued shaping, tasting, and teasing it from without.

It was the most shocking thing I had ever experienced.

The most intimate.

The most amazing.

Pleasure from Edward's kiss invaded my senses, and I tentatively allowed my own tongue to join with his. The groan my action provoked reverberated from deep within Edward's chest, and I moaned in response. Then I tensed, stunned at my reaction. I didn't understand what was happening to me, but one thing I knew: I

wanted more...more of Edward...more of his kisses.

When he finally released my mouth, I was panting.

"If you accept my offer," he said, his voice hoarse but determined, "there will be a great number of kisses involved. In fact, I plan on kissing every single square inch of your body many, many times over."

My shock at his words was so deep, I couldn't respond. People didn't do such things...did they?

"I mean every word," Edward murmured, reading my expression as easily as if he could read my mind. He reached up to skilfully remove the pins that held my hair in place, and within seconds it tumbled down around my shoulders.

"And we won't be stopping with kisses, Bella. I don't want you to be under any illusions," he whispered against my cheek while his fingers combed through my hair, untangling the tousled locks. "I plan on making you mine...completely...utterly...intimately mine, our bodies joined together as I claim you as my own."

With his final pronouncement, Edward nuzzled my neck, his hands in my hair so that I couldn't pull away...if I'd been so inclined. I was mesmerised, bewildered, but I had absolutely no desire to be anywhere but exactly where I was...in Edward's arms.

"Joined?" I whimpered when I could find my voice.

Edward's lips journeyed from the nape of my neck, up to my ear and then slowly down along my jaw line sending tingles of sensation racing along my nerves to spark like fireworks when they reached the sensitive endings.

"We'll start with touching, Bella." Rubbing my chin with his nose, Edward then slowly worked his way towards the corner of my mouth. At the same time he gently disentangled his hands from my hair and smoothed his fingers down my arms, stopping at the edges of my sleeves. With deft flicks of his fingers the buttons came undone, and Edward's long fingers reached beneath the heavy material to caress the tender skin of my wrists and forearms.

I moaned, swaying against his body, and he groaned again in response. Then, releasing my wrists, he went to work on the buttons at the base of my throat, working rapidly down the front of my blouse. I blinked, staring down in shock as the

coarse material parted revealing the flimsy chemise beneath. With sure movements, he slid the blouse off my shoulders, frowning when he saw the bruises that ringed my upper arm.

"Ahh...Bella," Edward murmured as he bent his head and gently kissed the tender flesh. "This is exactly what I'm talking about. You *need* me to take care of you." With that he pushed my blouse further down my arms, letting it fall to the floor.

Finally, I reacted, gasping as I lifted my hands to cover my breasts, my nipples clearly visible through the worn material of my chemise. But Edward captured my hands in one of his and held them away from my body.

"It's a sin to hide such beauty," he murmured, his voice a husky whisper.

Reaching out with his free hand, he touched my chin and then slowly dragged his fingers down my throat, over the dip between my collarbones, and then down the middle of my chest. When he reached the band at the waist of my skirt, he used it to tug me closer. The letting go of my hands, Edward reached around to the back of my skirt where he dealt with the clasps and closures so quickly, I barely realised what was happening. Before I could react, my skirt and petticoat tumbled to the floor, leaving me standing in nothing but my knee length chemise and stockings.

"I, oh...no..." I stuttered incoherently. Reaching out, I intended pushing him away, but I ended up clutching his arms helplessly when his hands cupped my bottom and pulled my body tight against his own, that now familiar hardness pressing against my lower belly. It couldn't possibly be his gun...not here...not now. But I had no idea what it was.

"Shh, Bella, beautiful, Bella. Trust me," Edward whispered against my ear. "Don't you want to know what I will require of you? Aren't you just a little bit curious?"

I groaned as his words and touch tempted me beyond my limits.

"If you accept my offer, I will touch you in ways that will make your blood sing and your body tremble. You'll beg for more."

"Beg?" I whispered hoarsely.

"Oh yes, I'll have your consent before this night is through."

Before I could protest, Edward shocked me to silence, reaching up to cup my cotton covered breasts with his hands.

"Touching your breasts will be a big part of our agreement," he said on a groan as he weighed them in his hands and then began to caress and knead the mounds with his fingers.

I stared down at Edward's hands covering my breasts, too stunned by the sensations his touch created in my sensitive flesh to do anything but gasp. They ached and tingled, seeming to swell beneath his touch, and when he slowly circled my clearly visible nipples with his fingers, and then pressed them firmly with the palms of his hands, I crumpled against him.

"Ahhh," he moaned, and swung me up into his arms before carrying me over to the bed. I could barely make sense of his actions, returning to reality when I felt the firm mattress and soft pillow beneath me. Blinking, wide-eyed, I gazed up at Edward who sat on the bed leaning over my prone form.

"I've hungered for this moment, Bella," he murmured, his eyes raking my barely covered body. "Would you like to know what comes next?" he asked as his hand slid slowly along the length of my stocking-clad leg, starting at my ankle and then moving over my knee and up under the hem of my chemise.

"More touching?" I whispered, what little was left of my determination to resist his advances swept aside by the torrent of sensations his gaze and caress evoked.

Edward smiled. "Oh yes, lots more touching." His hand reached the top of my stocking, and again his skill and speed at undoing the ties that held my stocking in place surprised me. Before I knew it he was rolling the stocking down my leg, removing it completely, before repeating the process on the other leg, his hands skimming gently over my skin as he exposed it to his view.

I moaned at his touch, and then covered my mouth with my hands.

"Oh, no you don't." Edward shook his head and reached up to lift my hand away from my mouth before placing a kiss on the centre of my palm. "I've been waiting to hear the sounds of your passion...don't deny me now."

With sudden movements, he pulled his shirt off over his head, kicked off his leather loafers, and lay beside me on the bed.

He was stunning, sculpted to perfection, and I couldn't drag my eyes away from the beauty of his chest, the breadth of his shoulders, and the rippling muscles that banded his stomach. I gripped the sheet beneath me to keep from reaching out to touch his pale, ivory skin.

"So, Bella, shall I show you what will come next if you accept my offer of protection and you allow me to make you mine?" he murmured, lying beside me with one hand supporting his head while the other rested on my cloth-covered belly, teasing little circles around my navel. My eyes flickered from his bare chest, to his sculptured shoulders, to his achingly beautiful face, my mind too overwhelmed to form a coherent answer.

~AFL~

Well, I don't know about you guys, but I don't think I'd be able to think straight either!

Thanks for your support and for taking the time to review. Next chapter will be up Wednesday: the BPOV that follows on from here, as I don't think any of us could handle a delay!

xxx TLSue

Surrender

Stephenie Meyer is the true Queen of UST. I actually like to see things resolved occasionally...and absolutely NO fading to black!

Thanks to my wonderful betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, for nursing me through the last week (600 reviews and about 30 or 40 flames...but not so many since I disabled anonymous reviews! LOL!)

I have a feeling this chapter is going to cause me a world of trouble, but all I can say is that I did warn you. To those reviewers begging me to change the direction of this story and have Carlisle come home and rescue Bella from the arrogant, manipulative clutches of Lord Can't-Keep-It-In-His-Pantward before he can have his wicked way with her...sorry. I guess I could have written a PG version of this story (minus Edward's imagination, of course.) But I really wanted to write a very naughty fantasy after being #ahem# inspired by some of the dark and steamy stories I'd read on FFn - without the BDSM, abuse, character deaths, cheating, and other sundry nasties that tend to pop up when you least expect it. No offence to the likes of MOTU, but I just never got the whole 'pain is pleasure' deal.

I also never thought I'd have the courage to actually show this story to anyone. But hey...what did I have to be afraid of? #snicker# And to think, I almost went with one of my other ideas for a period tale: Edward as the all powerful Sheik and Bella the young travelling companion to a grand lady who is kidnapped and sold into his harem (and you think I've got a hard time ahead of me guaranteeing the HEA in this story!) Then there's pirate Edward, who storms the boat that young governess Bella is travelling on and offers the freedom/lives of the other passengers in exchange for her submission. Then there's, well...I could go on and on. I have read WAY too many of these types of stories...and they are most definitely NOT PG. But I promise, everything always works out just wonderfully in the end no matter how impossibly dark things may become or how utterly hopeless the heroine's situation may appear. ;)

Enough with trying to defend myself...on with my torrid tale!

Posted: Wednesday, December 7th 2011

Words: 4521

~AFL~

"So, Bella, shall I show you what will come next if you accept my offer of protection and allow me to make you mine?" Edward lay beside me, one hand supporting his head while the other rested on my cloth-covered belly, teasing little circles around my navel.

My eyes flickered from his bare chest, to his sculptured shoulders, to his achingly beautiful face, my mind too overwhelmed to form a coherent answer.

Surrender

BPOV

"I'll take that as a yes, then," he chuckled softly and reached to untie the bow at the neckline of my chemise, tugging the cords through the eyelets and removing the lacing that crisscrossed to my waist. I watched my chest rise and fall with my rapid breaths as he slowly drew the material of my chemise apart, revealing the pale curves of my breasts and allowing the dusky pink nipples to come into view.

I couldn't quite believe this was happening, but neither could I bring myself to protest.

"Ah, Bella, you're so beautiful." Edward's eyes roamed over my bare torso, and then he drew one finger slowly up the naked skin in the valley between my breasts and then back down again.

I froze, holding my breath.

He repeated the move, his finger lazily detouring towards the underside of my breast before slowly circling the rounded flesh.

"Your breasts are surprisingly full for one so slender," he murmured, his finger continuing its slow, torturous journey towards the centre of my breast. "And such lovely, dark, pink nipples. I can't wait to taste them." His words coincided with his fingers finally reaching the peaking bud, his hand closing over my naked breast and squeezing.

I gasped.

Edward groaned and lowered his head, replacing his hands with his mouth. I stared in shock as he planted kiss after kiss on the curves of my breasts before reaching out and flicking his tongue over my nipple. I whimpered as he drew the entire nub into his mouth and gently suckled. His free hand covered my other breast, caressing and stroking, teasing the nipple into an impossibly hard peak.

It was too much: the sensations, the intimacy, the strange, sweet pleasure radiating out from my breasts and settling into a throbbing ache low in my belly. I moaned, my head tossing from side to side on the soft pillow.

I needed Edward to stop.

I needed him to never...ever...ever...stop.

"It's all right," he crooned as he trailed hot, wet kisses across the valley between my breasts before capturing the other nipple and suckling it deep into his mouth. "This is just the beginning of what we'll do when you're mine," he said between kissing, suckling, and flicking his tongue across the extraordinarily sensitive bud, "though I plan on giving considerable attention to these utterly adorable breasts."

I was lost, all thoughts of reputation and consequence well and truly buried beneath the onslaught of his lips and hands.

"Oh...oh, Edward..." I cried softly.

He paused and looked up across my flushed chest and into my wide eyes.

"That's the first time I've heard you say my name."

He climbed over my body and then nestled his hips between my thighs. With his weight pressing my hips into the mattress, he supported his upper body on his elbows with that strange hardness pressing against my belly.

"I like it," he murmured in a musing tone. "In fact, I'd like you to use my name whenever we're alone."

Staring into my eyes, he slowly lowering his mouth to mine.

This time when he kissed me, I responded. My arms rose to reach around his back, my fingers marvelling at the touch of his warm bare skin, so smooth over taut bands of muscle. My mouth opened beneath the pressure of his lips, my tongue tangling with his as soon as I felt its questing touch.

We moaned in unison, deepening the kiss even further.

"Say yes, Bella. Say you accept," he urged.

The words seemed superfluous. I'd gone too far...there was nowhere safe to go back to...but still I hesitated.

Edward groaned hoarsely and then chuckled. "That's all right. I'll have your assent before the night is through...certainly before I enter you."

Enter me? His tongue had already plumbed the depths of my mouth. I frowned, wondering what else he could mean.

Reaching up, he smoothed my wrinkled forehead with his thumb.

"You really have no idea what I'm talking about, have you?" he murmured between short, sensual, tugging kisses. All the while, his lower body rocked against the cradle of my hips.

I shook my head, shyly agreeing with his assessment.

"How about if I explain what I'm doing each step of the way? Would that reassure you?"

I nodded, biting on my lower lip.

Edward closed his eyes. "Ahh...what you do to me, Bella." He kissed me again, pulling my lip out from between my teeth, sucking it gently into his mouth and caressing it with his tongue.

It felt so wonderful, I moaned, moving restlessly on the bed.

Still kissing me, he rolled off my body and slid his hands up beneath my chemise, pushing it up to my waist before he undid the ties at my waist and began to draw my pantaloons down over my hips.

"Wha..?" I exclaimed, pulling away from his enticing mouth to protest.

"It's all right; I just need to get these out of the way," he murmured calmly while gently drawing the pantaloons down my legs and away from my body.

I whimpered. My breasts were exposed to his view, and now, so was the most

private area of my body.

"Shh." He smiled his mesmerising smile and tugged at the chemise that was bunched around my middle. With purposeful movements, he slid the garment off my shoulders, releasing my arms before lifting my bottom off the mattress as he guided the material past my hips. "It's better this way, believe me. The feel of our naked bodies pressed together is not something I plan on denying either of us."

"Ohhh..." I whimpered as he drew one hand along the length of my bare leg and settled for a brief moment over the mound of curly dark hair at the juncture of my thighs. Then he whispered his fingers softly across my stomach, circling around my navel, before coming to rest squeezing my breast.

"Shall I tell you what comes next?" he whispered leaning close and running his tongue around the shell of my ear.

Still moving restlessly on the bed, I was unable to form the words to reply, only knowing that—despite my nervousness—I did not want him to stop.

"Now I'm going to touch you here." His fingers trailed back down across my belly and began to tangle in the curly hair that covered my most private area.

"But...but why?" I asked finding my voice, his shocking actions goading a response from my befuddled mind.

Edward chuckled and then trailed his mouth down my neck before nuzzling his mouth against my breast. All the while his fingers continued their intimate exploration of the tender flesh between my thighs.

"Because this is where I will enter your body," he said as he gently nudged my legs apart. I tensed my thighs together tightly.

"Open for me, Bella," he urged, his voice gentle but firm.

I hesitated, absorbing the feel of his finger slowly sliding up and down my hidden flesh, the pleasure his touch elicited incredibly unexpected, intensely shocking, but oh...so...very...very nice.

"Bella," he insisted, and I let my legs inch gradually apart. His hand moved lower and his fingers carefully parted the sensitive folds. "Do you know what this is for?" he asked as one long finger slowly circled around the opening he'd revealed.

I shook my head, as I didn't think Edward was referring to the monthly troubles that plagued all females.

"This is the entrance to your delectable little body."

"It is?" My surprise was obvious.

"Let me show you," he rasped, his voice dropping to an even lower tone. I sat up a little, leaning on my elbows, so that I could watch as he slid one long finger inside me. "Ahhh...Bella, you're so soft, like velvet...and wet. You're going to feel so good, so tight. I'm going to make you feel things you've never felt before, wonderful things...I promise."

I was beginning to believe he was right. The feel of his finger moving inside me was shocking and yet incredibly wonderful at the same time. Then another finger joined the first and my body arched off the mattress, pressing against his hand. His fingers were tight inside me, stretching and probing as he pushed deeper and then slowly withdrew.

"Oh, Edward," I cried, stunned and amazed at the sensations his touch created.

"You like that, don't you?" he murmured, repeating the action of his fingers again and again, each time a little deeper, stretching a little further. Then his thumb reached up through the curls and teased the little nub hidden there that had no purpose that I knew of...until now.

I froze, drawing in a deep breath, the sensation his touch engendered too intense to bear. Deep inside my lower belly, my muscles clenched and squeezed Edward's fingers tightly.

With a groan, he moved one of his long, black-clad legs to rest between my thighs and rocked against my hip. His bare chest pushed against my breasts, forcing me back down upon the mattress, while his fingers continued their magic. I looked up into his slow smile and smoky gaze, and another one of those unexpected spasms contracted deep in my belly. It was like a cramp in my muscles, but one that caused pleasure rather than pain.

I wanted to feel it again.

"I can't wait much longer," Edward's voice was hoarse and gravelly. "I need to be inside you. Please, Bella. Say you accept."

"But...you're already inside me," I whimpered, staring up into eyes that had darkened to a deep sea green. What else was there?

"Oh, there's more." He did that mind-reading thing again and then slowly withdrew his fingers from my body.

I couldn't imagine more, but then, I hadn't come close to imagining any of the things we'd done so far this night.

"Have you ever seen a naked man, Bella?" he asked, and I looked down to where his hand rested at the waistline of his pants and shook my head.

"I've seen drawings of statues, paintings," I offered.

Edward's laugh startled me, but then he reached out to caress the side of my face, his expression tender.

"Did you know that a man's body changes when he is aroused?"

"Aroused?"

"Yes, sexually." He frowned at my perplexed expression. "When he is preparing to join himself to a woman...to mate."

My mouth formed an O of surprise.

"His member, his sex, grows longer and harder."

I puzzled at his words. How did a part of one's body change shape and size?

"Maybe it would be easiest if I just show you..." he murmured and began to undo the buttons on his pants.

I couldn't look away. I was far too curious, and though my body had calmed a little from the frenzied state I'd experienced when his fingers were inside me, my innate modesty noticeably absent.

Watching with rapt attention, my eyes followed the path of his fingers as he undid the buttons down the front of his pants and then slowly slid them off his legs, leaving only his underclothes. His drawers did not sit flat but tented out as if a large object were underneath. Whatever was behind the material moved, and I jerked back with a start, staring up at Edward's amused expression with a shocked look.

"It's all right; you don't have to be afraid. It's all me...just the aroused version."

My breathing came in short, hard pants as I stared, transfixed while he slowly pushed his underclothes down over his hips before kicking them off completely. I gulped, disbelieving at what came into sight.

"It's just my erection, Bella," he said huskily, taking the long, muscular-looking shaft in his hand and rubbing it slowly up and down from its thick base to the sculptured head. It sprang from a nest of curly dark hair, located at the juncture of his thighs.

When I realised that I was gaping, I snapped my mouth shut. Then I looked up to see Edward watching me, his eyes dark and intense, before my attention was drawn again to his enormous member.

"Wh..." I swallowed hard and then managed to whisper. "What are you going to do with...that?" I think on one level I already knew, but my mind refused to accept the seemingly impossible.

Edward smiled wolfishly and moved to cover my body with his own, his newly exposed member becoming trapped between us in the process. I could feel it pulsing against my lower belly. So *that* had been the hard object I'd felt pressing against me on all those different occasions. It wasn't a weapon after all!

"I'm going to put it inside you, Bella," he growled, rocking his lower body against me.

I thought about this for a moment, remembering the feel of his fingers stroking inside me my sensitive, hidden flesh, and then I panicked.

"No...no!" I cried, struggling to escape from beneath him. My efforts were futile. All I managed to do was alter our positions so that the hard, throbbing flesh that frightened me so much ended up moving between my legs. It came to rest firmly wedged against the opening to my body, and I froze, my breath coming in terrified gasps.

"It's too big," I whimpered, hating that I sounded so cowardly but too afraid to pretend otherwise. "You'll hurt me."

"Shh, Bella, it's all right." He soothed, gently stroking the curve of my cheek. "It's not too big; your body will expand to accept me. But I won't deny that it will hurt a little the first time."

"The...the first time?" I searched his eyes for answers and reassurance.

"Bella, you're a virgin. Do you know what that means?"

"Just that I'm supposed to stay one until I'm married," I whispered reluctantly. The last thing I wanted to think about was the warning I'd been given as I'd moved from childhood and began to grow into a young woman...or my old life.

Edward moved a little so that one of his hands was able to reach down between us, and I trembled as his fingers gently entered me again. He reached inside and then expanded his fingers. I winced at the slight twinge of pain he caused.

"Can you feel that?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

I nodded shakily.

"There is a membrane just inside the entrance to a woman's body that breaks the first time a man penetrates her."

"If...if you do that," I swallowed hard, "I won't be a virgin anymore?"

"No, you won't," Edward groaned, rocking his hips against me in rhythm with his questing fingers. "You'll be something better."

"Better?" I whimpered, as he increased the speed of his strokes.

"Yes, Bella. You'll be mine...all mine."

His questing fingers pressed deeper, causing my belly to clench with pleasure. We moaned in unison, and he moved to replace his fingers with the blunt head of his aroused member. I stiffened and he paused, pressing firmly against me but not yet inside, and I wondered how much pain his taking my virginity would cause.

"Trust me, Bella; I promise I'll make this good for you. Your safe with me, but you need to relax."

On one level I did trust him, but rather than relaxing I felt my body tense as I remembered those men from the market. Tears fell soundlessly down my cheeks as horrifying pictures formed in my mind. I hadn't understood the threats and taunts I'd heard since leaving Forkston...until now. This is what those evil men had wanted to do to me, what they'd threatened.

Edward groaned and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Ah, Bella, Bella, sweetheart," he murmured, leaning down to kiss me softly, before wiping the tears from my face. "Please don't be afraid. I'm sorry if I frightened you. I want you so badly...more than I've wanted anything in my life, but if you ask me to leave...I will go."

Swallowing down my fear, I did my best to clear my muddled thoughts as I considered my options. I didn't want anyone but Edward touching me, kissing me, doing *anything* to me...ever. While I was afraid of what he was about to do, the thought of it being anyone else was far more frightening. And if I was honest, an even worse fear lurking in the back of my mind was of *not* doing this with him while I had the chance. If my father had still been alive, I would have behaved very differently...I wouldn't even *be* in this predicament. But with my father gone, I had no idea what my future might hold. What I did know was that I couldn't imagine any sort of life without Edward which meant being willing to take what he was able to offer me, even though in my heart I wanted so much more.

"All right," I whispered.

Edward raised his eyebrows. "You want me to go?"

"No, I want you to stay. But there's something I want, no, *need* to say first," I murmured quietly, unable to meet his eyes.

"What is it, my sweet?" he asked, gently stroking my face with his hand. I hesitated, and he lifted my chin, capturing my gaze with his mesmerising emerald eyes. "Just say it, Bella."

Taking a deep breath, I began. "I don't know if you want to hear this, but I need you to know the depth of my feelings; that this isn't something I agree to lightly or only because my options are so limited." *Non existent*, my conscience mocked, but I carried on regardless. "I want you to know that I love you, Edward, and I only want *you*...touching me, kissing me, *inside* of me...only you...ever."

Edward's eyes widened, and then he lowered his head to kiss me deeply...passionately...his lips warm and firm as they shaped and tasted mine again and again. My hands tangled in his silky hair as I found myself responding with a depth of passion I had not known I was capable of. The kiss went on for so long I became lost in the feel, the wonder, the sheer joy of it. All my fears and worries dissolved under the onslaught of his mouth and hands and body.

Then he surged forward from his hips and drove his long, hard member deep inside me.

I gasped, shocked by the sudden pain and the incredible sensation of being stretched...penetrated...filled. The pain quickly subsided, and I almost laughed with relief. It hadn't been anywhere near as bad as I'd feared.

Edward froze and studied me, his expression tense.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice a gravelly rasp.

I nodded shyly and there was no disguising the look of relief that swept across his features which was quickly overtaken by an expression of fierce, masculine determination. Then he began to move, and my eyelids fluttered closed as the most incredible feelings I had ever experienced in my life flooded my senses.

"Oh...my..." I cried softly as he slowly withdrew and then gradually pushed his way back inside my body.

Carefully he established a rhythm...out and then in, out and then in...pushing a little harder, a little deeper each time. I opened my eyes, watching him watching me as his body moved over me, his hips rocking against mine as he moved inside me. Of their own volition my arms encircled his back, my hands stroking the warm, silky skin stretched tight over his flexing muscles.

Holding his weight on his forearms, his chest brushed my breasts with each stroke of his body. Then he pushed deeper and I moaned, my body arching up to meet his invasion.

"Yes, Bella, oh yes..." he groaned between dropping hot, wet kisses on my lips, my jaw, the curve of my neck. His hand reached to cup my breast, squeezing and stroking the sensitive nipple in time with his penetration of my body.

"You're so beautiful, Bella...so...damned...lovely..." he murmured against my lips and then filled my mouth with his tongue in rhythm with the surging of his lower body against and inside me.

Moaning around his velvet tongue, the pleasure built and built as if my body was striving toward some unknown destination. The internal muscles I'd been barely aware of before this night clenched inside me, triggering an almost torturous spasm of pleasure. Edward groaned and thrust harder, then his hand left my breast, trailing down my body to my hip and around under the curve of my bottom to the

back of my thigh, where he urged me to lift my leg up to cradle his hips. I mirrored the move with my other leg and then moaned at the even greater sensation this new angle created.

"Oh, Edward," I cried softly as he nuzzled the curve of my neck.

With each stroke of his body I felt the pressure building higher. Then another exquisite spasm tightened my lower belly, causing my body to clench tightly around his erection.

"Yes, Bella, yes..." He groaned and increased his pace.

The pressure was so intense I felt somehow...desperate, consumed by an insatiable hunger. Then my muscles tensed impossibly tight, and the breath caught in my lungs. For a long, fraught moment I teetered on a precipice, every muscle straining...reaching...for something, but I didn't know what.

Then the pressure broke, and I cried out in shock.

Pleasure like I'd never known existed radiated out from the core of my body in ever-increasing circles. Sensations of ecstasy flooded through me, racing along my nerves and shimmering over my skin like ripples on a sun-drenched pond. My toes curled, and I moaned as the pleasure pulsed through my belly, my breasts, and across my face, slackening my features.

"Bella!" Edward cried loudly as he surged inside me even harder...once...twice...three times. Then his muscles tensed tightly, before he collapsed against me, shuddering and groaning.

Clinging to him as my body continued to tremble and pulse, our hearts raced and breaths panted in unison, before slowly...slowly...we returned to reality. A long moment passed then Edward lifted his weight off my body and looked down into my eyes.

"I knew you'd be like this," he smiled tenderly.

My eyebrows rose, asking the question I was too stunned to form with words.

"Responsive...sensual...but you amaze me," he sighed.

"Why?" I whispered.

"Because *that* was incredible, Bella, and only your first time." He shook his head, clearly bemused.

I didn't know what to think of Edward's words. He was clearly complimenting me, but for something I was nowhere near close to comprehending.

"It was good?" I heard myself ask, surprising myself with my boldness.

"Oh yes, better than good...the best," he murmured as his eyes closed and his lips found mine. We kissed for a long, lovely moment while he continued to stroke my face and body with gentle, soothing caresses. Then his member moved inside me, triggering another of those delicious contractions and a ripple of sweet sensation shuddered through me again. I gasped, clutching at his shoulders, and he smiled against my mouth.

"Oh, Bella, you are temptation incarnate. I could stay here all night...but that *was* your first time." Sighing, he carefully withdrew his still erect member from my body. "And I'm not that much of a beast."

I winced as he pulled all the way out and he paused, reaching down to gently stroke my cheek.

"Sorry I was a little rough. I wasn't expecting to get quite so carried away." He smiled ruefully before rising from the bed, leaving me sprawled across the mattress. I couldn't seem to move but lay drowsily watching Edward as he walked across the room to the dresser with the wash-basin, momentarily mesmerised by the sight of his naked body. Then realizing his intention, I quickly averted my eyes, the reality of what I'd done coming crashing down on me as I scrambled to cover myself with the bedcover.

It was then that I saw a smear of blood on my thigh. My monthly visitor had ended a couple of days before and I hadn't expected it to return. Cringing, I imagined what he must think and glanced his way. He'd finished with the wash water and pulled on his pants and then came to sit beside me on the bed.

"Here," he said softly, handing me a damp wash cloth. "You'll want to clean yourself."

Blushing crimson, I stammered an incoherent apology.

His brows lowered, his expression puzzled. "You're apologising for being a virgin?"

I blinked at him, confused.

"It's normal to bleed your first time, Bella."

"Oh," I whispered, remembering what he'd had told me about the membrane that would tear when he entered me.

Edward stood and turned his back to me, reaching for his shirt. I took the opportunity to quickly clean myself and then stowed the cloth beneath the bed; I would deal with it in the morning. When he'd pulled on his shirt, he moved to the dresser and rummaged amongst my few possessions, before returning with the old nightgown Mrs. Cope had given me on my arrival.

"Not quite the quality of the gown I'd intended for you to wear tonight, but I imagine you'll feel more comfortable in something familiar." He smiled and motioned for me to sit up so he could help me dress.

I blushed at the intimacy of his actions, a totally incongruous reaction considering the activity we'd just been engaged in. The term 'throes of passion' came to mind, and I tried to remember when and where I'd heard the phrase. It made sense to me now, but I was no longer in its throes and felt...exposed and vulnerable. I also felt very young when Edward smoothed the old, worn gown past my hips and then tucked me securely beneath the bedcovers.

"Sleep well my darling," he said as he leaned down to kiss me gently on the forehead. "Remember, you're safe now...you're mine."

I nodded, chewing nervously on my lower lip as he backed up to the door, and his gaze dropped to my mouth. He took a step back toward me before halting and closing his eyes. When he opened them, they had darkened almost to black. His nostrils flared, and he swallowed hard.

"One thing, Bella," he said hoarsely. "Tomorrow, when you come to my study in the morning...don't wear any pantaloons."

I gasped, and he turned to leave, closing the door softly behind him.

~AFL~

I know...I know...What a bastard for leaving her, and that ultimatum! But we can't have him acting all soft and cuddly too soon. ;)

I'd love to know what you thing #ducks for cover# but do me a favour, if you hate it that much...just stop reading!

xx TLSue

PS: Next chapter is an EPOV but it's not an outtake. It occurs the 'morning after' and looks at Edward's response to Bella's words as well as including an interaction with Lord's Emmett and Jasper. I'll post it Friday. :)

Dreams

Stephenie Meyer created Twilight...and would no doubt be a tad shocked by this particular incarnation of Edward. No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks to Chloe Cougar for beta'ing this chapter on very short notice. I was going to write another ridiculously long Author Note to attempt to answer all the questions reviewers have raised questioning Lord Lustward's behaviour, but then I decided to let him explain himself. Consequently, I rewrote this chapter and added in quite a bit, so any errors in grammar are mine.

As to the many comments and questions I received regarding the use (or disuse!) of contraception during this time period, and the possibility and consequences that might occur if Bella were to fall pregnant...I think I'll let Bella respond to those in the next chapter. ;)

Thank you so much for all the amazing support and encouragement given to this story. Sorry I don't reply to many reviews, as my updating schedule doesn't leave me much time for anything but madly writing the next EPOV or preparing chapters for posting. But I do read all reviews and find them encouraging, funny, challenging and quite often inspiring. (Hence the EPOVs!)

Special thanks to misscyn for posting A Forbidden Love's 2500th review. Wow...Picture me gobsmacked!

Updated: Friday, December 9th 2011

Words: 3050

Dreams

EPOV

I dreamed of Bella, of kissing and caressing and moving inside her delectable, nubile body, coming close to fulfilment only to awaken to find my arms and bed empty and my body aching for her touch. Disgruntled, I rose early and called for Sabre to be saddled. It was only when I was cantering across open fields some

distance from the Hall that I allowed myself to question the unsettled feelings that had plagued me since waking.

I hadn't wanted to leave her, but of course, it was the gentlemanly thing to do. The thought of holding her in my arms while she slept as I'd done during the carriage ride from Worthey held a surprising appeal, but that would have required a level of self denial I was realistic enough to know was not within my power in that moment after finally making her mine. Giving in to my base desires and taking her again would have been unconscionable. She needed time to recover from the loss of her virginity, though at least Bella's common heritage meant that the experience wasn't the ordeal she would have suffered if she'd been a lady of more genteel breeding.

I'd been thoroughly forewarned as to what to expect on the occasion of the consummation of my eventual marriage...terror, tears and quite possibly tantrums, though the last was unlikely for one in my position. A lady of the calibre suitable to fulfil the role of a marchioness would be too well trained—too well *bred*—to allow for such excess of emotion. She would no doubt endure stoically and silently, any distress she felt at the trauma of the events would be contained, only to be expressed when I had made my departure and left her to the privacy of her bedchamber.

Of course, a considerate husband would require only the very barest minimum of his wife and do everything within his power to avoid shocking her unduly. Nudity would *not* be on the agenda. The husband was to keep his contact with the wife's bare flesh to the absolute minimum and to perform his duty as politely and perfunctorily as possible. A considerate husband would have the decency to impregnate his wife in a timely manner whereby absolving them both of their duties. Finding himself a mistress, or some other convenient means by which to satisfy his base desires, was the only civilised option and discreetly encouraged. Displays of affection between a husband and wife were seriously frowned upon by the upper *ton*—publicly or privately—and I gathered that most husbands and wives never even kissed.

A shudder ran through me as I considered what awaited me on the other side of the marriage bed, but then I dismissed the unpleasant thoughts. Recalling the time I had spent with Bella in my arms was a far more pleasurable exercise. I was indeed a fortunate man to have found such an extraordinary girl. She miraculously combined all the traits one could hope for in a wife: beauty, grace, charm, wit and a truly commendable level of education—though many men would find that particular characteristic challenging—but the same time, she was warm, freely affectionate and responsive...all in all, the perfect mistress.

I'd been surprised by the level of her ignorance and briefly concerned that her father may have ruined her in his misguided attempt to force her to conform to a code of conduct not native to her class, but Bella's innate sensuality could not be suppressed. There was no denying the enjoyment she had received from our love making, and I looked forward with great anticipation to initiating her to the many and varied delights to be shared in the bedroom...and elsewhere.

A smile lifted the corner of my mouth as I recalled her sweet, untutored responses to my love-making and the honest passion she freely owned to and willingly shared. The pleasure I had found in her arms...her kisses...her body...far surpassed anything I had experienced before, regardless of the skill or enthusiasm of the courtesan with whom I'd lain.

But therein lay the source of my unsettled disposition. Bella was mine now, and I had already begun to make plans to keep her safe, but it wasn't only her safety that exercised my thoughts. I'd never *wanted* a woman the way I wanted her with a craving that went beyond the mere physical. When she'd told me that she loved me, offering up the words without any thought or expectation of having them returned or of gaining anything by the telling, I'd been stunned, gratified and unexpectedly...*affected*.

Just thinking about it caused a lump to form in my throat, and I swallowed back the unaccustomed emotion.

Irritated by my folly, I tried to remind myself that Bella was just a girl, albeit a truly exceptional one, and they were not to be trusted.

But she was different to anyone I'd known before. Something about her drew me in, obviously, or I wouldn't have gone to such extreme lengths to ensure her place in my bed...and in my life. It could only be the common blood that ran so hotly in her veins that set her apart from the ice maidens and cold-hearted matrons of my experience and acquaintance.

And...she loved me. The genuineness of her feelings was obvious, the words so clearly spoken from her heart. I couldn't deny that they had touched me deeply, but I supposed that was hardly surprising since I had heard those words so rarely.

Slowing Sabre to a walk, I allowed him his head as we ambled alongside a gently flowing stream.

My dearly departed mother had not known the meaning of the word love, unless one was referring to love for position, possessions and, above all, the power she

yielded over the matrons of the *ton*. Nor had she had it within her capabilities or any desire to express the emotion...certainly not to the heir she had provided out of duty and nothing more. Alice had been even less wanted by our mother, but she'd been well loved by both myself and my father...on the rare occasions that we saw him. While I understood my father's need to put as much distance between himself and the biting tongue of his excessively vitriolic wife as possible, combined with the form of distant parenting routinely practised by those of our class, it meant we saw him far less often than we would have preferred.

I would not deny that Alice loved me, unconditionally, as I did her, but we'd been well trained from an early age to hide our emotions and guard our words. Our mutual affection was expressed subtly, if at all. Our nanny, the old termagant, had cared for us in her way, but her North Country reserve and no nonsense manner had not exactly lent themselves to flowery speech or overblown declarations of affection.

But Bella...Bella loved me. She'd told me so freely and without agenda, and as the knowledge gradually permeated my being, I found I could not keep the smile from my face.

Contemplating my own feelings, I could admit to caring for her, of course, and wanting her like I could not recall wanting anything before. I could even admit—with a certain amount of chagrin—that I would undoubtedly give my life to protect her...a commoner. But love? Love was for poets and fools not men born to my level of privilege and responsibility.

My father had felt affection for several of his mistresses, something he'd confided in me when I was approaching manhood and he had begun to teach me of such things. But I'd received the impression that it had not been difficult for him to part ways with the courtesans who had shared his bed and a portion of his life when the time had come. Of course, he'd made sure they were well taken care of and would not suffer unduly from his absence, but their losses were not keenly felt.

I, on the other hand, had awoken to the unsettling realisation that I could not imagine a future without Bella or a time when I would no longer want her in my life.

Breathing deeply, I tightened Sabre's reins and turned us towards home. Explaining my actions to my father upon his return was going to be a highly unpleasant task, as I could only imagine his response when I confessed that I had seduced one of his maids in direct contravention of his expressly stated wishes...and under his own roof. Admitting that I had decided to take her as my mistress and planned to keep her in my life *indefinitely* might not be the wisest.

Contemplating my options, I considered that the sooner I removed Bella from Worthington Hall and saw her safely ensconced in the home I would provide for her in London, the better. The thought filled me with a sense of expectation as I imagined the life I would give Bella, the gifts I planned to shower upon her and the sights, entertainments and experiences we would share together. Consequently, I rode the remainder of the way back to the hall with a smile on my face and an unaccustomed feeling of contentment in my heart.

After returning Sabre to the safekeeping of the head groom, I bathed and dressed for the day, unaware that I was whistling until it was pointed out to me with good-humoured grumbling by Jasper as I made my way two-at-a-time down the stairs.

"Good God, man. Do you have to be so mercilessly cheerful this early in the morn? Have you no decency?"

"What I want to know is what's got into him?" Emmett puzzled, slapping me soundly on the back as the three of us entered the breakfast room together. "Since taking on his duties as Marquess, all he ever does is work, work, work, taking care of boring estate matters or fussing about like an old midwife when his mares are due to foal."

Chuckling at Emmett's rather accurate portrayal of my life since leaving Eton and our youthful carousing behind, I looked around, pleased to note that the dark-haired girl was nowhere to be seen. Angela had seemed kindly in her attitude and concern for Bella in the village and had sat by her faithfully the day she was injured, so I'd asked for the lass to be reassigned to Bella as a lady's maid-cum-companion.

Despite my firm insistence, I'd been worried that the surprising nature of my request meant it may not have been taken seriously—or that some of the other measures I'd ordered taken to ensure Bella's comfort might possibly be ignored—an unlikely an unprecedented occurrence. But Angela's absence here this morning bode well; as I was determined that Bella was to be treated with respect while we resided at my father's home, regardless of her change in circumstance and the...*exceptional* nature of our relationship.

"So, are you going to tell us what's put that spring in your step?" Jasper persisted, and I shrugged a shoulder in response. Requesting a beverage, my smile deepened as I recalled how close Bella had come to depositing the scalding contents of the coffee pot in my lap the day we'd first met.

"By jove, Jazz, I think he's been with a woman," Emmett speculated, and I quickly

schooled my features to a mask of indifference.

Jasper's response was an instantaneous bark of laughter. "Here, in his father's Hall? Not bloody likely! Unless he's taken to visiting the village girls or has found some bored widow living on a nearby estate we're unaware of."

"Enough, you two," I growled, concerned that they were getting altogether too close to the truth. While I knew they would find out about Bella eventually, my preference was for their enlightenment to be delayed for as long as possible. "Just because I don't lay abed half the day and have been put in a passably fair mood by an early morning ride, doesn't mean I'll allow you to make erroneous speculations about my activities."

"Just jesting, cousin," Emmett mouthed around a fork full of kedgerees, seeming content to let the matter drop and focus on his more than ample breakfast. But I couldn't help noticing Jasper's continuing speculative look.

"If it is a woman you're after," Emmett mumbled, his mouth all but overflowing. "You should have accompanied us to the Denali's house party. Lady Tanya is a stunner, and you know how eager the earl is to form an alliance. I can't understand your reluctance."

I shuddered, passing off my reaction to his words as a minor fit of coughing.

"There's a considerable difference between allowing oneself to become leg-shackled to the eminently respectable daughter of an earl, and finding a lusty lass to lay with," Jasper responded dryly, and my coughing fit went from feigned to real as I accidentally inhaled my coffee. "You, of all people, Emm," Jasper surprised me nature of his concluding remarks, "should know that finding a wife and finding... *fulfilment* is not necessarily one and the same thing,"

"You go too far," Emmett rebuked, but there was little bite to his words. Jasper and I normally tread carefully when making comment in regard to the state of Emmett's marriage, as the man had gone and done the unthinkable for one of our class and fallen in love with his wife, a tragic state of affairs. Personally, it was beyond me how anyone could feel anything but disdain or dismay in Rosalie's presence, and I found myself regularly questioning the soundness of Emmett's mind. I'd even worried that I may have inflicted one too many blows to his head when we were skylarking as lads or that he'd received permanent damage during one of the frequent boxing matches he'd engaged in during our days at Eton.

I could find no plausible reason for his continuing infatuation with a woman who

treated him with almost perpetual disdain...unless she wanted something, of course. Then she reeled him in exactly as if he were a trout lurking in one of my father's well stocked lakes with her inevitably short-lived charm and artificial affection. As far as I was concerned, Rosalie was cut from the same cloth as my mother, and to be avoided at all costs.

Bella, on the other hand, was an entirely different story. Her charm was unaffected, her intelligence remarkable, and her nature both sweetly genuine and without artifice. The enjoyment I found in her presence was extraordinary whether we were discussing art or poetry or pastries for that matter, or she was lying naked and willing in my arms. Shaking my head, I concluded that Emmet was a fool to think that a gentleman could ever in good conscience expect to receive the same wanton pleasure from lying with his wife. Well bred ladies of the upper *ton* were simply not equipped to respond in such a manner.

"Lady Tanya's eligibility is no concern of mine," I remarked, steering the conversation away from the discordant state of Emmett's marriage...a situation I believed to be almost entirely of his making considering his unattainable expectations.

"I don't think that's quite how the Earl and Countess of Denali see the situation. In fact, I got the distinct impression that their prospects are focused solely upon your bronzed head." Jasper smirked. "Isn't your father keen on the alliance also, as a way to gain those extra votes he needs?"

Ignoring the pricking of my conscience, I would not be drawn into another pointless argument on the matter. Yes, I was as equally committed as my father to seeing the slavery laws repealed and changes put in place to protect child workers and our poorly treated returned soldiers, but I was *not* willing to sacrifice my entire future and happiness to the cause. I would do whatever was in my power to assist my father to find the votes he needed to support Wilberforce's bill, but my assistance would have to come from some other quarter than being consigned to the misery of marriage at my age.

While I recognised my duty to marry and provide the Dukedom an heir at some point in the future, my father was still relatively young and robust, and I was in absolutely no rush to submit to the fate I'd inherited. The fact that the woman my mother had virtually ear-marked as my bride from the day of her birth was approaching her spinsterhood—having reached the unfortunate age of twenty-one as yet unwed—was of no concern of mine. Whatever promises that my mother had made on my behalf were not commitments I felt bound to fulfil, and the girl was a fool if she continued to wait for me to change my mind. Lady Tanya might be

eminently qualified to fill the role of a marchioness and duchess-in-waiting, but she was a little *toowell* trained for my liking, the similarities between her and the previous Duchess of Worthington—my *mother*—the stuff of nightmares.

After a leisurely breakfast, I arranged to meet with Emmett and Jasper later in the day and then excused myself before making my way to my study to attend to the pile of correspondence that awaited me. The rest of the morning dragged interminably, and it became apparent that my mind was less focussed on the task at hand than was usual, and that my eyes were prone to drift towards the clock situated on the mantle. When I could no longer deny that I was accomplishing little, I forgave myself the distracted nature of my thoughts and took great pleasure in clearing off my desk. Then with a rising sense of anticipation, I paced, impatiently counting down the minutes until eleven o'clock and Bella's arrival...the girl of my dreams.

~AFL~

Well...I can't say I'd mind sharing a dream with Lord Smitten-even-if-he-doesn't-know-it. ;)

Real Life pressures mean I'll be a bit late getting my next chapter posted. Hubby and I are also heading off on holiday next week for ten days of sun, sand, sea, swimming, snorkelling, sleeping and #ahem# another 's' word but one that would be a bit TMI, I'm sure! Consequently, I'll only be getting a couple of chapters posted over the next two weeks, but I hope to return to my crazy two to three chapters a week updating schedule for Christmas. :D

xxx TLSue

PS: If you haven't taken a look at my AU story, Once Bitten, yet...now is the time to jump on board. It's only taken me 30 odd chapters, but my loved up virgin vamps are finally about to be virgins no more! LOL! I can't believe both my stories reached the 'resolution' stage in the same week. What are the odds? And I can promise that things are going to get very exciting from here on in.

Ignorance

Stephenie Meyer created the Twiverse. No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks for all the support and encouragement for my EPOV chapter. I hope it helped explain Edward's at times appalling behaviour, while keeping in mind that times and expectations were incredibly different in the early 1800s. For the upper classes, love in marriage was frowned upon, passion of any sort was not to be expressed by 'ladies of quality' and women were considered the property of first their fathers and then their husbands. Women couldn't vote, received limited education - if they were lucky, (I've stretched the boundaries for Bella) and it was incredibly rare for a woman to retain ownership of property or finances without strict male guardianship. And then there was the whole class issue where commoners were practically considered a lesser species and females were at the absolute bottom of the pile!

To the many queries about where this story is heading, I promise that no matter how dark, angsty and outrageously lemony this story may become, there will be a HEA!

Thanks to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, for your ongoing and amazing support.

Content1...thanks for helping me navigate the flames and finding my lost perspective. Yep...this is a historical romance. Lordward is supposed to be dark, dominating and a bit of a douche...to start with. ;)

Updated: Tuesday December 13th 2011

Words: 2805

Chapter 27

Ignorance

BPOV

I lay awake staring at the soft, lamplit ceiling for a very long time after Edward

left, unwilling to leave the bed to douse the lights.

My mind swirled with words, images and remembered sensations, a tumult of uncertainty as the night's events replayed in my thoughts. Swinging between wonder at the intimacy and ecstasy I'd shared with Edward and despair at the slowly unfolding realisation of the consequences of my actions, tears trickled unimpeded down my cheeks.

My plan had failed...spectacularly. In agreeing to Edward's protection, my safety was assured—*supposedly*—but to what end? My reputation, already battered by Lord Hunter's baseless accusations, would not survive when knowledge of the events I'd become embroiled in became public: an inevitability once my true identity was revealed. The *ton* were notorious gossips. While I was uncertain how Edward would react if the truth were to come out, I could guarantee that Lady Rosalie would take great pleasure in ensuring my ruin was made public whereupon no respectable member of society would accept me into their home.

My father's face swam before my eyes, and I brushed away my tears. All my promises to stay safe and my hope that I could avenge his murder and restore my good name had come to naught. How naïve I'd been to think I could hide in plain sight for three or four months...I'd barely made it that many weeks!

If only I'd understood Edward's intentions from the beginning, I could have taken steps to protect myself, I thought angrily, and then my indignation faded as I came face to face with the truth, leaving me unable to continue with my self-delusion.

Hugging my pillow close, I could not deny that a part of me had known I was courting danger all along and that my feelings for Edward had clouded my good judgement. Caught up in the emotional maelstrom of my first-ever infatuation, I'd allowed myself to be blinded to the peril of my situation until it was far too late and the damage had already been done. I should have known better and kept my distance rather than tacitly encouraging his interest...if that had been an option. But, oh...what a heady thing it had been for a girl such as me, who'd never before received or engendered the overt attention of any eligible males of my class, to be so actively pursued by a man of the calibre of Lord Edward.

Mrs. Waters would have said I was ripe for the picking.

The thought reminded me of other comments and vague instructions I'd received since embarking on my transformation to womanhood, many of which were beginning to make sense to me now. My eyes had been opened to the truth like Eve's in the garden after she ate from the apple, and gradually, my feelings of

self-castigation turned to anger. I'd been utterly ignorant of something so important, so life-changing, that I had almost no idea how to make sense of it all, and the results of my ignorance were anything but blissful. How on earth were young ladies supposed to keep ourselves 'pure and unstained' when we were kept in the dark as to what 'impure and stained' entailed?

Not that the knowledge would have made a huge amount of difference, I acknowledged bitterly. My reputation had apparently already been ruined by merely spending time alone with a man, long before I'd done anything of an intimate or scandalous nature.

Society clearly operated under a double standard, as at no time had I received the impression that *Edward's* reputation was in any way at risk. It was obvious from his words—and actions—that he had plenty of experience when it came to...to...I didn't even know what to call what we'd done. He'd called it lovemaking, and while I hoped that's what it was, his actions had helped me to finally understand the lewd and frightening threats I'd heard since leaving Forkston, even before, if I included the words Lord Hunter had used to provoke Papa. There was nothing of love in the intentions of any of those men towards me, just a desire to take what they wanted...brutally.

Not that Edward had been like that, of course. He'd been gentle and caring, his touch bringing me such pleasure I still marvelled at what we'd shared, despite my conflicting emotions. He'd called me beautiful, said that my allure was irresistible and that he couldn't stay away from me any longer. But he'd said nothing to indicate he felt anything for me other than desire. His parting request, that I forego wearing my pantaloons when I visited him in his study in the morning, left little doubt in my mind as to the direction he expected our relationship to take.

My heart raced as I recalled his mysterious words when he'd described the different places where he wanted to 'have me'—the mystery now partially solved and my curiosity undoubtedly aroused. While a part of me was outraged by his arrogance and presumption, I could not deny that I wanted him...still. But I didn't *just* want him, I *loved* him, irrevocably. Was wanting all he felt for me?

Sighing, I curled into a ball on my side, wondering what difference it would make if he did. Even if Edward said he loved me, it wouldn't change my circumstances. I was unmarried, and now unmarriageable. I may not have previously understood the specifics, but of one thing I'd been made sure—young ladies were required to be virgins on their wedding day. It would seem the same rules did not apply quite so assiduously to young gentlemen.

Anger burned in my belly at the injustice and hypocrisy I perceived as enlightenment awakened my understanding. Society's standards and expectations were far from fair, but then, I conceded, neither was the world at large. Shuddering, I thought of what would have happened if Edward had not rescued me from those men in the village, or if I'd been unable to defend myself against Mike Newton that day in the library. Then there were the rough and rowdy men in the alehouses on my journey from Forkston, and as for Lord Hunter and his evil threats, I could not even bear to imagine their fulfilment. My experience might be limited, but I knew that the touch of any of those men would not have been gentle nor brought me the pleasure I'd experienced at Edward's hands.

He might have pounded the last nails in the coffin of my ruin, but at least he'd made it a pleasant experience, I thought, laughing bitterly at the bleakness of my situation.

Accidentally bumping my bruised arm, I stroked it soothingly with my fingers, remembering all the times that Edward had acted to protect me. He'd even put his own life at risk the day of the hunt when he dove amongst the panicked horses, taking blows on his body that would have otherwise fallen on me. It wasn't his fault that he didn't know my true identity and position in society, though whether I should have told him or not, I still could not say. While my situation was dire, there was no doubt in my mind that it was far preferable to the horror I surely would have experienced if I'd been handed over to Lord Hunter's far-from-tender care.

With the damage done, Edward was now my only hope...for security and for any sort of a future. He said he cared for me and that he would keep me safe. I could only hope he was a man of his word, for I had no idea what I could possibly do in terms of protecting or making a future for myself alone...if I'd wanted to. Despite finally understanding exactly what it was I'd gotten myself into, I couldn't bear the thought of leaving and never seeing the man I loved again.

But he could never know my true identity.

Destined to remain Belinda Brown forever, I would bear whatever consequence I faced as long as I did not bring any more shame to my father's name. I'd been uncertain of Lord Carlisle's reception before these events, and it was clear that I could never face him now. Somehow...somehow...I would have to make sure I was far from Worthington Hall before his return.

While the lamplight slowly flickered and faded, I cried into the night, grieving my last hope of resurrecting the life I'd lost.

Isabella Swan was no more.

~AFL~

Sleeping late, I woke to the sound of my name being called and the delicious smells of a cooked breakfast. Mrs. Waters must have decided to let me sleep in, I mused, as I stretched in my warm, cosy bed. Then I felt an odd aching sensation low in my belly and tenderness where I'd never experienced before.

Clutching the bedcover to my chin, I sat up as memories of the night before drove away the fantasy of my being back home...and safe. Angela stood off to the side of the bed, a silver domed tray in her hands.

"I've brought ye breakfast," she said, as she placed the tray on the bedside table before standing and wringing her hands, her eyes averted.

Quickly glancing around the room, I saw that my clothes lay scattered on the floor in a trail toward the bed, and since I'd not braided my hair before retiring, I knew it must be a tangled cloud around my face. There was no hiding what had happened here last night.

"Angela?" I whispered. "Why won't you look at me?"

She shrugged, not meeting my eyes. "I just thought you were different, that's all. Not the sort to...to..."

I threw the covers back and came to stand before her.

"You think I had much of a choice?" I demanded, my anger from the night before quickly resurfacing. I knew I'd be judged but not so quickly or from this quarter.

"Oh, Bella." Angela's eyes shone with unshed tears when she finally met my gaze. "I didn't realise he forced ye. Did he hurt ye very badly? Are ye...injured?"

"What? No!" I exclaimed, stepping back. "It wasn't like that. Edward wouldn't hurt me, well not intentionally." I defended him, discounting the damage he'd inflicted on my reputation, albeit in ignorance.

Angela frowned and her shoulders hunched over. Taking in her expression, snippets of conversation I'd heard between her and Jessica resurfaced, and with a sense of dread, comprehension dawned.

"Oh, Angela, that's what happened to you, isn't it? You were forced...hurt..." I whispered, aghast. "I'm so sorry." I reached out to comfort her, but she stepped away.

"It's not your fault." She shrugged.

My mind raced, considering and discarding possible culprits. Edward would never do such a thing, of that I was sure. If I interpreted Jessica's previous comments correctly, then Lord Emmett's marriage to Lady Rosalie was not...happy, but would that give him cause to take advantage of a terrified serving girl? As for Jasper, it sounded like he had no shortage of willing partners amongst the girls from the neighbouring villages. Would he find sport in forcing an unwilling partner?

Shuddering, I remembered Mr. Barclay's interest in me on my first day serving in the breakfast room and wondered if it had been someone like him, a visitor to Worthington Hall.

"I...I thought Lord Carlisle prevented such things from occurring, that his staff were safe here?" I whispered, cognizant of the irony of my situation.

"Oh, it wasn't at the hall," Angela replied so softly I could barely make out her words. "It was the last place I worked, before Lady Esme saved me and brought me to work for the Duke."

"So it wasn't anyone from here?"

"No..." Angela shook her downcast head. "It was Lord Haversham, Lady Esme's first husband...may he rot in hell."

I gasped, shocked at Angela's disclosure. Lord Haversham had been much older than his wife, old enough to be Angela's grandfather.

"It went on for a long time, but when Lady Esme found out she helped me escape. I wasn't the first girl she rescued. How she tolerated that evil man for as long as she did, I'll never know. Plenty of others in her situation would have turned a blind eye, grateful the old bugger's attention was focused elsewhere, but Lady Esme is a *true* lady," Angela said with feeling. "I'm so glad she's found happiness with His Grace. She deserves it."

I frowned, trying to make sense of Angela's words.

"But I thought you'd been here for a while?" I puzzled.

"Oh aye, more than two years now. The best two years of my life."

I felt the blood drain from my face. Angela was only just turned sixteen; she'd been a child when Lord Haversham had forced himself upon her. My stomach turned, and I sat heavily on the edge of the bed, having no idea how she had borne such abuse. No wonder she was wary of men and suspicious of their motives.

"Oh, Angela," I whispered. "It's a wonder you survived."

"Aye, and that's the truth. The bastard got me with child, but I was too young to carry. I nearly died, I lost so much blood. That's when Lady Esme found me and got me out. I wasn't good for much, but Lord Carlisle told Mrs. Cope to give me light duties 'til I could carry me weight. He's a saint, that man."

Staring at Angela in shock, my mind struggled to make sense of her words. One must be married to bear a child, surely? That was the order of things. One married, one did one's duty, and in due time one was rewarded with a baby.

Dropping my head in my hands, I felt the sickening weight of reality strike home. Yes, and one was supposed to be a virgin when one bloody well wed! I almost laughed aloud, shocked that I would even *think* a swear word, but then I couldn't remember having ever felt so overwhelmed before.

"There, there, Bella. Try not to worry," Angela consoled me, wisely and compassionately discerning the reason for my dismay. "Girls hardly ever fall pregnant their first time. It'd be uncommon bad luck."

Yes, and my luck had been truly spectacular of late, I wanted to retort but managed to refrain, not wanting to take my anger and fear out upon Angela. I couldn't begin to imagine what she'd suffered, and I recognised that my situation was far from the same. Though I did allow it was even more perilous than I'd perceived.

Angela kept me company while I ate breakfast and then helped me with my bath. She'd been ordered to act as my lady's maid, at least for the start of each day. I imagined that I owed Edward for the kindness, and I would have to thank him, if I could refrain from choking him to death for putting me in this completely untenable situation in the first place!

Oh, why couldn't he have just suffered in stoic silence while upholding his father's upright and moral standard? Surely his interest in me wasn't *that* uncontrollable? My angry thoughts spurred the brush as I tugged it through my tangled locks.

And maybe I could have acted a little more circumspectly, I admitted, letting the brush fall listlessly and staring at my wan expression in the large, bevelled mirror in the dressing room. While it would have been easier to lay the entire blame for this debacle on Edward's broad shoulders, I couldn't deny that I'd done little to discourage his interest. Spending time in his company had been the most wonderful thing I'd ever known...until last night, though my pleasure at that experience was tainted by the dire consequences with which I was now faced.

How vastly different my circumstances would have been if this morning was the first day of my honeymoon and last night had been my wedding night. I may have felt embarrassed when I realised what the teasing comments and knowing looks of the staff had been about, but their actions would have been well-meaning, and the possibility of a child a cause for celebration for the entire household. In stark contrast, I was faced with the most uncertain of futures and the mortification of having to face the people who'd known what Edward expected of me all along, even if I didn't.

Scolding myself for my pointless, self-pitying thoughts, I brushed my futile tears aside and readied myself for the day.

~AFL~

Poor Bella...hard to imagine a HEA at the moment...but I did promise!

I love reading your wonderful reviews, even the challenging or critical ones...well, I may prefer the positive ones a bit more than the negative. LOL!

Thanks to all the lovely AFL readers giving my vamp story, Once Bitten, a read. I'm soooo glad you're enjoying my sweet and angsty Guiltward and feisty Flirtella. The reviews have been fantastic. :D

Well...I'm off to go swimming with the fishes in the 'not murdered by a gangster' sense of the phrase!

Next chapter of AFL should be up on the weekend as long as the mobile internet dooverlackie I bought actually does what it's supposed to do.

Hope you're all enjoying your pre Christmas and keeping it stress free. ;)

xxx TLSue

Implications

Stephenie Meyer might like the rain and wet...I'm loving the sunshine! But she did give us Isle Esme which was pretty cool. ;)

Thanks so much to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, for fixing up my messes and keeping up with my crazy chapter updates.

I wasn't going to post this chapter until next week as I'm on HOLIDAY! with my lovely hubby, soaking up the sunshine and enjoying all those other lovely 'S' words - yeah Sammi, I'm definitely shaving my legs several times a day. LOL! - But I've got the next chapter ready to go off to my betas tonight, and I may just get it out before Christmas - plus a rather interesting EPOV. Besides, I'm feeling rather loved up, and I thought you guys might like some of the same. ;)

Thanks for all the awesome reviews!

This one's for Nahla Kass. Thanks for the tweets! (I'm at twiloversue if you want to follow me.)

Updated: Friday December 16th 2011

Words: 3613

Chapter 28

Implications

BPOV

When Stephens collected me from my room, I kept my eyes down and offered a mumbled greeting. We walked in silence the short distance down the hallway to Edward's study, before pausing at his door.

"Ye be alright, Miss Bella?" Stephens asked after an uncomfortable moment.

All I could manage in reply was a nod, my embarrassment acute. When it was too late to make a difference, I finally understood everyone's concern. Yet even now, faced with the fearful consequences of my actions—*our* actions—I yearned to see

Edward again, my belly curling with that now familiar warmth as anticipation heightened my senses.

I was well aware of what was going to happen when I reached his study. He would want to make love to me again in one of the many places that he had mentioned when I'd been lying on his couch with his long, lean, masculine length pressing me into the leather. Despite the understanding I had gained from the night before, I was still uncertain about most of what he'd described. But despite my concerns, I could not deny I wanted to know...to learn...to experience the fullness of being with Edward in every possible way...while I had the chance. I'd even obeyed his outrageous instruction and had foregone my pantaloons when dressing, knowing full well the implications of my actions.

Unable to wear my full length stockings without the pantaloon ties to secure them, I'd donned a knee-length pair that had been delivered to the dressing room along with trunk loads of gowns, underclothes, nightclothes, shoes, shawls, and folderals of every conceivable nature.

"They're cast-offs from Lady Alice's and the late Duchess' wardrobe," a maid tasked with unpacking the trunks had explained. She also informed me that one of the resident seamstresses would come to my room that afternoon to take my measurements and begin making any necessary adjustments. My opportunity to admire the array of truly beautiful gowns and garments—and to contemplate their significance—had been brief, as eleven o'clock had rapidly approached. But I couldn't help feeling grateful that Edward would soon be able to see me wearing something *other* than the drab uniform I was forced to don despite the bounty that he'd provided.

The feel of my naked thighs brushing together as I walked was a sensual reminder of the wantonness of my behaviour, but I could not find it in my heart to judge myself too harshly. I loved Edward. I would only ever love Edward. The awareness that our time together could only be of a temporary nature—the thought causing a sob to catch in my throat, at which Stephens reached to pat my shoulder in sympathy—made me even more determined to express my love to him in every way that I could.

But first, I would need some answers to the questions that vied for my attention before I surrendered again...and some sort of reassurance about the fearful future that I may already be faced with.

Our short journey down the hallway completed, Stephens announced us, and Edward's response sounded clearly through the door. Stephens ushered me into the

room where I noted that the tea tray had already been placed on the table by the fire. Then he left us alone, closing the door behind him. I turned to see Edward leaning against his desk, watching me, his expression typically intense.

"Bella," he smiled the slow, sultry smile that melted my insides and caused my breasts to tingle as he pushed away from his desk.

"M'lord...I...I mean, Edward," I stammered, as he strode purposefully towards me.

Reaching me, he pressed me back against the wall to the side of the doorway with his body, his hands at either side of my head. "Ah...Bella," he sighed, and then his hands were suddenly everywhere: tilting my head to receive his heated kisses, sliding down my body to shape and squeeze my breasts, and cupping my bottom to pull me firmly against him. Then pressing one of his legs firmly between my own, he rocked his body against the cradle of my hips.

"I dreamed of you last night," he murmured huskily against my still-swollen lips. "I've been counting the minutes."

Already overwhelmed by his touch, I melted at his words, all my good intentions to gain answers to my many questions *before* things went too far momentarily forgotten. No protest left my lips as Edward lifted me in his arms and carried me towards his startlingly clear desk. Seating me on the edge, he spread my knees to give him space to stand between my legs, all the while devouring my mouth with his kisses. His hands roamed my body, but it was only when he had tugged my skirt high enough to expose both my naked thighs and had begun rapidly undoing the buttons down the front of my blouse that I regained enough sense to react.

"Please...wait. M'lord...Um...Edward...I need to talk to you," I managed to utter, my voice hoarse to my ears as my senses swam under the sensual onslaught of his caresses.

"We'll talk later, Bella," he murmured against my skin. With my blouse now undone, he'd begun tugging at the ties on my chemise as he kissed his way from the corner of my mouth, down my neck and across my collarbone in a teasing, tantalizing slide of lips and tongue and heat.

I moaned at the sensations his touch aroused in my recently awakened senses, the rocking of his hips and thighs against my body an insistent reminder of what we'd done the night before and of what he clearly wanted to do again. Despite my misgivings, I couldn't deny I wanted it, too, but one fear I could not ignore. Willing my hands to obey, I placed them flat against his chest, the patterned material of his

elegant vest rough beneath my fingers.

"Stop!" I cried, my voice barely above a whisper. Pushing ineffectually against the hard muscular wall of his chest, I strengthened my resolve and spoke again more firmly. "Please...I need to ask you something before we...before you... It's very important."

Edward stilled, his lower body pressed tightly against me, one hand at my breast, and the other at my waist.

"I promise we'll talk later. Can it not wait?"

"It's important," I repeated, and he stopped nuzzling the curve of my neck to meet my anxious gaze.

"Are you worried it will be painful again, like last night?" he asked, his expression softening. "I'll be gentle, Bella. Take it slow."

"No, that's not it." I blushed; at least I didn't *think* that would be a problem, the long hot bath I'd luxuriated in this morning having gone a long way towards easing my aches and tenderness. "There's something that I need to know about what we did last night."

Edward's eyebrows rose, and taking a deep breath to bolster my courage, I continued. "Um...what *you* did to me...that's how a woman becomes...with child?"

His brows drew together into a frown. "You want a baby?" he asked.

"No! Of course not!" I gasped. "Well, not now, and not like this. I'm unwed, m'lord, without a family. I wouldn't know what to do or how to..." I looked down at my hands that still held tight to his vest as tears filled my eyes and spilled onto my cheeks.

"Ah, Bella," Edward sighed and drew me gently against his chest, one hand caressing my hair as the other stroked soothingly over my back. "I told you, you have nothing to fear now. I'll protect you, no matter what."

"So that means we *are* to have a child?" I asked, my words muffled against his chest.

Leaning back again so he could look me in the eyes, he murmured soothingly. "No, sweetheart, at least not yet. I wouldn't mind a babe of yours...one day. To be honest I'm too selfish to want to share you at the moment, but if it happens..." he shrugged,

a soft smile on his lips.

I stared at him aghast. "But...but...the babe would be a...*bastard*," I whispered, horrified. I'd heard the word but never spoken it aloud, or thought to use it in conjunction with a child of my own.

"So?" Edward shrugged again, his expression quizzical. "Do you know how many girls would beg for a chance to bear a lord's bastard? It's a virtual guarantee of security. Of course there are some unscrupulous members of the nobility who neglect their duty to the offspring they sire, but you have nothing to fear. My protection extends to any children we have as much as it guarantees *your* future and safety. You have my word, Bella."

Stunned by Edward's declaration, I realised how little I knew about him and how very, very different was our experience of the world.

"Do you...do you have other, er, offspring?" I asked, dreading the answer.

Edward surprised me by laughing at my question. "Jealous, Bella?" he asked, a teasing lilt to his voice.

I stared at him blankly, my mouth open. I didn't like to think of Edward with other women—though that was really the least of my problems—but I couldn't for the life of me understand how he could be so cavalier about the possibility of having fathered children out of wedlock.

His smile faded, and he raised a hand to caress my cheek.

"Forgive me, Bella. I forget about your far from typical upbringing and how sheltered you've been. I can see that I've shocked you, but you've nothing to worry about. I've been very careful in the past, as I have no intention of siring children at random. I've never even considered the possibility before; it's just that you...*affect* me in ways I'm still discovering. But I'd rather we left that for later...much later."

"One has a choice in the matter?" I asked, frowning. "Wouldn't it just...happen?"

Again Edward smiled, at my ignorance, I presumed. I suppressed the surge of indignation I felt at his attitude, as getting answers to my questions was much more important than defending myself for my lack of knowledge.

"A woman doesn't necessarily fall pregnant *every* time she lies with a man; it depends on whether or not she is fertile or if precautions are taken," he explained

while I hung on his every word.

To 'lie with a man' must be a way of describing the, er...act of joining together, I mused, though I wondered if it were possible to make it any more ambiguous. No wonder young girls like me were so thoroughly left in the dark! The thought reminded me of other euphemisms I'd heard and not understood, in particular something the minister had said at a wedding I attended with Papa the previous summer, "and the two shall become one flesh." I'd wondered about it at the time, and now I had my answer. Though clearly *marriage* was not necessarily an essential part of the arrangement, I thought dryly.

It was easier to take refuge in a very black sort of humour, rather than be distracted by thoughts of my father's expectations for my own marriage and the horrible disappointment I would now be to him if he were still alive.

Shaking off my sad musings, I considered Edward's explanation. While I had a rough understanding of what fertility meant, I had no idea at all what precautions he could be referring to. My confusion must have been evident, for he clarified his words without my having to ask.

"A woman is only fertile—able to fall pregnant—on a few days each month. Your courses finished a couple of days ago, so we're fairly safe for the next few days and then again for a few days before the next one begins. That's assuming you have a roughly monthly cycle?"

I nodded dumbly in response to Edward's question, my cheeks ablaze. I didn't want to know how he knew such intimate details about personal matters pertaining to *my* body, or how he'd obtained the information. As to how he knew so much about a woman's fertility in regard to *avoiding* a pregnancy, that didn't bear thinking about either.

"So...so the days in between are the fertile days?" I asked and he nodded. "Then we won't be, I mean you won't want to...on *those* days?"

Edward laughed. "Bloody hell, Bella, I don't plan on missing out for more than half of each month now that I've finally had you! Those are the days we'll use precautions. But before that curious mind of yours starts grilling me for explanations, suffice to say I will take care of matters *when* it is necessary to do so, and not before. Now can we please get back to the far more pleasurable business of *making* love rather than discussing the implications?"

As he spoke, Edward undid the last of the ties holding my chemise together and

parted the fabric, revealing my breasts to his hungry gaze. My mind was still spinning when his hands began to squeeze and fondle my naked flesh, reawakening my physical senses to the exquisite pleasure of his touch while my mind continued to spin. There was so much to absorb, but as usual I had no time to assimilate the new information I'd received. I briefly considered asking Edward for a reprieve, for time to think, but his arousal pressed heavily against my belly, and his hands at my breasts continued to work their magic. Then his mouth joined in the onslaught as he trailed hot, wet kisses from my ear to my lips, where he proceeded to plunder the depths of my mouth with his tongue. And all the while his hips rocked rhythmically against me.

There was only so much resisting a girl could manage.

Moaning, I arched against his hands, squeezing his hips with my thighs. There'd be time to make sense of all the information...later.

"Lean back on your hands," Edward instructed, his words whispered hoarsely against my lips.

I did so, and he arched my back with one hand, lifting my swollen breasts high while his other hand pushed my skirts farther up my thighs, exposing my nakedness to his view.

"Good girl," he smiled, then he leaned forward, capturing a tightly pebbled nipple in his mouth and suckled...hard. I gasped, the sound quickly turning into a moan when his fingers trailed all the way up my thigh and then began to tangle in the curly hair that covered the swollen, tender flesh hidden beneath.

While Edward's mouth continued to wreak havoc on my aching breasts, his fingers teased the entrance to my body, rubbing and stroking the sensitive flesh. When he slowly entered me, I groaned and contracted tightly around him.

"Ahhh...You're so sensitive...so responsive," he rasped, pulling away. I whimpered at the loss of his mouth from my breasts and fingers from inside me, but then I saw that he was undoing his breeches. He released his aroused member, and I gasped for another reason. It was so big...even bigger than I remembered from the night before and really quite intimidating in the harsh light of day.

"Don't be afraid, darling. I'll be gentle," he murmured, and I looked up to see his reassuring gaze. His spare hand gently grazed my cheek, and I swallowed against the emotion that rose in my chest, wondering if I was imagining the incredible tenderness I saw in his eyes...or whether I was projecting the feelings I so

desperately wanted to see there.

Then, inexplicably drawn, I looked back to where he was guiding the head of his... *member*—I didn't know what else to call it—to the glistening entrance to my body. He pressed against me, flexing his hips and slowly, determinedly pushed inside. I was tight, swollen from the activities of the previous night but gradually began to open to his insistent invasion.

We both moaned, and even though I was a *little* tender, I wondered if it could possibly feel as good for him to be inside me as it was for me to be filled by him.

"Oh, Edward," I whispered as he slowly withdrew and then pushed in even further than he had the first time. It was an amazing sight, and the feel of him penetrating my body...filling me...*taking* me...was beyond imagining. My eyes fluttered closed, and my head fell back. I wanted to keep watching but couldn't seem to do anything but revel in the sensations coursing through my body from the feel of his heated flesh moving inside and against me.

"Any pain?" he asked hoarsely, and I shook my head vehemently from side to side. I couldn't bear it if he stopped.

"Good," he whispered, increasing the pace and strength of his movements.

It was bliss. I pushed aside every thought, every doubt, every fear and just let myself feel. I knew what we were doing—what I was *allowing*—wasn't right. We weren't married, joined physically but not in the eyes of God or man, but in that moment, I couldn't bring myself to care. I would never marry now. There was no one for me but Edward, and there would never be a place for another in my heart. My love for him was neither fleeting infatuation nor merely a response to all the stress and trauma of the previous month. I wanted this, to be with him in this way. Considering all that I had lost and could never recover, I determined that I would do whatever it took to stay with him—to *be* with him—for as long as I possibly could.

Then Edward lowered his head to suckle at my breasts as he continued to thrust between my thighs, and I could no longer think...only feel.

"Ohhhh," I moaned, tossing my head from side to side.

"Come for me, sweetheart," he urged, leaving my breasts and kissing his way up my chest and throat to my mouth, leaving a trail of tingling heat in his wake.

"Mmm?" I whimpered, not understanding.

"Like last night, Bella, when you reached your peak, your climax. I want to feel you come."

"Oh..." I murmured understanding. "I...I don't know how."

"Let me help." Leaning back a little, he reached down between our bodies to rub his thumb in circular movements over the little nub at the top of my sex. Pleasure cascaded through my body, and I cried out, arching against Edward and increasing the pressure as my body began to spasm in response to his movements and touch.

"Yes, Bella, oh yes..." Edward moaned, letting his head fall forward to nuzzle against my neck.

This time as I scaled the same incredible peak I'd reached the night before, I had some understanding of what awaited me at my destination. The building pressure was almost too much to bear as Edward tormented my incredibly sensitive flesh with his wonderful fingers while continuing to thrust determinedly inside me with his long, steel-hard length. When I finally reached the zenith, I hovered in blissful anticipation for a long and sweetly aching moment before tumbling over into an ecstasy so intense I marvelled that it didn't completely sweep me away. I would have collapsed onto Edward's desk, but he pulled me against him, his arms holding me close as he moved deeply inside me. Then having drawn every last tremor of rapture from my throbbing core, he groaned loudly and reached his own peak, his body shuddering as mine pulsed around him over and over again.

Breathless...panting...we stayed wrapped in each other's arms as our heartbeats slowly steadied and our senses gradually calmed. Despite the continued intimacy of our embrace, it didn't feel quite the same with all the clothing in the way, and I appreciated anew Edward's determination to have us both fully unclothed the first time we'd joined together. But it *was* the middle of the day, and we were in Edward's study...not the privacy of my bedchamber.

A brisk knock at the door startled me from my reverie.

"Lord Emmett and Lord Jasper to see you m'lord," Stephens announced through the door, shocking me with the reminder of his presence so close by.

Edward sighed and lifted his head, giving me a rueful smile before he called out. "Tell them to wait. I'll be with them in a minute." Then, groaning, he gently disengaged himself from my body before turning aside to right his clothing. I quickly tugged my skirts down past my knees before moving to the very edge of the desk. Panicked at the thought of the gentlemen waiting in the hallway, I eyed the door to

Edward's suite which I assumed must somehow connect to my own, wondering if I could escape by that route. I was about to climb down, when Edward caught me around the waist.

"Allow me, my darling," he murmured, as he lowered me to the floor before kissing me gently on the forehead and circling me in his arms.

"Edward..." I hissed, glancing toward the door. "They're right outside!"

"And that's where they'll stay until I bid them enter," he murmured confidently before capturing my mouth in a tender kiss. Knowing I should leave immediately if I did not want to risk facing his friend and cousin, I nevertheless allowed myself to be distracted by the wonder of Edward's lips moving so gently and softly against my own. Trusting his words that we would not be interrupted, I leaned against him, hugging him tightly and allowing myself the continued pleasure of his embrace.

But our idyll was to be short-lived.

~AFL~

Hmmm...drama ahead, I foresee!

Bella's behaviour in this chapter may have shocked some of you who would have preferred a more 'Austen' like heroine who flounced off in a fit of righteous indignation, but keep in mind that she's only seventeen, is very much in love and experiencing the rather overwhelming effects of lust for the first time in her life and, as far as she knows, has no possible way to redeem her reputation or regain the life she's lost. So please, don't judge her too harshly.

Besides...sex on Lord Hotness' desk. ;) Would you say no?

xxx TLSue ;)

PS: Believe it or not, knowledge of the rhythm method or 'safe times' was available during this era, along with some other rather interesting forms of contraception. Edward would have been well informed, and with his interest in horse breeding, quite knowledgeable about such matters. It was just the poor girls who were kept in the dark.

Assumptions

Thanks to Stephenie Meyer for sharing her wonderful imagination with the world. No copyright infringement intended.

A huge thank you to all my wonderful reviewers for your encouragement and support. You'll be happy to know I am having the loveliest of holidays. Hubby and I have snorkelled every day, and so far we've swum with a black tip reef shark, numerous turtles, stingrays and an absolute plethora (what a gorgeous word!) of tropical fish over coral canyons of limitless variety. Bliss...

Special thanks to OriginalChele for giving A Forbidden Love its 2900th review. I'll try to keep track and give a shout out to the wonderful reviewer who posts the 3000th review. The mind boggles!

As always...thanks, love and hugs to my awesome betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar. Mwah!

Updated: Monday December 19th 2011

Words: 2583

Chapter 29

Assumptions

BPOV

"Edward you sly dog, I knew you were up to something."

I gasped at the sound of Lord Jasper's voice, not having heard the two lords' entry into the room. Panicking, I clutched the loose edges of my blouse together even as Edward's arms encircled me protectively.

"I asked you both to *wait*," he growled, annoyance plain in his voice.

"Weren't expecting you to be dallying with one of the maids," Emmett retorted with a laugh. "I can't believe Jasper was right, especially after listening to you pontificate on the rights of the working classes and their need for protection. You're

almost as bad as Uncle, or I *thought* you were. A tad hypocritical, if you ask me."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Lord Jasper walking around the side of the desk, and I ducked my head against Edward's chest.

"Can you blame him, Em? It's the pretty one he was brooding over a while back. Been wondering what happened to her, and 'twould seem that Edward had her stashed away for his own private use."

"Looks like my timing's perfect then." Emmett added in a musing tone. "I've decided to take the advice you two keep throwing my way and look outside my marriage bed for...*entertainment*. I'll be more than happy to keep your secret from Uncle, Edward, as long as you're willing to share."

I began to tremble, tears springing to my eyes.

"That won't be happening," Edward replied, his voice strained.

"Oh, come on, Edward. Remember the fun we had a couple of years back with that little French whore at Madame Barrie's? We could teach your new plaything some tricks. Set her up to earn some money when we're finished with her." Jasper's tone was surprisingly reasonable despite the shocking nature of his words. While I did not fully understand his meaning, I knew enough to be very afraid. My stomach roiled, and I tensed my muscles, preparing to flee at the first opportunity.

"Shh...it's all right, Bella," Edward whispered in my ear and then pushed me behind him, shielding me with his body.

"You've both misunderstood," he said with icy calm. "Bella is not a 'plaything,' and you will not touch her under *any* circumstance."

Peeking past Edward's arm, I saw Jasper's amused expression turn calculating, while Emmett scowled and straightened to his full, intimidating height.

"Don't see how you can stop us, *cousin*," Emmett growled. "Or are you the only one allowed to break the rules?"

"It's not about the bloody rules, Emmett!" Edward shouted and then lowered his voice to hiss, "We're not children competing for Father's attention. She's *important* to me, damn it. You will *not* touch her!"

Emmett stepped back, clearly shocked by Edward's outburst. "But... but she's not

one of us?" he said, sounding genuinely puzzled.

"I don't care. If you so much as go near her, I *will* tear you limb from limb. This is not a game, Emmett; I'm deadly serious."

Edward's words were met with a stunned silence.

"I thought you said the Duke frowns on this sort of thing?" Jasper asked after a moment, his tone clearly puzzled. "It's been damned inconvenient not taking what's on offer, so if I've misunderstood, do let me know. I think your lass's blonde friend would be up for some sport, given the opportunity."

I blanched, my whole body trembling. While Jasper might be right about Jessica's willingness to fraternize as she called it, I was afraid the men might turn their attention Angela's way. I'd never forgive myself if her safety was compromised because of me.

"The rules still apply. Bella's situation is...different."

"Try selling that to Uncle when he returns," Emmett remarked dryly. "I doubt he'll be buying."

"Bella won't *be* here when Father returns," Edward retorted, and I flinched. It was what I wanted—to be gone from Worthington Hall before Lord Carlisle arrived home—but where would I be...and why?

"Hell, Edward, if you're just going to pack her off to some brothel when you're finished with her, there's no need to be so possessive. You might not want to share, but it wouldn't hurt to send her our way when you're done. You're not the only one who likes the look of her." Jasper's words sent a cold shudder rippling through my already trembling body, and Edward reached behind to pull me tight against his back.

"Bella won't be here because she's coming with me when I leave, and I'll be gone before my father returns. She'll be staying with me from now on, under my protection." Edward ground the words out between his clenched teeth.

"Bloody hell, you mean to set her up as your mistress?" Emmett's tone revealed his disbelief.

Edward nodded, and Jasper responded with a long, low whistle.

"Don't think His Grace will be too thrilled with that," Jasper murmured shaking his head. "Won't exactly fit with the new family image he's trying to project...or the alliance he's angling for."

"This has nothing to do with any of that," Edward muttered.

Emmett snorted. "Hell and damnation, Edward! You play the game without putting a foot wrong all these years, and you're going to risk it all for a bit of skirt... *common* skirt at that."

Edward shrugged. "Be that as it may; have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal, dear cousin, though I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when Uncle gets wind of this." Emmett's smile didn't quite meet his eyes.

"Jasper?" Edward turned to his friend, apparently satisfied with Emmett's response.

Jasper put his hands out in a sign of acquiescence and shook his head. "Understood. Didn't mean to offend...just never expected you to get so territorial about one of the serving lasses. It's not like you're the sort to actually *fall* for a female..."

I couldn't see Edward's expression, but whatever it revealed caught the other men's attention.

"Damn it all," Emmett muttered, shaking his head slowly from side to side. "What the bloody hell are you thinking?"

"He's not thinking, not with his head," Jasper said musingly. "Don't worry Em; it'll pass once he gets her out of his system. The novelty will wear off, and he'll come back down to earth...with a thud, no doubt. Might even reconsider the whole 'no sharing' idea just to spice things up."

Edward growled, the sound low and feral, the muscles in his back bunching tightly. If he hadn't been shielding me so protectively, I think he may have launched himself at his friend.

"Whoa...just jesting," Jasper said, his hands raised as he slowly backed away.

"Get the hell out of here...both of you," Edward snarled and then turned his back on them, gathering me into his arms. I couldn't seem to stop shaking, and my teeth

were chattering so hard my jaw hurt.

The door closed quietly, and Edward picked me up, carrying me to the couch. After carefully laying me down with my head resting against an embroidered cushion, he strode to a sideboard, quickly returning with a glass of amber liquid.

"Here, sip this slowly," he urged, crouching down beside me and offering me the glass.

My hands were shaking too badly to hold the glass steady, so Edward sat beside me, supporting my back with one arm while he lifted the drink to my lips. I sipped the liquid, which burned all the way down my throat...it wasn't sherry. Then he set the glass aside and began to rub my hands.

"God, your fingers are like ice. Come, let me warm you."

He lifted me into what I was fast deciding must be a favourite position for him...on his lap. Stifling a giggle at the odd thought, I burrowed into his warm embrace. Was I in shock? I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Bella, sweetheart, talk to me," Edward urged, lifting my chin so my eyes would meet his worried gaze. "You do know I would never let anyone touch you?"

Shuddering, I felt the strange disconnected feeling that had cocooned me in numbness dissipate, and strong emotions flooded the vacuum created by its absence...anger and despair. Bursting into tears—great wrenching sobs that soaked the front of Edward's vest and shirt—I wept against his chest. Under normal circumstances, I was considered a fairly practical, level-headed girl. But I couldn't take any more, the horrid encounter having been the last straw.

Edward enclosed me in his arms, rubbing my back gently with his hands. "Shh, it's all right," he crooned against my ear. "They just don't understand."

"What?" I demanded, pushing away from his chest until I could sit up and stare him in the eye. "What don't they understand? That you want to...to *be* with me without us being wed? Why wouldn't they think they can take their turn next when you've 'had enough' and don't want me any more?"

Edward flinched, and then he reached to pull me back against him, tucking my head under his chin and rocking me in his arms. Despite my outburst, I was too overwhelmed to resist, my emotions a mess of confusion, shame and anger. But having cried myself out, I sniffed back my tears, wiping my sodden cheeks with a

linen handkerchief that Edward produced. Then I noisily blew my nose, not caring one iota that it was considered horribly unladylike to do so...especially in front of a gentleman.

Ha! Edward was as much of a gentleman as I was an aristocrat, I thought grumpily, shoving the sodden handkerchief into his hand. I was sick of crying and sick of feeling like a victim, but I couldn't seem to find an escape from the farce that had become my life.

When I had recomposed myself, I leaned back and looked up into his worried expression. "I can't do this any more, Edward," I murmured, sadly shaking my head. "I'm sorry, I thought I could, but I'm not the person you think I am."

Edward closed his eyes for a moment then gripped my shoulders tightly. "*Please*, Bella, don't let my idiot cousin and friend come between us. Can't you tell how I feel about you?"

"You find me attractive," I acknowledged bitterly. "You...*want* me."

"I do, Bella, more than you can imagine. You're beautiful—*too* beautiful to resist—but it's more than just your appearance that draws me to you. You're charming, intelligent, , brave, and so damn interesting. I never know what you're going to say, what to expect. I've never met anyone like you before...never thought I'd feel this way."

"Feel what way?" I whispered, his words battering at my fragile defences.

"I...I *care* about you, Bella...a great deal." Reaching up, he brushed an errant tear from my cheek and then cupped my face with his hands. "I've never felt this way before about anyone. I...I *adore* you." The look in Edward's eyes was both tender and intense, and I sagged against him, the fight draining from my body.

How could I possibly resist him...and what alternative did I have?

Ignoring the painful reality of the outside world, I lay in the cradle of Edward's arms and let my mind drift, content—for the moment—to just be with him. His hands stroked my body just as he had when we'd been making love, but this time his actions were designed to soothe and comfort rather than arouse. Before long, I found myself drifting off to sleep as the stress and exhaustion of the day—of too many arduous days strung together by nights with too few hours sleep—caught up with me. When I awoke, it was early afternoon, and I was tucked beneath the coverlet in the oversized bed of my new room. My boots and short stockings had

been removed and the buttons at the waistband of my skirt unfastened. My blouse and camisole, of course, were still undone from this morning's...activity.

Curling into a ball, I felt a flush steal over me when I thought about the incredible experience of Edward making love to me while I'd been seated on the edge of his desk, my knees spread wide and my back arching with my bare breasts raised to receive his lavish attentions. I still couldn't quite believe the intimacy that was involved with the entire process. My mind kept picturing the shocking sight and remembering the exquisite feel of his huge member entering me...stretching me...filling to my very limits.

A tremor ran through me as that now-familiar delicious warmth clenched my belly with remembered pleasure and current desire.

Oh, Edward...what have you done to me? I moaned quietly into my fisted hand, disbelieving that I could still be imagining—and *wanting*—to lose myself in the bliss of his love making despite...everything.

"Bella, are you awake?"

Angela's voice startled me, and I sat up to see her sitting in the chair beside the bed.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, pushing the long strands of hair that had come loose out of my face. "Aren't you supposed to be working?" I didn't want her to get into trouble over me.

"I am working...watching over you, seeing if there's anything you need."

"But I thought you were only supposed to help me in the morning?" I puzzled, clutching the front of my blouse to stop it from gaping open.

Angela shrugged. "That's what Mrs. Cope said, but then Lord Edward came down to the kitchens personally, and he made such a fuss." Angela's eyes widened as she said this, and I wondered just *how* much fuss Edward had made. "And now I'm to be yer lady's maid full time."

"I bet that went over well," I muttered.

Angela giggled. "Not exactly. Mrs. Cope's not very happy...she did lose a pastry chef and a maid in the space of a couple of days. Lady Rosalie's in a right tizz, Lord Jasper's sporting a black eye and nobody knows how he got it, and, well...the

household's in a right old uproar."

"Oh my," I whispered, my hand going to my mouth as a giggle escaped my own lips. It felt good to laugh, even if it was at the craziness that had become my life.

Then my smile faded. Thinking about all the things I had learned in the last twenty-four hours and all the things I still did not understand, I came to a decision. While I could not bring myself to regret having been with Edward or deny the ecstasy I'd experienced lying in his arms, ignorance had brought me anything but bliss.

"Angela, where would Jessica be working at the moment?"

"We were supposed to be polishing the silverware this afternoon, but I guess she'll be doing it by herself. Why?"

"I have some questions that I'm hoping she might be able to answer for me. Do you think she'd like some help with the polishing?" I asked.

"I'm sure she would." Angela nodded. "But you'll need to be back here for when the seamstress comes to do your fitting in an hour."

"Very well," I murmured, rapidly retying the laces to my chemise. Buttoning my blouse, I noticed one missing. Edward *had* been in a hurry to get it undone this morning, I mused, but at least I knew where to find it.

"Let's go give Jessica a hand...and get some answers," I said with determination, taking hold of Angela's hand and leading her towards the door.

~AFL~

For those of you concerned by Bella's lack of backbone (though I'd like to see us modern lasses do any better under such trying circumstances with the ridiculously limited options available!) all I can say is, 'Knowledge is Power'.

To my lovely reviewers, thanks for all your support and for helping A Forbidden Love reach 3000 reviews.

I'm merrily writing the next chapter...an EPOV...and should have it up before Christmas. ;)

xxx TLSue

PS: If you're looking for a great, angsty and similarly controversial read from a fantastic author, check out Sins Of My Past by Content1. I'm prereading, know where she's heading (which helps a lot!) and find it absolutely riveting. s/7423404/1/Sins_of_My_Past

Indefinitely

Thanks to Stephenie Meyer for the Twiverse. No copyright infringement intended.

Merry Christmas! (or Happy Holidays to those who don't celebrate Christmas.)

My present to all my wonderful readers and reviewers is to get this chapter out today even though I only arrived home from our holiday a few hours ago and just did my last minute Christmas Shopping on Christmas Eve. Yep...I'm certifiably silly.

Special thanks to totteacher for posting A Forbidden Love's 3000th review. Yay!

I just found out that A Forbidden Love has been listed on the FFn Community, La Tua Cantante (2000+ Club) which is quite an honour. ;)

Thanks, as always, to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for all their hard work and support. Thanks for beta'ing on the holidays...you guys are the best!

Special hello to Amanda Santos...sorry I didn't reply to your PM...but here's the chapter you've been hanging out for, which I assumed you'd prefer anyway. ;)

Updated: Friday December 24th 2011

Words: 2481

Chapter 30

Indefinitely

EPOV

I sat for a long time with Bella sleeping in my arms, staring down at her beautiful face. Studying her features, so delicate in repose, her innocence was unmistakable—innocence that she had offered sweetly in ignorance and that I had

taken brashly out of lust and an overwhelming desire to possess.

There was no denying that the truly lovely girl who had so completely captured my attention, and irrefutably my heart, was utterly blameless and completely undeserving of the treatment she had received...from her so-called betters and, if I was honest with myself, from me.

She'd trusted me, sweetly and ingenuously giving herself to me when I had asked—no, practically *demand*ed—that she surrender her body...her security...her very *life* to me. I'd promised to keep her safe, and yet I was too conceited, too arrogantly secure in my place in the world, to consider locking a damned door when I was intent on ravishing the girl in broad daylight when anyone could—and *did*—come barging in.

Sighing, I leaned down to press my lips to the soft curls that had framed her face and now tumbled in disarray past her shoulder. A few loose strands curled beguilingly against her partially bared breast.

What she did to me...

Jasper was right. I'd never felt such desire, such wanting, such intense and all-consuming longing, and it was definitely affecting my decision-making. But Emmett was right, also, and my heart was well and truly engaged. It ached. I felt things for this girl I had most definitely never felt before.

My words had been nothing less than the truth when I said I was intrigued by her, liked and especially cared for her more than I'd ever expected to care about a female other than my sister. But my feelings ran deeper than that. I was determined to do so much more than just protect her—though that was proving particularly difficult. My desire was to make her feel safe, cherished and above all...*loved*.

Groaning, I let my head fall back against the padded chair, tightening my arms and tucking Bella close against me. She murmured in her sleep, her small, elegantly formed fingers sliding in between the buttons of my shirt and brushing against bare skin. Her touch—incidental, conscious or otherwise—had a predictable effect, and my almost-constant erection pressed eagerly against her hip.

Suppressing a snort, I acknowledged that I really was a monster, and I had treated her monstrously...but I knew no other path to take to secure her place in my life and bed, just as surely as she had found a place in my heart.

"Oh, Bella," I breathed softly, and she snuggled in close, her hair brushing against

my chin.

"Love you, Edward," she murmured in her sleep, and my throat all but closed, the ache in my chest becoming unbearable.

While still somewhat disbelieving of the situation I found myself in, considering my long-held belief that falling prey to such debilitating emotional weakness was not within my nature, I was no longer able to deny the obvious.

"It would appear that I love you, too, dear girl," I whispered, contemplating the repercussions of my admission.

Protecting Bella was no longer a matter of duty, a promise to be kept. Her happiness and wellbeing had suddenly taken on far greater significance than my own...a circumstance inexplicable for one of my class and unimaginable to my peers, but very real, nonetheless.

In keeping with the revelation that had transformed my priorities in the space of a heartbeat, I decided that as much as I would like to continue holding her on my lap...indefinitely, Bella would no doubt be more comfortable reposing in bed. She clearly needed the rest, and prosaically, I had work to attend to and certain matters to bring to order.

With a minimal amount of jostling, I rose with Bella carefully nestled in my arms and made my way to her suite via the adjoining hallway.

Tonight, I would take the time to delineate the plans I had for her future...for *our* future together. Then, when her fears and concerns were allayed, I would tell her of my reciprocal feelings before spending the rest of the night worshipping her body with my own. In that way, I hoped that my admittedly animalistic desire and the more tender sensibilities of my conscience would both be assuaged...and Bella would be loved in every way I knew how.

To my intense annoyance, when I entered Bella's suite, I found it empty. The young maid, Angela, should have been waiting for her new...*mistress's* return.

Groaning, I could not deny that life would be considerably easier when I had Bella ensconced in her new abode. The staff would be hired with the explicit purpose of protecting and serving their new mistress, enjoined to treat her with the utmost respect or face instant dismissal. Irrespective of my intentions, I was aware that I was stretching the bounds of realistic expectation—let alone propriety—in attempting to set Bella up as *my* mistress in the very household where she had been

previously, and only very recently, employed in service.

Smiling at the absurdity of the situation that I, in my infatuated folly, had created, I managed to manoeuvre the bedclothes and lay Bella down without waking her. Rather than the chore it might have seemed, gently removing her shoes and short stockings was a pleasure.

I couldn't quite believe she'd obeyed my audacious demand that she forego her pantaloons, though I was exceedingly glad that she had done so. Their absence facilitated this morning's encounter by providing ease of access to her delectable flesh, and I smiled at the memory of her uninhibited and passionate response to my lovemaking.

Despite taking the greatest care not to arouse her, she moved restlessly on the bed, and my fingers itched to brush against the bare skin of her legs.

Considering it a testament to my newly defined priorities—and a lifetime of character training and the benefits of good breeding—I refrained from taking advantage of the situation. Though I may have enjoyed the sight of Bella's truly beautiful limbs laid bare before me...and the glimpses of breast made visible by the gaping of her still-undone blouse...swallowing hard, I drew on the reserves that had been sorely tested since Bella had come into my life and tamped down on my desire.

After releasing the buttons at the waist of her servant's skirt—how I looked forward to seeing her dressed in a manner to which I hoped she would enjoy becoming accustomed—I pulled the bedcover gently over her too-tempting form. Leaning down to tenderly kiss her forehead, I then left the room, closing the door quietly behind me.

~AFL~

Bypassing Henson, I strode purposefully into the hectic bustle of the kitchens, determined to make my wishes known expressly and without equivocation. My presence created an unmistakeable stir, engendering the attention of the industriously engaged servants whose efforts slowed considerably as they watched on with blatant curiosity.

"Mrs. Cope," I nodded in response to the clearly flustered head housekeeper's curtsy.

"How may I be of service, m'lord?" she asked, rapidly regaining her characteristic composure.

"Quite simply, you can do as I previously requested and make sure that Angela is freely available to fulfil her new assignment." My tone brooked no argument...or so I thought.

"But, m'lord. The girl is needed elsewhere. Since you have, in effect, assigned young Bella to other...ahem...*duties*, also, fulfilling your extraordinary request would mean the household would be down not one but *two* vital members of staff."

"Then hire *other* staff to replace them from the village," I retorted, and the housekeeper's shoulders stiffened. Raising a brow at the woman's resistance, I reminded myself that Mrs. Cope had been in service at Worthington Hall since I was a boy. But I was no longer the impish lad who had snuck into the kitchens to be indulged with extra sweets, and my wishes would be honoured one way or another.

"I realise that my actions may have caused a certain degree of inconvenience, Mrs. Cope. But with the last of my father's guests having finally tired of the exceptional hospitality of the Hall..." my thinly veiled compliment was met by a 'harumph,' but I did detect a slight softening of her formidable expression... "only the regular household members are in residence. Surely the girls' losses can be covered by the remaining staff?"

My final query was accompanied with what I'd been assured was a dazzling smile, one I had put to good use as a boy—and on occasion since reaching manhood—and Mrs. Cope's slightly stunned expression indicated that a successful outcome was imminent.

"Well, if it was just up to me, m'lord, it wouldn't be a problem," she conceded. "But His Grace left Lady Rosalie in charge of household matters, and..."

"You let me worry about Lady Rosalie," I replied with determination and left with the housekeeper's assurances that Angela would be reassigned as requested, immediately...and *permanently*.

~AFL~

After taking Henson to task for not following my previous instructions to the letter, the grim-faced butler referred me to the green drawing room when I requested knowledge of Rosalie's location. The polite but firm approach I intended taking with my cousin-in-law was rendered obsolete, however, by the conversation I overheard from the partially opened doorway.

"He's gone too far," Rosalie hissed in that screechy voice of hers that set my teeth

on edge. "It's bad enough that your uncle requested he come and stay here and then put him in charge while he went on his honeymoon, a veritable slap in the face, Emmett. But if Edward thinks he can interfere with the running of the household... my domain...he's got another think coming!"

"Now, Rose," Emmett placated. "You know I find all those estate meetings hellishly boring. I'd much rather be engaged in more gentlemanly pursuits than worry about which crops to plant or the goings-on in some dreary mine or factory. Honestly, Edward's as bad as Uncle with the way he has to be involved with the running of things. If the two of them weren't so loftily positioned, society would accuse them of dabbling in trade!"

I smirked at the intended insult, well knowing the *ton's* opinion of gentlemen who lowered themselves to actually *work* for a living. It was a wonder that more titles and estates weren't lost to bankruptcy considering how little effort was put into their management by those who nonetheless expected to reap considerable rewards.

With the doorknob in my hand, I went to make my presence known but hesitated at Rosalie's response.

"Well, he's gone too far now. Edward's 'golden boy' status is going to be well and truly tarnished when His Grace finds out his son has disobeyed a direct order and taken up with that brown-eyed slut. We'll see who's the favourite once that little morsel is revealed!"

"Ah...but what a tasty little morsel," Jasper drawled just as Rosalie stormed from the room, her face turning ashen when she saw my expression and realised I had overheard her words. Flouncing past me, she did not stop to face my formidable wrath, leaving Jasper, with his back to me, to continue on his ill-considered path.

"I, for one, plan on sitting back while Edward's passion runs its course. His interest is sure to wane quickly. The lass is clearly an innocent and unlikely to satisfy his sophisticated tastes for long. Then when he's done with her, having taught her the basics, she'll be ripe for the picking and no doubt eager for a more advanced education in the trade that Edward, in his infinite wisdom, will have reduced her to. Or would one consider prostitution a promotion from the drudgery of a kitchen maid's lot in life? At least the gal will get to enjoy herself whilst earning a living."

Jasper's tone indicated his words were spoken somewhat in jest, but the sardonic humour of his expression quickly sobered when I grabbed his shoulder and spun him to meet the driving force of my fist.

"Edward!" Emmett rebuked, quickly rising from his place by the fire to hold me back when I would have lifted Jasper from the ground, intent on punishing him some more. "What's got into you, man? She's just a servant...a nobody. Are you really going to let a chit of a girl come between you and your best friend?"

"I told you; she's more to me than that," I growled, shaking the hand that had begun to sting like the blue blazes. My boxing skills were well-honed and apparently quite effective, but I'd never attempted bare-knuckle before. "I warned you both what would happen if you tried to touch her!"

"But I didn't...I haven't!" Jasper defended, standing with difficulty, one hand covering his left eye. "I only meant to have some fun when you're done with her...not before. You can't be serious about this business of setting her up as your mistress. She's a *serving girl*, for heaven's sake—even the *demimonde* will laugh you to scorn!"

"You have no idea who she is or what you're talking about, Jasper. But if you expect to continue as my friend—and in your pursuit of my sister—you'd better watch your words. Bella is in my life now, and you can accept that fact or we're done!"

If I thought I'd shocked my friend and cousin during the altercation in my study, it was nothing to the expressions that appeared on their faces at the conclusion of this particular tirade. If they'd doubted the seriousness of my intentions, they did no longer.

"Edward...you know your father will never allow it. Not with the new moral stand he's taken, let alone his determination to garner the approval of the crown to help secure concessions from Parliament for his latest bill. Reputation is paramount in these matters."

I knew better than to underestimate Emmett's perceptiveness, but it was a while since I'd seen him emerge from behind his jocular facade. His words were not without veracity, and I was aware that the path I had chosen would not be easily traversed.

Grimacing, I ran a hand raggedly through my hair, my shoulders slumping as the fight drained from my body. Leaning down, I assisted Jasper to his feet in tacit apology for my overreaction. If I was standing in either of their shoes, I'd no doubt think I'd taken leave of my senses also. If they could only get to know Bella a little—something I could *never* allow—they'd understand my willingness to risk so much.

"I appreciate your concern, Em, but I'm not a complete fool. I'll be discreet, and I'll toe the line in all other regards. But Bella will remain under my protection... *indefinitely*...and that's an end to the matter."

~AFL~

Hmmm...if only it was that simple. But at least Lord Smitten is starting to acknowledge his feelings for our lovely, Adorabella.

Merry Christmas and thanks for all the lovely reviews. (Best pressie ever!)

xxx TLSue

Answers

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks so much for all the support, encouragement and rec's for this story. I especially appreciate all the reviews. Sorry I don't reply more often...though I promise, I read every one! :D

Warning:

This chapter is very angsty and was incredibly difficult to write. I even considered skipping over the topic, but it is integral to the story. My betas suggested I include the background research info I found on Wikipedia, which I've done so but a 'toned down' version. The reality of life for girls and women before the 20th century was even worse than I had assumed. I'm not exactly sure why we romanticise this time in history, but I guess we like reading the fairytale/Cinderella version of events...I know I do.

"The age of consent for heterosexual acts in England was set at 12 in 1275 during the reign of Edward I. It was lowered to 10 in the latter part of the 16th century.[52] The wording was along the lines of "It shall be deemed illegal to ravage a maiden who is not of age" - at the time "of age" being 12...A fine was payable for the taking of a girl's maidenhood by force; the rules varied according to status and may not have been applied rigidly to commoners.[53] ...A concern that young girls were being sold into brothels led Parliament to raise the age of consent to 13 in 1875 under the Offences against the Person Act 1875. After W. T. Stead's *Maiden Tribute* articles, the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 raised the age of consent to 16." (Wikipedia: Age of Consent in Europe.)

I know this story is a bit gritty in places, but I wanted to address some of the issues relevant at the time while also writing a love story with a very happy ending. Stay with me and you can let me know if you think I succeeded!

Thank you so much to my wonderful betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for beta'ing over the Christmas break. You guys are amazing.

Welcome to spechell from France...and thanks for giving A Forbidden Love its 3200th review. Cheers!

Updated: Tuesday December 27th 2011

Words: 2495

Chapter 31

Answers

BPOV

"Wot d'ye think ye're doin' 'ere?" Jessica demanded, looking up from where she sat all alone at a work table, an intimidating pile of silverware in front of her.

"Don't be like that, Jess," Angela admonished quietly. "She's here to help...and she has a favour to ask."

"A favour? Miss 'igh and mighty wants something from the likes of me? Well that's a nice to do." Jessica exclaimed sarcastically, but then her expression turned calculating. "What's in it for me?"

Nonplussed, I stared at her for a moment before an idea sprang to mind. "A new dress," I declared. There were well over two dozen lovely gowns waiting to be fitted to my measurements in the dressing room of my new suite, more than three times the number of dresses in my entire wardrobe back home in Forkston and far more than I could possibly need in my current situation. "And one for you, too, Angela...that's if you wouldn't mind wearing a hand-me-down from either Lady Alice or the late Duchess?" I finished tentatively, worrying my lower lip with my teeth.

"Mind? Ye think we'd *mind* a new dress made from a lady's gown? Are ye mad?" Jessica retorted. "And ye'll 'elp with the polishing?"

I nodded, and the chubby blonde girl's face lit with glee. "Wotever ye want...it's yers!" she declared, and I smiled at the transformation my offer had engendered, Angela and I taking our places across the table and getting straight to work.

"So...out wiv it. Wot do I owe ye fer a new dress? Must be sumpt'in' pretty big, I reckon." Jessica's brow furrowed, and I quickly set her mind at ease.

"Just information, that's all," I explained. "I'm tired of not knowing what's going on around me...or what is expected of me. I need answers to a myriad of questions that I'm hoping you'll be able to help me with."

I could have asked Angela, but after the tale of woe she had told me just that morning, I was worried my questions would distress her further...and, despite her dreadful experience, I wasn't sure she would have the answers I was looking for.

Jessica's scowl deepened. "Don't know nothin' about no myri...meeria...wothaveye...but ye can ask if ye like." She shrugged, and I swallowed hard, wondering where to start. Taking a deep breath, I blurted out the words that I could scarcely believe I was uttering aloud, let alone needing to know their meaning in relation to my own person and future.

"What is a brothel...what happens there? And what does a...a...*whore* actually do?" I'd heard girls called that word on my journey here to Worthington, but other than receiving the impression that it was a particularly derogatory term, I didn't know what it meant.

Both girls gaped at me, their mouths hanging open, and my heart sank. If these girls—who had seen and experienced so much more than I could ever imagine—d—were shocked by the mere mention of these words, the threat that Lords' Emmett and Jasper seemed to think was hanging over my head must be even worse than I feared.

"Jessica?" I murmured tentatively when she just continued to stare.

"Wot the 'ell ye want to know about them things for?" she demanded, and a shiver ran down my spine. Deciding that telling the truth, no matter how intimate and personal, was required if I expected to receive the information I needed, I told them about the incident with Edward's cousin and friend, shyly alluding to what had preceded it.

"Edward said he won't let anyone else touch me, but the other, er...*gentlemen* seemed convinced that he...he will eventually tire of me, and that once that inevitably occurs, I'll be passed off to...to...another gentleman...or to work in a brothel."

"Bleedin' 'eck," Jessica breathed, a fairly accurate assessment of the situation.

"At least Lord Edward said he's gonna protect ye...and he told the other lords not to touch ye," Angela murmured, reaching to pat my shoulder soothingly. I smiled wanly, appreciating her comfort and calm support in the middle of this bizarre conversation and then returned my attention to Jessica.

"Yeah...but 'ow much trust can ye put in the promise of a toff?" Jessica voiced the

question that troubled my thoughts.

"Which is exactly why I want to know what the lordships were talking about," I admitted. "I...I should have told you girls how little I understood of Lord Edward's intentions before...before I let things go so far, but I didn't realise how little I knew."

"Aye...hard to know 'ow iggerent ye are when ye're the one that don't know nothing,' aint it?" Jessica acknowledged, though it took me a moment to decipher the meaning behind her convoluted phrasing.

"So...will you tell me what those words mean?" I asked again, and both girls exchanged a look.

"A brothel is a place where girls work earning money for the codger who owns the place, by, er...servicing the men that come there to get their jollies."

Staring intently at Jessica, I concentrated on her words.

"Servicing?" I asked for clarification.

"Yeah...on their back...ye know?" Jessica shrugged. "Spreadin' their legs for the fellas who pay to climb on top fer a ride."

"Oh!" I gasped. "You mean...you mean that the girls are paid to...to...*lay* with the men?"

I took Jessica's shrug as confirmation, and swallowed the bile that rose in my throat.

"So...the girl doesn't *know* the men before hand, and has to lay with a different man every night?" I whispered, horrified.

Jessica snorted. "Not just one fella a night...try about ten!"

I frowned, not understanding, and then I felt the colour drain from my face as comprehension dawned. "Ten different men in one night?"

"Every damned night, or so me second cousin told me when she got to come home one time from the place where she works," Jessica confirmed, her words and the horrifying pictures they conjured following me as I ran for the water closet at the end of the hallway when it became apparent that the contents of my stomach would be making an unwelcome appearance.

The girls must have followed me, for when I was able to focus on something other than trying to control the dreadful heaving of my insides, Angela was crouched beside me, holding a few loose strands of hair back from my face.

"Are ye sure she ain't up the duff?" I heard Jessica query, typically having no idea what she was talking about.

Angela shook her head. "She only lay with Lord Edward for the first time last night, remember?"

"And again this morning in his study, the lucky cow," Jessica muttered, as I wiped my mouth with the edge of my skirt, finally confident I had my wayward bodily functions back under control.

After helping me walk unsteadily back to the work room, the girls and I focused on polishing the silverware in front of us for a time before I felt up to asking more questions.

"A...a *whore* is the name given to girls who work in such places?" I asked croakily, my throat hoarse.

"And a whole lot of other nasty names," Jessica muttered. "Girls who sell their bodies for a livin' don't always work in brothels. Sometimes they work out of alehouses or inns, but there's always some fella/ lordin' it over 'em and keepin' most of the earnings."

"But why...why would a girl choose such a horrid profession?" I asked the question that bewildered me the most about this entire, sordid topic.

The look Jessica gave me told me she thought my question was particularly stupid.

"Nobody *chooses* the life, Bella." Her voice dripped disdain. "Half of them got took right off the street when they was just girls...thirteen or fourteen if they're lucky, but once they've been took, there's no goin' 'ome."

"What?" I gasped. "But that's...that's..."

"The law...as long as the girl's no younger than ten," Angela added, and I stared at her disbelieving. Her words must be some sort of joke...a terrible...horrifying jest. But her serious expression told me otherwise, and my stomach clenched sickeningly.

"What do you mean, the law?" I whispered.

"Age of consent, they call it," Jessica explained with a grimace. "As long as a girl's turned ten, the fellas ain't doin' nuffin' wrong. Well...she's supposed to give her permission before...*ye know*...but nobody worries about that. Not like no one would listen if she complained." Both girls shrugged, and I stared from one to the other.

"But...but...they're just *children*...little girls. How can that be legal? Does the crown know? Parliament? Surely, if they did, they would change the law to make it illegal."

"Oh, they know, all right. 'Tis the bleedin' lords in Parliament that make the rules; but they don't want anything changed 'cos it suits 'em. Most of 'em like their girls young...the younger the better."

"But...not *all* the lords are like that, surely?" I murmured, my voice trailing away to the barest whisper as I fought to keep my stomach from heaving again. "Not Lord Carlisle or Lord Edward."

"No...not them." Angela's ready agreement was like a soothing balm to my battered soul. "In fact, that's one of the changes His Grace, the duke, is fighting for with them new laws he's trying to get passed...to stop people being sold as slaves and little children from working down in the mines... and to raise the age of consent."

"Never bleedin' 'appen," Jessica interjected.

"Well...at least Lord Carlisle and Lord Edward are *trying* to change things with that alliance they're a part of...wot with lobbying the crown and all," Angela insisted.

My relief at the knowledge that Edward was opposed to such dreadful practises and actually working to change the laws that perpetuated such travesties was profound, but it didn't change the awful reality that I was only just becoming aware of.

"But...but...how can a girl be forced to work in such a manner?" I asked, s,,,mtill perplexed. "What about the girl's family...her parents? Don't they get a say?"

Again Angela and Jessica shrugged.

"Girls mostly get took from poor places...poor families. Sometimes it's the girl's family that's sold her for a few coins in the first place. The brothel owners ain't idiots. They don't take girls from families that'll make too much fuss, and if they do, they don't put 'em to work straight away in case the family's got money to buy 'em

back...but that don't usually happen. Even if the girl ain't been used yet, the damage is already done...if ye know wot I mean."

I did indeed know what Jessica meant and nodded absently. It was as if the world I'd been raised in was make-believe...a fairytale existence that had been replaced by a dark and terrifying new reality.

"Older girls sometimes take up the trade 'cos they got no place else to go, no other way to keep from starvin' to death," Jessica continued while I listened avidly, though a part of me wanted to beg her to stop.

"Are there no alternatives for a girl without family or support?" I asked, fearful of the answer she would give, but expecting it all the same.

"She gets into service, if she's lucky, and hopes like 'ell the master of the 'ouse ain't too evil a bugger. Otherwise it's a whorehouse or the poorhouse, and they're both about as bad as each other," she concluded with a sad shrug.

"Oh, my," I murmured, tears springing to my eyes, and Angela reached to place a hand over my trembling fingers.

"Don't worry, Bella. That won't happen to ye. Lord Edward said he'll take care of ye, didn't he?"

I nodded shakily.

"Well...ye don't have anything to worry about then, do ye?"

"Nothing at all," I whispered.

"Not like me," Jessica muttered disconsolately, and I looked up to see tears welling in her eyes.

"Jessica?" I murmured, actually relieved to have someone *else's* problem to focus on rather than the terrifying state of the world and my own increasingly uncertain future. "What is it?"

"Oh, just the usual. Rotten cheatin' boyfriend won't marry me, even though he got me up the duff," she sniffed, wiping her nose rather crassly on the back of her sleeve. Not that I was one to judge, I mused wryly.

"Up the duff?" I enquired, my eyebrows rising.

"A bun in the oven...in the family way...a babe on the way," Jessica clarified, and I gazed at her, shocked.

"Oh...my..." I eventually whispered.

"Aye," she acknowledged, rolling her eyes.

"We're talking Mike, I presume?" I asked softly, reaching across the table to capture one of Jessica's hands in my own.

"The bugger." She confirmed with a nod.

"And he won't marry you?"

Sighing, Jessica pulled her hand from mine and studied her work-worn fingers. "We're both in service, and ye can't be married in service, and there's no work in the village, and me mam will kill me when she finds out, and I'll probably end up in the poorhouse meself." Jessica's face fell and the tears flowed in earnest down her cheeks.

"But some of my father's staff were married, I mean some of the local, er...*squire's* staff were married...that my father knew...of," I concluded lamely, not that Jessica appeared to notice my lapse. Angela, on the other hand, sent me an odd look.

"A large household like this is very strict about such things," Angela explained. "And not the place for babes and younguns."

"No...of course not," I murmured, comparing what I knew of the grandeur of Worthington Hall with the relative informality of my childhood home. "But doesn't the duke have farms and factories and such where Mike could get work?" I suggested.

"I s'pose." Jessica shrugged. "But he's got his 'eart set on bein' 'ead footman one day. I don't think he wants to work in a factory or on a farm."

"Well 'e should 'ave thought of that before he got it out of his pants, then, shouldn't 'e?" Angela retorted, and now that I actually understood to what she was referring, I silently agreed.

"What about if I have a word with Edward...I mean, *Lord* Edward, and see if he could help?" I offered, and Jessica's eyes shot up to my face.

"Ye'd do that, for me?"

"Of course," I nodded. "Though are you sure it's what you want...marriage to Mike?" I did my best to hide the shudder that ran through me at the thought of being tied for life to the philandering wastrel.

"I...I love him," Jessica admitted reluctantly. "Besides...wot choice do I 'ave?"

What choice indeed? I mused sadly, thinking of the conversation I would be having with Edward at the first opportunity, and the many things I needed to talk to him about now that I finally...*finally*...understood the way the world worked and the truly fearful dangers I faced.

As if the mere thought of one day having to live without Edward was not terrifying enough.

~AFL~

Yep...horribly angsty but some lighter, fluffier and *ahem* lemonier stuff ahead, I promise...before the drama starts again. ;)

xxx TLSue

PS: I hope you all had a lovely Christmas. I won't wish you a Happy New Year just yet, as I'll be updating before then. :D

Passion

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I own a propensity for creating angst and UST and hopefully...zesty lemons. ;)

You guys were so supportive of my last chapter that I decided to take the time (several hours...argh!) to reply to all the lovely reviews and holiday wishes I received over the last few days. Sorry if I missed you...and sorry I don't reply more often. I love hearing from you, and I'm often inspired to add in things I hadn't thought of (or that I'd forgotten!)...so thank you, very much for all your support and input. I'm caught up with what I'd already written, and I am madly writing to try and keep up with my three-times-a-week updating schedule, so I probably won't reply too often for a while unless you have a specific question you'd like answered. :D

Thank you so very very much to Squeaky Zorro for beta'ing when she had the stomach flu (seriously... above and beyond!) and to Chloe Cougar for beta'ing over Christmas. You. Guys. Are. Amazing!

Updated: Thursday December 29th 2011

Words: 2335

Chapter 32

Passion

BPOV

In stark and surreal contrast to the horrifying revelations of the day, I spent the remainder of the afternoon being fitted for one beautiful gown after another.

"The styles are no longer in the latest mode, but, of course, the fabrics and trims are of the highest quality, m'lady...I mean Miss...I mean..."

"Just call me Bella," I suggested to the stammering seamstress. The poor woman might be struggling to know how to address me, but I could tell she was doing her best to be polite. This was testament, no doubt, to the fact that she would answer to Edward directly regarding her treatment of me...or so Angela informed me.

Doing my best to put the woman and her trembling assistant at ease, I treated them the way I had been taught to deal with a merchant or unfamiliar servant back home. As I took charge in a firm but considerate manner, both ladies seemed to welcome my confident assurance, and they soon relaxed.

While making the minor adjustments needed to fit the gowns to my measurements, the seamstress made suggestions for how to modernise the lovely dresses. Smiling, I offered my encouragement and thanks.

My new wardrobe would be quite different from the one I had previously worn. Half the dresses were being adapted from those belonging to Lady Alice, a young maiden of similar age but much higher rank than me, of course. The rest of the dresses were gowns previously worn by the previous Duchess and made from richer fabrics—both in colour and opulence of fabric—with lower necklines and more provocative designs than were normally worn by one of my age and marital status.

Having no real idea of when or where I would make use of such an extravagant range of gowns, I sighed. But I did not balk at the odd *variety* of styles, merely reminding myself of the many questions to which I was determined to receive answers.

With Angela's help, I set aside two dresses—one for her and one for Jessica—choosing less formal gowns that the girls could wear for special occasions. My sewing skills may have been poor, but they were not nonexistent, so I decided to do my best to adapt the dresses for my friends myself. It didn't seem appropriate to ask the seamstress or her assistant to do the work for me.

While it was my intention to continue spending a part of each day in the kitchen—if I was still welcome—taking a day or two away from my work seemed wise. The sideways looks and snide comments I expected to receive were more than I could manage at this point, my decidedly rattled nerves needing a chance to recover before I was faced with any further criticism or abuse. The temptation to remain hidden away in my new rooms was strong, but I feared the isolation would be harmful in the long run.

When Angela left to collect the supper we would share together in my new sitting room, I decided to don one of the gowns that had only needed minor alterations and was consequently ready for me to wear. It had been Lady Alice's, I surmised, a soft, buttercup-yellow gown not dissimilar to a favourite dress of mine from home. With sweetly puffed sleeves and a fitted but not overly revealing bodice complimented by the gracefully flowing skirt, it was feminine and very pretty.

Edward had left no specific instructions for the evening, nor had he delivered any more shockingly revealing *negligees*. The nightwear that had arrived that morning along with the gowns, while lovely, was more in keeping with what a maiden or wife would wear than a *mistress*. , At least...that was what I assumed.

Mistress...of course I was familiar with the term. My mother had been the mistress of Swan Manor as Lady Rosalie was the current mistress of Worthington Hall. I supposed that every wife was the mistress of her home, however grand or modest. But when Emmett had accused Edward of planning to 'set me up as his mistress,' his outraged tone and disparaging comments gave me the distinct impression that Edward had something quite different in mind. What exactly the alternative meaning of the word could be, I did not know, giving me more questions to which I was determined to receive answers. I'd not asked Jessica what she knew of the term, deciding that some things I would prefer to hear directly from Edward's lips.

Dressed in the lovely gown and with my hair styled to the best of my newly acquired ability, I studied my reflection in the full-length dressing room mirror. What I saw gave my battered confidence quite a boost, encouraged as I was by the image of the fashionable-looking young lady smiling shyly back at me. I still wasn't sure what Edward—a man who could have anyone he wanted—saw in me. But at least I wouldn't be facing him in the guise of a servant this time.

"Bella?" Angela's gasp caught my attention, and I turned to see her staring at me from the doorway. Smiling, I walked toward her, but she backed away with her hands held up in front of her as if to ward me off.

"Who are ye...really?" she demanded. "And don't try fobbin' me off with that rubbish story ye gave us when ye first come 'ere. You ain't never worked in no inn, though I can't for the life of me think 'ow ye learned to cook like ye do."

I froze, fear at the thought of exposure robbing me of breath.

"Don't be afraid, Bella. I'm ye friend...I wouldn't never do ought to 'urt ye," she said with obvious sincerity. "But I'd like to hear the truth."

Swallowing hard, I considered my options and decided that trusting Angela with my secret would be a relief.

"I'm...I'm Belinda Brown," I offered hesitantly, and Angela's expression turned doubtful. "But I wasn't always," I admitted.

"So...who were ye before then?" she asked, coming close enough to capture my hands in hers, entreating me to trust her with her gentle expression.

"I was Isabella Swan, daughter of Sir Charles Swan, squire of Swan Manor, retired military officer and close friend to the Duke of Worthington," I whispered the words, my lower lip trembling to hear the declaration that I doubted I would ever make again.

"Oh...my..." Angela murmured then her eyes widened and she released my hands. "Ye be Lord Hunter's runaway bride. The papers say ye may have murdered yer own father!"

"But I didn't!" I cried. "Lord James wouldn't take no for an answer when my father rejected his plea for my hand in marriage, and he...he *shot* my father in the back! Before he died, Papa told me to flee...to make my way here to Worthington Hall and ask Lord Carlisle for help and protection...but..."

"But ye were too late 'cos 'e'd left for 'is 'oneymoon with Lady Esme," Angela whispered, aghast. "And ye found Lord Edward instead or rather...Lord Edward found ye!"

"Exactly," I murmured wryly.

"But why didn't ye tell Lord Edward who ye are?" Angela puzzled, and then her expression changed to one of horror. "Of course...ye couldn't! Lord Hunter is a friend of 'is, and Lord Edward would 'ave 'anded ye over in a 'earbeat...the toffs always take care of each other. Oh...ye did the right thing keeping quiet, but what a right mess ye're in now. How will ye ever get it sorted?"

"I won't...I *can't*...not now. I had hoped to stay hidden, working as a servant until Lord Carlisle returned, but now I must remain Belinda Brown forever."

"Is there no way to get yer old life back?" Angela asked, her expression sympathetic.

I shook my head. "Not now that Edward...that I..." I shrugged, and Angela's lips pursed.

"Bleedin' toffs who can't keep it in their pants!" she growled, and I smiled wanly, touched by her defence.

"Yes...well...I could have acted a little more circumspectly myself, I imagine. But

I'm afraid I let my, er...*desire* to be with Edward overwhelm my discretion and good sense."

Angela surprised me by giggling. "I wouldn't judge yeself too harshly. I don't think there are many females in all of England who could resist Lord Edward once he set 'isself to wooing 'em, and 'e was awfully set on 'aving ye. Can ye imagine the fuss there'll be if he ever finds out who ye really are?"

Angela's words galvanised me to action. Grabbing her forearms, I gave them a gentle shake.

"He must *never* know, Angela!" I insisted. "Ye must never tell a soul...promise me. My very life may depend on it...not just Edward's good opinion of me."

Angela's expression sobered, and she nodded thoughtfully. "I think ye be right, Bella. The nobility can be dangerous when they're crossed, and they don't like to be made fools of. Though Lord Edward might surprise ye...'e does seem to care for ye."

He adored me, or so he'd said. I could only hope that he meant it and that he would never find out how I'd deceived him. Regardless of my motivation or intention, I could see no good coming from the truth being revealed...unless...unless...

Ruthlessly suppressing the flimsy hope that had burgeoned in my heart, I filled the time after supper with some sketching while I awaited Edward's arrival. Angela was worried about leaving me alone, but I insisted that I did not need babysitting and that she should have some time to herself for the remainder of the evening. Her surprise and relief were palpable, and my heart went out to the girl who had only ever known a life of dreadfully long hours and numbingly hard work...when she wasn't being shockingly abused. While there was nothing I could do to make up for all the pain and indignity she had suffered, at least as my lady's maid, I could make sure her burden was not so arduous.

In truth, the opportunity to indulge in my artistic hobby was most welcome. It had been a long time since I'd done anything for the sheer pleasure of it, and my pencil fairly flew across the page. In no time, I'd recreated many of the key moments that had occurred since my arrival at the Hall...all involving Edward.

My first drawing was of him seated proudly on his horse, Sabre, just as I'd seen him from the work room window on my first day. My second sketch was of him carrying me away from danger the day of the hunt, with a focus on the expression I'd seen on his face...determination, possessiveness, power and concern.

When I was happy with the first two pictures, I sketched the dining room at the inn in Forkston, with the two of us seated across the table from each other. It took a couple of attempts before I was satisfied with the result, but when I was, it showed Edward's beautiful face aglow with candlelight, his expression intense in the moment when he had told me that he could no longer stay away from me.

Sighing, I relived the memory: the disbelief I'd felt that a man like Edward could be interested in one such as I, the joy and anticipation I'd felt, wondering if he was going to kiss me, and the excitement at the thought of being able to spend more time with him.

Did I regret the way things had turned out?

I knew I *should*, but in my heart...I didn't. Of course, I would never have allowed things to go so far if my father was still alive, or if Lord Carlisle had been in residence when I'd first arrived at Worthington Hall...not that there would have been any opportunity for impropriety if that had been the case. After a formal introduction to Lord Carlisle's son, I would have been quickly dismissed as a virtual nobody. Any attraction he may have felt for me—the idea still seeming preposterous to my way of thinking—would have been ruthlessly quashed in the face of my total unsuitability for anything other than polite discourse over afternoon tea, or to make up the numbers for a game of bridge.

My conscience pricked when I realised that, despite the dangers I continued to face and the questions I was yet to have answered, a part of me was relieved that things had turned out the way they had. I would have done anything to bring my father back to life, but I could not bring myself to regret being with Edward, despite the shocking nature of our relationship.

Cringing, I wondered what sort of person that made me.

A very foolish girl, I supposed...but one who was very much in love and more than a little overcome with desire. Even the thought of being with him in that way caused anticipation to curl in my belly, creating a hunger that only Edward could satisfy.

With my mind filled with images of the man I had come to love beyond reason and propriety—watching me...holding me...naked and rising over me in my bed and in my arms—I continued to sketch, but nothing quite so intimate, of course. Instead, I drew him leaning against the edge of his desk the way he'd been when I entered his study the morning before. Recalling the predatory gleam in his eye, one I was becoming very familiar with, a heated sensation flushed my skin.

Undeniably impatient, my eyes kept skittering to the clock on the mantelpiece. With the hour reaching eight o'clock, I sighed again, the time moving slowly, despite the enjoyment I was receiving from indulging my passion for drawing.

Deciding to indulge another passion—for fantasy—I sketched a picture of Edward and me dancing together in an imaginary ballroom.

A girl could dream.

~AFL~

For those of you missing their Edward and Bella interaction, they'll be back together next chapter with lots to discuss...if they can keep their hands off of each other long enough to actually sit and talk!

I hope you all had a lovely Christmas break and got to spend time with the people you love. Next update New Year's Eve. ;)

xxx TLSue

Promises

Happy New Year!

Thanks to Stephenie Meyer, Robsten, Twifanfic and all the wonderful inhabitants of the Twiverse for making 2011 a truly memorable year...and so much fun!

Thanks to all my wonderful readers and reviewers for all the support you've given my stories this year. I can't believe I only started posting my stories in the middle of this year (Once Bitten in June and A Forbidden Love in October.) What an amazing roller-coaster ride it has been! I haven't read as much fanfic as I normally would, (Hmmm...whose crazy updating schedule would be to blame for that!) But I've made a host of new friends and had a fantastic time.

Thanks so much to my wonderful betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for their beta'ing expertise and invaluable support. Thanks also to Content1 for helping me work out the nuts and bolts for the next section of this story and to overcome my lapses into illogicality. :D

Updated: Saturday December 31st 2011

Words: 2672

Chapter 33

Promises

BPOV

The sound of Edward clearing his throat drew my attention away from my sketching, and I turned to see him leaning against the doorframe. He was dressed casually, the same as the night before, his pose masculine and relaxed.

"Edward," I murmured, my heart leaping in my chest at the sight of him. Standing, I turned to face him, nervously smoothing my skirts and patting my hair in place.

His sharply inhaled breath could be heard all the way across the room, and I wondered what had caused it. Pushing abruptly away from the doorframe, he strode

toward me, his expression suddenly severe.

One of my hands rose to my throat as fear caused my heart to pound. Had Angela divulged my secret? I could think of no other reason for his obvious displeasure.

Coming to a halt in front of me, he reached for my hand and raised it to his mouth. Gently kissing the back of my fingers, his eyes never left mine.

"You look absolutely gorgeous," he murmured, his tone intense.

Realising it wasn't anger that had caused his earlier expression, I sighed with relief.

"Why thank you, m'lord." I hid my discomposure by sweeping a low curtsy the way Mrs. Brewer had taught me, *not* the curtsy of a servant. "I'm so glad you approve."

"Approve? I don't know whether to ravish you right here in the drawing room or go looking for your father to ask permission to court you!"

My eyes shot to Edward's face just in time to see him grimace and run a hand through his hair.

"Bella, I'm so sorry. Please forgive my insensitivity. I didn't mean to...to..."

"It's all right," I assured him softly, reaching to touch his arm. "I know you didn't mean anything by your words, though if my father *was* alive, I'm sure he would have welcomed your interest."

My words were spoken only partly in jest, but they had the desired effect, lightening the mood.

"Hmmm...I don't know about that," he murmured, drawing me into his embrace and leaning down to nuzzle my neck. "He might have been impressed by a marquess coming to court his beautiful daughter. But if he'd had any idea the truly wicked nature of my thoughts, he'd have been more likely to run me off his property, rifle in hand, than welcome me as a prospective suitor."

"I think you may be right," I whispered hoarsely, the feel of his lips brushing whisper-soft over my sensitive skin, robbing me of both reason and resolve...temporarily.

Groaning quietly, I reluctantly withdrew from Edward's arms.

"Bella?" He frowned, but I moved to put the table between us.

"Edward," I countered. "You need to stay away from me."

"Whatever do you mean?" he demanded, his expression comically affronted.

"You promised that we would talk, and I plan on holding you to it. You are a man of your word, aren't you?" I asked, my teasing tone faltering as a tremor shook my voice.

His expression softened. "Of course I am, my darling. I promised I would take care of you, and despite this morning's evidence to the contrary, I plan on keeping that and every other promise I make you."

Coming around to my side of the table, Edward reached for me again, and I couldn't resist him a second time.

"I'm so sorry about what happened in my study," he murmured, stroking my back. "I *promise* that nothing like that will ever happen again. No other man will touch you, Bella...you have my word."

"And the other things you said this morning?" I whispered, looking up into his dark, emerald gaze. "Did you mean them also?"

Frowning, he hesitated before answering, but then a very arresting smile curved his incredibly kissable lips. "You wouldn't be referring to my declaration by any chance?"

My blushing cheeks answered for me.

"I *do* care for you," he continued, punctuating his words with soft brushes of his lips over mine. "A. Very. Great. Deal. And I meant what I said, sweetheart. I adore you. I..." With a slight shake of his head, he cut off what he was going to say next, leaving me wondering. "But first, you're right. We need to talk. Come, let's take a seat over by the fire."

Curious about what Edward had been going to say but relieved that he was allowing us the time we needed to discuss so many things, I moved towards the long upholstered couch.

"Bella...did you draw these?"

Pulled back towards the table by an insistent tug of his hand, I blushed furiously, dismayed that I had not thought to quickly pack the pictures away when he'd first appeared.

Would a girl of my station know what the inside of a ballroom looked like?

I didn't *think* I'd drawn anything incriminating, as the inspiration for my last picture was mostly based in fantasy. It wasn't as if I'd ever visited a ballroom as grand as the one at Worthington Hall before.

Sighing with relief, I realised that it wasn't so strange that I would know what a ballroom looked like. I'd spent enough time dusting this one to have an image of it engraved in my mind. Leading up to my planned London debut, I'd attended a few country dances. But I'd never thought a great deal about the servants who'd waited upon the society members in attendance. Of course they would be familiar with the appearance of the room, having had an excellent view of proceedings while attending to their duties on the night.

My attention was refocused on the pictures Edward was perusing by his quietly spoken oath. Not that his words shocked me...I was well past that stage, having heard more cursing and bad language since taking on the guise of a servant than I had in all my prior seventeen years combined!

"Heavens...They're amazing," he cried, sounding stunned. "Damnation, girl, will you never cease to surprise me? Just how many hidden talents do you possess?" he demanded teasingly, pulling me to stand in front of him with his arms wrapped around my waist while he leaned over my shoulder to peruse the sketches I'd drawn of him and me.

"You weren't supposed to see those," I whispered, embarrassed.

"Why ever not? They're wonderful." Turning me to face him, he speared me with the intensity of his gaze. "*You* are wonderful, Bella, and I am the luckiest man alive to have found you."

He kissed me again, passionately, possessively, but when he drew back a fierce scowl furrowed his brow.

"What is it?" I queried breathlessly.

Not answering straight away, he led me to the couch where, for a change, we sat facing one another, my hands held firmly in his.

"Bella..." he began, and then he faltered, releasing one of my hands to run his fingers through his already deliciously tousled hair. "If I had my way, I would parade you proudly before all of London...the entire damned Empire if I could. I'd take you dancing at Almacks and to the opera and theatre. I'd rent the flashiest, most prominent booth at Vauxhall Gardens and we'd enjoy the light show with all the *ton* watching on, every man there—from baron to prince—envying my good fortune to have the most beautiful girl in the world on my arm...and in my life. But..."

"But, of course, you can't do that," I whispered hoarsely, incredibly flattered by his words, but also increasingly alarmed.

It wasn't that I knew many prominent members of society, but I only had to be recognised by one person for the beautiful fantasy that Edward described to be destroyed.

And then there was the threat that Lord Hunter still posed to my safety.

I doubted that he had remained sequestered at Swan Manor for long, the more sophisticated enticements of the city sure to have drawn him back as soon as he had bled my poor home dry, no doubt squeezing every last penny he could from the coffers and selling off whatever wasn't literally bolted down.

A sob caught in my throat at the thought, and Edward pulled me into his arms.

"Ah, my darling girl. I'm so sorry, but we will have to be discreet, I'm afraid. But please, don't ever think for one moment that it's because I am ashamed of you. Most men of my rank don't need to hide their mistresses, but my father's work is very important to me, and I must be careful to do nothing to jeopardise its success."

I nodded my understanding, though I still wanted to learn more of this role of a gentleman's mistress.

"Besides..." He leaned back to eye me ruefully. "I can't bear the thought of the rakes and wolves of the *ton* discovering what an amazing prize I have in my possession and trying to win you from me."

My alarm at Edward's words must have been clearly written on my face for he reached to pull me back into his embrace, but this time I did resist.

"What do you mean 'possession' and how could they 'win me'?" I queried, distressed.

His eyebrows rose. "No! Not the way you're thinking, Bella. I would never gamble with your future! I just meant that every man who sees you is going to want you, Bella, like my friend and cousin this morning. *They* will try to win you away from me, but the choice will *always* be yours."

"Oh," I whimpered, my racing heart slowly returning to a more normal beat—it was always a little elevated when we were close. "Well, then...I will always choose you, Edward. But please, there are so many things that you speak about of which I have no understanding. I need you to explain them to me."

"Of course, my sweet," he murmured, relief clearly evident in his expression.

Impulsively, I leaned forward and planted a soft, hesitant kiss on his lips, at which his smile grew wider. It was the first time that I had initiated a display of affection between us, but I couldn't help but be touched by his impassioned declarations...and the display of jealousy I'd just witnessed.

"I asked the other serving girls, my friends, what the words meant that the, er...lordships used this morning. And Edward, you must promise me, on your word of honour as a gentleman, that no matter what happens between us in the future—whether you tire of me or I anger you or anything at all—that you will never send me to work in a brothel. I'll work in service the remainder of my days if necessary, but please, don't ever force me to work in one of those places!"

The colour drained from Edward's complexion at my impassioned plea, and he swallowed hard.

"You think I would do that to you, Bella? That I could hurt you in that way? When I've already told you I won't ever let another man touch you?"

I could tell by his hoarsely whispered words that I'd offended him, but I couldn't risk any ambiguity between us, and I didn't retract my words.

"Your friends assumed that is what you had planned for me. There are almost no other options for a girl in my position if she loses her place of employment. You might believe that reputation is not an issue for one of my class, Edward, but once a girl is deemed a...a...*whore*, there is no going back to respectability."

He stared at me, unblinking, for a moment, and then swore, the harsh sounding

words causing me to flinch.

I had been gently raised, after all, and some words still held the power to shock.

"God...I am so sorry, Bella. I've been a fool, and to think that you've had all afternoon to wait and worry about such things." He rubbed my upper arms soothingly as he spoke and then leaned down to gently kiss my forehead.

"Do you not understand what it is that I've offered you? What it means to be the mistress to a man of my station?"

I shook my head hesitantly and he groaned.

"A...a *wife* is the mistress of her household, but I know that's not what you're offering, of course." I ducked my head, but continued doggedly. "So no, I've never heard the term before, not in regard to a relationship such as ours," I offered tremulously. "What does it mean...to be a gentleman's mistress?"

Edward surprised me by smiling and cupping my cheek with his hand.

"It means to be wanted, above all others. It means to be cherished and protected and cared for in every way possible. A mistress is the woman a man *wants* to be with...not out of duty or to form a beneficial alliance or for the production of an heir...but a freely made *choice*. I choose you, Bella...only you."

When his lips closed with mine on his final word I could not contain the soft moan of pleasure that his touch elicited. The next thing I knew, he had lifted me onto his lap and we were kissing each other hungrily, our lips brushing against one another's as our tongues tasted and stroked, exploring each other's mouths as if for the very first time.

"Oh, Edward..." I murmured breathily, pulling back just far enough to capture his dark, smouldering gaze. "I choose you, too...only you...forever."

Groaning, he let his head fall to rest against my forehead, his hands soothing and caressing my fevered flesh.

"You have no idea how good that sounds or what you do to me. Or maybe you do?" he chuckled, his erection pressing insistently against my bottom.

I wriggled against him as my hands tangled in his hair. Growling, he ducked his head to nuzzle that lovely spot he'd discovered on the curve of my neck that sent

sensation skittering along my nerves.

"Minx," he teased, his words whispering breathily against my sensitive skin. Then drawing back, he gave me one last kiss. "There's no way you'll believe me, but I've always been vaunted for my self control. With you, however, I seem to have very little."

"I don't mind," I whispered huskily, shocking myself with my words even though they were nothing less than the truth. Blinking rapidly and panting for air, I struggled to find my own too-easily discarded resolve. "But I would appreciate some more answers before...before..." I managed to utter.

"Yes...of course...before..." he groaned again, closing his eyes for a moment. His jaw was tightly clenched, and I bit down on my lower lip, feeling bad for making things so *hard* for him, but secretly flattered that I could affect him so profoundly.

"Maybe it would be better if I removed myself from your lap?" I suggested, albeit reluctantly.

"No!" Edward protested and pulled me close to his chest, that intriguingly adaptive part of his anatomy twitching beneath me...also in protest, I assumed. "Just give me a moment," he rasped hoarsely, and I chuckled.

"Would you rather we spoke *after*?" I surprised myself by offering, and he leaned back to look me in the eye. "As long as you didn't have to leave straight away...that is," I added insecurely.

"Oh, sweetheart, I won't be leaving you tonight or any night we share together from now on," he murmured, brushing his lips across my brow and trailing a path down to my ear. "It nearly killed me to leave you last night, but if I'd stayed..." His words trailed away, and I smiled, relieved by his admission.

"While I appreciate the offer, my answer is no," he said with marked deliberation. "Once I start making love to you tonight, I don't plan on stopping until we're both completely satiated and utterly exhausted—sometime around dawn—so any further questions you have should be asked and answered now. I will behave...I *promise*," he whispered huskily, and I whimpered, wondering if I was capable of waiting, considering the torrid declaration he'd just made.

All night long? Oh my...

~AFL~

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. My betas retitled it, 'Unfff!'

I hope you all enjoy a wonderful, safe and very Happy New Year!

xxx TLSue

For Now

Thanks, Stephenie, for sharing your wonderful world. No copyright infringement intended.

I have some exciting news!

A Forbidden Love was chosen to be featured as Story of the Month for the January Newsletter of The Writer's Coffee Shop, which is an amazing honour. Thank you so much to rmcrrms5 for the wonderful review and for interviewing me for the newsletter.

Thanks to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, for their ongoing support and hard work beta'ing my many chapters.

Special thanks to gothgirl1245 for giving A Forbidden Love its 3500th review, and to CyraBear for going back and reviewing every chapter. That was very sweet of you and great timing, as it really cheered me up on a particularly tough day. :D

Updated: Tuesday January 3rd 2012

Words: 2754

Chapter 34

For Now.

BPOV

Sitting in Edward's arms with my head nestled against his chest, I listened to the steady thump of his heart, absorbing the peace and strength that emanated from his masculine form. After taking a moment to compose myself—several surprisingly restful moments while he soothingly stroked my back—I considered which question to ask next.

The day had been filled with so many revelations, as had the night before, but there was still much to learn and much I did not know. While some of what had occurred in the previous twenty-four hours had brought me great joy, increasing the love I felt for Edward to an almost overwhelming degree...other events had caused

me a level of fear, distress and utter helplessness that I never wanted to experience again. The only way I could think to safeguard myself against the vulnerability and uncertainty that my previously ignorant state had brought upon me was to arm myself with knowledge.

Sitting up, I took a deep breath before looking to Edward's too handsome face, resisting the temptation to reach up and stroke his cheek. I was *attempting* not to provoke the ardour I could tell he was restraining, so I kept my movements circumspect. For the moment, my thirst for knowledge kept my own barely banked desire contained...just.

"Edward, what exactly does a mistress *do*?" I asked, and his eyebrows shot up, a smirk twisting his lips.

Rolling my eyes, I tapped my knuckles against his chest. "Well, other than...*that*," I muttered, embarrassed.

"Hmmm..." he murmured, leaning in to nuzzle my neck. "*That* is one of the more important and enjoyable duties of a mistress."

"Be serious," I gasped, trying to ignore the gentle rasp of his tongue along my collarbone and the way his hands had begun a rather determined exploration of my person.

"What will I do with my time when you take me with you to London? Will I work as a maid or kitchen hand in your house in the city? You know I'm an excellent cook and I'm more than willing to earn my keep; in fact, I think I would prefer it. I'm not sure how well I would cope if I were required to stay sequestered in my room all day," I admitted reluctantly.

Edward slowly sat up, his expression perplexed.

"Bella, you will have your *own* home. I have my agents searching for a suitable property in the right part of town, or they will be as soon as they receive the directives I have sent. I've asked them to find a good-sized house with a pleasant outlook and a private garden not far from one of the main parks. You'll have your own staff—loyal to you—a fine carriage and stable of horses and a very generous allowance. You didn't realise any of this?"

His words were almost incomprehensible and took me a moment to absorb and interpret. He was buying a home for me to live in...in the city? And he thought I *knew* this already?

"How could I?" I almost laughed at the way he blinked in surprise. "Edward, I told you, this is all new to me. I had no idea that gentlemen even had mistresses or anything much about...*anything* other than that people usually *marry* when they're going to set up a home together. Or so I thought," I finished with a wan shrug of one shoulder. "If I'm to have my own home, where will *you* be?"

"With *you*," he retorted indignantly. "I'm not planning on setting you up in town and then ignoring you, if that's what you're worried about. Hell..." he muttered, running a hand through his hair. "I'd move you in with me to Cullen House if I could, but I don't want you to feel uncomfortable, and there is the slight matter of *discretion* that I mentioned."

"Cullen House?"

"My father's London home. It's where I usually stay when I'm visiting the city. The damned pile is big enough to house a dozen families and their staff, but not really suitable for you and me."

"No...of course not," I murmured.

"My father never bothered with keeping up a city residence when he was Marquess, as he came into his inheritance quite young. I've considered acquiring my own London lodgings, though the house I'm looking to share with you will remain yours, regardless of whether I decide to purchase an official residence for the seat of Masen. I'll make sure of that."

"Whatever do you mean?" I queried, unable to resist touching him again and reaching to rest my hands against his shirt. He lifted a hand to cover mine, pressing them to his chest so that I could feel the warmth emanating from beneath the silk.

"If anything were to happen to me, I don't want you to have to worry about your future or be at any risk," he explained. "So I plan to have the property my agents are looking for in London purchased in your name, along with transferring the deeds to a country cottage I own near Masen Park to you as well. It's not overly large...only six bedrooms...but there are ample servants' quarters and the stables are well equipped. It has a small acreage attached that brings in a modest income which, combined with the annuity my lawyers will establish for you, should provide a generous living. You'll be able to afford to travel, if you desire...though obviously, that is something I would rather we did *together*."

Wagging his eyebrows at that particular pronouncement, Edward's enthusiasm for the plans he had set in motion was joyfully reflected written on his face.

"Unfortunately, we'll eventually run into the same issues regarding discretion at Masen Park, though you'll stay with me when we visit there...for now. But in the long run, you'll need your own country abode close by where I can come and visit you, and I don't want there to be any *problems* for you."

"Oh!" I stared into his now serious expression, stunned by his words.

He was buying *me* a house...*two* houses...and arranging for my future financial security.

There was no possible way I could have taken him up on his offer except for the fact that he seemed determined that we would keep our relationship hidden...from *the ton* at any rate. There'd be no keeping our secret from the servants. London was a large city. Surely the risk of my running into Lord Hunter would be extremely slim considering the circumstances?

"Will I have to spend time with any of your *friends* either in the city or when we're visiting your country estate?" I asked nervously.

"I wish we could, my darling," Edward murmured, reaching to cup my cheek with his hands. "As I said...I'd love to show you off to all of London, but..."

"No! No that's a *good* thing that you can't!" I exclaimed. "I would prefer not to spend time with other lords or members of the nobility...at all!"

Frowning, he cocked his head to the side. "Why ever not? Are you worried they may be disrespectful? Despite what happened this morning, I can assure you, Bella, I won't brook that sort of behaviour or treatment of you in future."

"But how would you stop them from *saying* things and attempting to take... *liberties*?" I asked, though of course, those very real concerns were secondary to my ultimate fear of having my true identity revealed.

Edward remained quiet for a moment. "You're probably right," he sighed and lowered his hands to stroke my arms soothingly. "I will do my utmost to protect you, Bella. Unfortunately, keeping you hidden may well be the price we have to pay to guarantee your safety. But there are many places I can still take you—if I plan ahead—and people we can mix with amongst the *demimonde*. You won't be bored or lonely, sweetheart, I'll make sure of it."

I was still rather shocked at the idea that he planned on supporting me in such a manner, but there would be time to process that information later. For now, I was

pleased to be gaining the answers I wanted to my many questions...well, at least some of them.

"What exactly *is* the *demimonde*?" I asked, and Edward chuckled wryly.

"A rather unique grouping of individuals," he offered by way of explanation. "Many are hedonists, hell bent on a life of pleasure and excess. But there are others: writers, poets, thespians...creative and talented sorts who would welcome you amongst their number as an artist in your own right. I think you would find them interesting though..."

"Though?" I prompted when he hesitated, his brow furrowing.

"I fear your beauty, intelligence and innate grace will set you apart, even amongst that elite group. Word will spread, and I'll be beating the damn wolves off with a stick. Men of influence, power and wealth," he clarified at my puzzled look, "who will want you for their own. Of course, you *could* become a very influential and sought-after courtesan, if that were your preference."

"But I've already said that I only want you, Edward," I retorted in alarm, reaching to grasp at his shoulders in my distress. I'd not heard the term courtesan before, but I knew enough—*now*—to infer its meaning.

"As *I* only want you," he responded passionately, but then his expression turned contemplative, and he let his head drop to rest against my forehead.

"The problems you foresee in the long run? Have they to do with when you will be required to take a wife?" I whispered hoarsely.

Edward had begun to paint a picture of a life that we could share together—a life I desperately wanted to live. I knew that at some point I would have to face the painful reality that would erase the fantasy he was attempting to create...unless I was willing to compromise even *more* of my morals and character and completely deny my heritage and upbringing.

Could I bring myself to commit adultery and knowingly wrong Edward's legitimate wife one day, even if it was the only way I could possibly be with the man I loved? And how did I feel knowing that the vast majority of gentleman—Edward included, it appeared—could so readily compromise their own character and the values they espoused, disregarding the vows of fidelity they made to their brides?

Had my father kept a mistress? The very idea seemed preposterous, especially

considering the memories I treasured of the love he had shared with my mother.

Honour, something I'd been raised to believe was a fairly straightforward and easily recognised virtue, seemed a rather fluid commodity in the world of the upper ton.

Sighing, Edward lifted his head. "Let's not worry about that, shall we?" he murmured, tenderly reaching to stroke my cheek. "That particular future is a long... long...way off, and personally, I'd rather we just enjoyed our time together unencumbered with burdens we're not yet required to bear."

Nodding, I found myself agreeing, unwilling to face a truth that I knew once confronted would change everything. Though as he enclosed me in the circle of his arms, I felt my heart break a little knowing that our time together would inevitability come to an end...one way or another. The future he offered—a house of my own, financial security, a place in the world...of sorts—was incredibly tempting considering the fearful alternatives.

But who was I kidding?

Of *course* I couldn't continue in my relationship with Edward once he was married to another.

Then there was also the matter of his keeping the knowledge that he was maintaining a mistress a secret. While I understood little of political machinations, I'd discerned enough from Edward's words to know that there were those who would use the information against him, his father and the incredibly important lobby group they supported. Despite Edward's assertion that he would be able to keep my existence hidden, I didn't think it would be possible in the long run.

My reputation may have already been damaged by Lord Hunter's baseless accusations, but at least there had to be *some* doubt in society's mind as to my guilt. If my current situation and circumstances were ever revealed, the shame I would bring on my father's name was incalculable. let alone the risk I faced of ending up imprisoned for a crime I had not committed.

Sighing, I faced the painful reality I could not avoid. At some point I would have to leave Edward and disappear altogether. How I would accomplish such a thing, while maintaining my safety at the same time, I did not yet know.

I'd come to realise that my mother's pearls must be quite valuable. Why else would Lord Hunter have made such a fuss about having them returned...and why

else would my father have insisted I take them with me?

If I could find a buyer for them, the money I received might go towards funding a new life for me in a foreign land...a start, at least. Maybe I could convince Edward to take me travelling on the continent so that we could share the time together, and then I could make my escape far away from England.

Disguising a sob behind a pretend cough, I stored the idea away for contemplation at a later date, the mere thought of one day having to live without Edward too painful to consider.

For *now*...I was determined to enjoy being with the man that I would love forever for as long as I possibly could.

"Any more questions?" Edward asked when several more moments had passed while I rested in his arms, my fingers tracing idle patterns on the smooth silk of his shirt while he played with the loose curls I'd left to fall at either side of my face.

I considered the many things I wanted to learn about the movement that Edward and his father were a part of, the dreadful laws they were working towards changing, and the social reforms that needed to occur to make our society—*all* of society—safe...in particular for the young and vulnerable. I was interested to know if that movement was something the *demimonde* were interested in or supported, or whether it was only members of more respectable society that were involved.

It was impossible, I knew that, considering the precarious nature of my position. But I would have loved to have some part to play, to do something that made a difference to help the girls who *didn't* have a wonderful, handsome, powerful lord to come to their rescue...even if that rescue could only be temporary.

The thought reminded me of Jessica's frightening plight, and I reaffirmed my determination to do whatever I could to assist her and to make sure that Angela was kept safe from now on.

It would be wonderful to have Angela continue as my lady's maid, comforting to have a friend accompany me into my new life...*if* she were interested. The last thing I would do was force her to a life not of her choosing. I was fairly certain she had feelings for Ben, one of the groomsmen—a miracle in my mind considering all that she had suffered—but I didn't know if he would be able to accompany us also.

"Bella?" Edward queried, an amused tone to his voice. I didn't realise I was chewing on my lower lip until he gently released it from between my teeth and

rubbed it softly with his thumb. Momentarily distracted, it took me a few seconds to recall what I was supposed to be saying.

"Yes..." I breathed, regaining my composure with difficulty. "There are more questions I would like answers to and a favour I would like to ask, several actually," I admitted shyly.

"A favour?" His eyebrows rose. "Anything, darling, anything at all."

Ducking my head, I smiled. I'd be holding him to his word, but despite my lack of experience, I had enough feminine wiles—as I vaguely remembered my mother calling them—to know that waiting until *after* might be the better time to gain the concessions I wanted for Jessica, Mike and Angela.

"It can wait," I whispered huskily, leaning in to brush my lips softly across his mouth. "There'll be time to talk later...*much* later."

Edward's groan and the way he swept me up into his arms, standing and striding towards the bedroom, was all the answer I needed...for now.

~AFL~

Squeee... I can't wait to share the next chapter. Don't forget to check out The Writer's Coffee Shop January Newsletter to see the featured article about A Forbidden Love.

Thank you so much for all the encouraging reviews. It means a lot to me to hear from you, and I do try and take your advice and suggestions to heart. ;)

xxx TLSue

Desire

Thanks to Stephenie Meyer for the Twiverse. No copyright infringement intended.

Welcome to all the new readers to A Forbidden Love, and thanks for the reviews. I hope you enjoy the rest of the journey. I've been receiving a lot of questions that I am going to assume are rhetorical, as if I answered them all, I'd be giving away the rest of the story! What I can say is that all of your questions will be answered by the end of the story - hopefully satisfactorily. ;)

Updated: Thursday, January 5th 2012

Words: 2944

Chapter 35

Desire

EPOV

Silently cursing myself for a fool, I carried Bella in my arms, cradling her close. Of course she would have found Jasper's and Emmett's words terrifying...she was an innocent and had led a remarkably sheltered life for one of her class. I could only hope that my efforts to reassure her regarding her future had been successful.

A part of me wished I could offer her more, but my particular place in society did not allow for anything else. What I *could* do was to make the life she would lead with me as contented and fulfilling as possible, starting with the remainder of the evening and for the rest of what I intended to be a particularly satisfying night.

Seeing the same desire that I felt reflected in her eyes, so large and dark in her beautiful face, was highly rewarding. Though not as gratifying as the things I planned to do to her, I mused, recalling another promise I had made. It wasn't one she'd referred to earlier, but I looked forward to reminding her of it when the time was right.

I had yet to tell her that I loved her, finding myself surprisingly anxious about speaking the words aloud. Which was ridiculous. She'd already told me she felt the

same, so I was in no danger of having my feelings rejected. But I had never expected to place my heart, as it were, into another's safekeeping. The prospect left me feeling surprisingly vulnerable, a sensation I was wholly unaccustomed to experiencing.

Reaching the middle of her bedroom, I let Bella's body slowly slide down my own until her feet touched the floor and we were left standing face to face.

"Don't ever leave me," I demanded, and her eyes widened, a whispered gasp catching on her lips. "Promise me?"

"Edward...I...I..." The look of sadness that swept across her features increased the pain that stabbed at my heart at even the brief, flickering thought of life without her.

"Bella?" I heard myself plead. "Now that I've found you, I could never let you go. You do understand that, don't you? Living without you would be...untenable."

"For me, too," she whispered, reaching up to stroke my cheek.

I pressed against her hand like a damned cat, the level of need I felt for her alarming in its intensity.

"Promise me?" I demanded again.

"Whatever would I do without you?" She smiled softly and reached up on tiptoes to bring her mouth to mine.

Her kiss consumed me, a veritable firestorm of desire, longing and possessiveness scorching everything in its path and driving every thought but one from my head. Bella. My Bella.

The feel of her fingers fumbling sweetly with the buttons of my shirt distracted me, bringing a smile to my face. Pulling back from our kiss, I watched her tentative progress.

"In a hurry?" I whispered and she froze. Her eyes shot up to meet mine, her expression one of a child that had just been caught raiding the biscuit jar. She went to snatch her hands away, but I captured them like two fluttering birds. Pressing them to the chest she'd partially bared, her hands felt cool and soft against my naked skin.

"Don't be afraid, Bella. I was just teasing. The fact that you want me—that you're not afraid to show your desire—is the most amazing gift you could ever give me."

"Really?" she breathed, her expression showing both surprise and uncertainty.

"Really," I confirmed, lowering my head again to capture her trembling lips in a gentle kiss and hoping my actions would make up for the clumsiness of my words. Then, leading her by the hand, I took her to stand in front of the trifold mirrors of the dressing table situated on the far side of the bed.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are to me? What I see when I look at you?" I asked, watching her expression in the mirror.

A slight shake of her head gave me her reply; the tremble I felt in her body letting me know how much my touch and words affected her.

"You...are...utterly...adorable," I whispered, peppering my words with kisses to the curve of her shoulder revealed by the lace-edged neckline of her gown.

She looked so pretty in the yellow dress and so damned demure that I'd been stunned when I first saw her, and more than a little angered by the sudden surge of guilt I'd felt as my conscience had begun second-guessing my actions. Fortunately a stern reminder that—despite appearances somewhat to the contrary—I had *not* deflowered an innocent society maiden had returned me to my senses. Bella could, in actuality, only benefit from our alliance, but, oh, how sweet and truly delectable she appeared.

Releasing the buttons that ran down the back of her gown, I let it fall from her shoulders to balloon in a silken pool around her feet. Standing facing the mirror, dressed in a sheer, silk chemise—*sans* corset, which of course, was another reminder of her *thankfully* common heritage—Bella was the epitome of elegance and desire...a delicious and enticing combination.

Looking at our reflection in the mirror, my much larger body towering over her slight form, I saw my own eyes darken and felt the evidence of my desire pressing against the sweet curve of her bottom.

"Bella?" I whispered hoarsely when she surprised me by pushing back against me.

In a lightning-quick movement, I captured the hem of her chemise and then swept it over her head, leaving her standing in a pair of very fetching lacy pantaloons, stockings, slippers...and nothing else. My hands came up to cup her high, firm

breasts, the pert nipples peaking eagerly beneath my palms. Surprising me further, she lifted her hands and covered mine, holding me in place as I caressed and aroused her sensitive flesh.

"Hmmm...you like it when I do that," I murmured, and she moaned in response, her tongue peeking out of her mouth to swipe a glistening path across her lower lip.

Growling, I spun her in my arms and pulled her close, as her hands reached to tangle in my hair. Her mouth reached for mine...unashamedly...passionately...the kiss we shared searing in its intensity. Then I felt her hands at my shirt once again, tugging at the material where it was tucked into the waistband of my breeches and pushing the garment off my shoulders.

Chuckling, I rejoiced in her eagerness, equally impatient but determined to follow a plan I had spent the afternoon envisioning. Not to mention wanting to enjoy the truly exquisite view before me.

When my shirt lay in a crumpled pile on the floor, I allowed Bella to explore my bare chest as she caressed me with her hands, taking the opportunity to devour her with my eyes. Her beauty was...*transcendent*, affecting me in ways I'd never experienced before.

"Oh, Edward..." she sighed, leaning forward to plant soft, wet kisses on my naked flesh. Her full, creamy breasts, crested with dusky pink peaks of perfection, brushed against my chest and abdomen in the process.

Groaning, I felt my resolve weaken when her hands trailed a tentative path to the waistband of my breeches, her fingers fumbling with the buttons she found there. Unsure of how much more of her ministrations I could take, I stilled her hands and saw her eyes lift up to mine.

"You don't want me to...*touch* you?" she murmured, that adorable lower lip of hers catching between her teeth.

"Oh, sweetheart," I groaned, barely able to remain standing at just the thought of her slender fingers wrapped tightly around my cock. "I would *love* for you to touch me, but how about we leave that for a little later?"

"Why?" she persisted, pouting a little and further undermining my resolve.

"Because I have plans for tonight and a promise to fulfil...first," I rasped, desperately trying to remember why I was so set on delaying something that would

undoubtedly bring me intense pleasure.

"What promise?" she queried, those delightful fingers trailing a path back up my belly to circle enticingly around my nipples. When she leaned forward to brush, first her lips, and then her tongue over my heated flesh, I felt my eyes roll back in my head, a moment passing before I was able to speak.

"To kiss every single square inch of your body," I eventually gasped, and her hands froze in place.

Determined to regain control of proceedings while I had the chance, I swept her up in my arms and carried her the remaining few feet to the bed. With sure but gentle hands, I divested her of the remainder of her clothing, my fingers trailing across her silken flesh as it was bared to me.

The feminine moans my touch elicited were a prelude to the cries of pleasure I expected to hear when I brought her to the peak of passion again and again.

When Bella lay naked before me, my eyes roamed her body, drinking in her sensual beauty before quickly removing the remainder of my own attire. My throbbing erection was desperate to find surcease in her tight, hot sheath, but I suppressed my own desire, intent on pleasuring her first...and repeatedly...before I found my own release.

Her eyes widened when I climbed onto the bed and came to kneel between her legs, my engorged member straining towards her. I wondered if she might still be a little nervous about having my body penetrate hers, but she didn't shy away from me. Licking her lips with what looked to be anticipation, her passion darkened eyes moved slowly up my body to meet my hungry gaze.

"Like what you see?" I heard myself ask, disconcerted at the trace of insecurity in my tone. I'd never particularly cared what a woman I was about to lay with thought of my appearance, having inevitably paid handsomely for the privilege. But Bella was different, and her opinion counted a great deal.

"Oh, yes," she breathed bringing a smile to my face, until the look of longing on her face morphed into a definite pout. "But I want to touch you," she whispered.

Who was I to deny her?

"Sit up," I instructed, my voice tellingly hoarse. She quickly obeyed, her expression determined though a little wary. Sitting back on my haunches, I reached

for her hand and then brought it to my heated, pulsing flesh, a shudder running through me when her small, slender fingers encircled me.

"Aaahhh..." I groaned, and she went to snatch her hand away, but I held it firmly in place.

"Am I doing it wrong?" she whispered, and I smiled my reassurance as I guided her hand up and down my length.

"Quite the contrary," I chuckled ruefully, allowing her the freedom to tentatively, and then more boldly, explore my eager flesh. "But I think that had better be enough for now," I added hoarsely after a few moments had passed.

"Why?" Bella breathed, her aptitude for learning extending to *all* areas of expertise, it would seem, as she moved her hand with increasing confidence, squeezing and caressing with each delicious, agonising stroke.

"Because *I* am supposed to be the one pleasuring *you* at this juncture...not the other way around."

"Oh? I wasn't aware there were specific rules of conduct pertaining to the art of lovemaking," she said in all seriousness, and my eyes shot to her face, her teasing expression drawing a bark of laughter from my lips.

"Minx," I murmured for the second time this evening. Gently removing her hand from my now aching member, I encouraged her to lay back, her head resting comfortably on the plump pillows.

"Now, lay still," I ordered, and she mock saluted.

"Aye, aye, captain, sir...anything ye say, sir!"

God, how I loved this girl, I thought and proceeded to show her to the utmost of my ability.

It felt as if every encounter I'd had preceding Bella had been leading up to this one moment...this series of sublime, incandescent moments that I fully intended to stretch into hour after pleasure-filled hour.

I began at her feet, first studying their delicate lines intently, before exploring...caressing...worshipping. The arches were ticklish—knowledge I stored away for another occasion—but her toes, I discovered, were erogenous zones and I nibbled on

them delightedly, my efforts eliciting a series of cries and moans as Bella writhed on the bed.

"Please...stop," she softly cried. "No...please...don't stop," she contradicted, and I chuckled, dragging my tongue slowly along her instep before pausing to kiss and caress here and there along the way as I slowly traversed the length of her surprisingly long and decidedly shapely leg.

Coming close to my destination, I breathed deeply of her intoxicating feminine scent. But then, denying us both for a little longer, I moved back down the bed and picked up her other foot, starting the torture all over again.

Bella's whimpers of need were music to my ears.

This time when I reached the top of her leg, I didn't hesitate but kissed and caressed my way to the sweet juncture of her thighs where I then proceeded to nuzzle the soft curls covering the precious bounty hidden beneath.

Tensing, she sat up and pushed at my shoulders ineffectively with her hands.

"Edward...no!" she cried, clearly shocked by my actions.

"Sweetheart, it's all right. I just want to taste you," I panted, having become increasingly affected as pleasuring her rebounded on me, tenfold.

"But...but..." she gasped, her body arching backward when I brought my fingers to play and let them slide along her sex. Slowly entering her wet, velvet sheath with first one digit and then another, I did my best to distract her from what I intended doing with my mouth, stroking her rhythmically until she lay back upon the bed, overcome with sensation.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" I whispered, softly blowing against the swollen nub I had revealed and teased with my thumb even as my fingers continued to reach deep inside her.

"Ahhh..." she responded incoherently, but giving me all the answer I required.

Emboldened by her cry, I gently swiped my tongue along her delicate folds, finishing with a swirl around the pink, pouting bundle of sensitive nerves already roused by the action of my thumb.

Bella's entire body lifted off the bed, her velvet walls clenching tightly around my

fingers.

Smiling, I repeated the action of my tongue again and again... teasing... tasting... tantalising.

"Oh, Edward..." she eventually panted. "I...I can't...you mustn't...it's too much."

"I'll stop if you want me to," I assured her, looking up to meet her passion clouded and decidedly befuddled gaze. "But I'd really like to keep going."

"Why?" she whispered, and my smile turned predatory.

"Because you taste divine, and I enjoy bringing you pleasure. It increases the anticipation for me."

"Oh. Very well then. If you must." she sighed, letting her head fall back on the pillow. Smiling at her politely granted permission, I licked her again and then drew the, by now, incredibly swollen nub into my mouth. Suckling it gently with my lips and tongue, my fingers continued to stroke and arouse her until I felt the rhythmic spasms that predicted her orgasm was imminent.

Backing off, I slowed the pace a little—of both my fingers and my tongue—her mildly indignant mewls bringing a smile to my lips.

Again and again I brought her to the peak, only to deny her the completion her body demanded, until she cried out my name. Her hands reached to tangle in my hair, holding me firmly in place, and I gladly obliged. Suckling harder...faster...my fingers moving in time with the stroking of my tongue, it was only a matter of moments before she came apart around me, squeezing my fingers so tightly that my cock almost wept with envy.

"Edward!"

The cry that was torn from her lips was closer in sound to a scream. The way her body arched beneath me broadcast the intensity of her pleasure, while I milked every last shuddering contraction of ecstasy from her sensual young body.

"Yes..." I breathed against her sweetly-scented, swollen folds when she finally lay still and quiescent beneath me.

Time to start again, I mused, slowly, deliberately climbing up the length of her body. Kissing, caressing, tasting and arousing along the way, my cock twitched in

desperate anticipation of finding release.

Soon, I reassured my achingly aroused member. But first I wanted to bring Bella back to the same fever-pitch of wanting that had led to her insisting with her actions that I continue to pleasure her with my mouth.

Then, and only then, would it be *my* turn.

~AFL~

Sigh...

Not much left to say after that really. ;)

Next chapter up Sunday or Monday.

xxx TLSue

PS: Reviews are lovely, though not quite as lovely as Lordward's lovemaking. Swoon...

Oh My

*I'd just like to say a huge THANK YOU for all the lovely reviews for last chapter. I'm glad you appreciated my *ahem* lemon writing skills, though I do promise there will be some story progression soon.*

Thanks to Rabia for the lovely review and rec you gave A Forbidden Love on The Fictionators. And welcome to all the new readers.

Thanks, as always to my wonderful betas, C hloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, for all your help and support.

Warning: for the handful of readers who aren't so keen on lemons and would just rather get to the action, you may want to skip this gratuitous offering. Though you will be missing a rather sweet declaration if you do so.

Updated: Sunday, January 8th 2012

Words: 2893

Chapter 36

Oh My

BPOV

I couldn't quite believe what Edward had just done to me...with his mouth...and lips...and tongue.

And then there was *where* he had done it...and the way he'd made me feel.

But even more so, I could *not* believe that I had willingly allowed it.

This lovemaking business was truly and utterly wonderful, yet before meeting Edward, I'd been completely ignorant that this sensual, pleasurable, intensely intimate physical world even existed.

Sadly, I mused that if I'd only ever received the instruction given to young ladies of quality, and if I'd followed those instructions to the letter, I would probably *never* have known of its existence, even after marriage.

"A well-bred young lady must submit to her husband on her wedding night, and as often as he sees fit to visit her in her bedchamber. If he is a true gentleman this will occur no more than once a week during the first months of marriage, and only until she becomes with child. She must remain absolutely still and silent, enduring the indignity and discomfort with stoicism. She must do nothing—*absolutely nothing*—to encourage his behaviour or to indicate anything other than polite tolerance of his masculine needs and a dutiful willingness to bear whatever is necessary to provide her husband with an heir. Every young wife's hope is that once she has provided the requisite heir and a spare, her husband will do the gentlemanly thing and cease from demanding his marital rights and, preferably, suppress his animalistic urges completely, or at the very least, take care of them in a discreet, alternative manner."

The words spoken to me in all seriousness by Lady Hartley—the senior female member of Forkston society and custodian of all wisdom and instruction pertaining to manners and propriety—had been quite specific in her advice...even if I'd had absolutely no idea about what she was speaking.

Now, of course, I did. And it pained me horribly to think that I could have gone to my marriage bed with a head filled with such instruction, thereby sabotaging any chance of a pleasant or fulfilling experience. Even worse was the knowledge that gentlemen of good standing *required* such subservience and lack of responsiveness in their wives. Now that I understood what Lady Hartley's advice was actually about, other snippets had surfaced in my memory, one pronouncement in particular making a dreadful sort of sense.

"If a young lady fails in her duty and comportment and, er...*expresses* any sort of interest or enjoyment in the proceedings, she will be viewed with disgust and disdain by her husband for demonstrating behaviour of a base and vile manner, unbecoming of a lady. If the knowledge of her downfall were ever to be revealed—God forbid—then great shame will be brought to her family name."

No wonder Edward thought I must be of common blood if the women of the so-called *upper* classes were required to behave like blocks of ice, barely masking their disgust and horror at their husband's unwelcome attentions and enduring in repulsed silence until the ordeal was over. Considering the pleasure and enjoyment that was possible between two willing, loving partners, it was little wonder that it had become common practise for supposedly honourable gentlemen to readily break their marriage vows and find some other female—besides their barely willing and unresponsive wives—to share their beds.

As far as I could see, the entire practise was a travesty as well as being a recipe for disaster when it came to promoting marital harmony.

Putting off these depressing thoughts, I refocused on Edward's exceedingly expert ministrations. In stark contrast to their intended purpose, the resurfacing of these memories made me determined anew to express my enjoyment and love for him to the utmost.

Whatever the future may hold, I wanted Edward in absolutely no doubt that I adored everything about him, including his passionate lovemaking. If that meant I was deemed 'common and base' in the eyes of society, so be it. The more I learned of the world that I had been born into, the less I wanted to be a part of it anyway.

"Where have you gone, my darling?" he murmured, drawing me into his embrace, his naked body pressed skin to skin with mine along its entire length.

"I'm right here," I sighed in response, snuggling against him and revelling in the feel of his warm, muscular and very aroused body. "I was just thinking how wonderful it is to be with you in this way."

"My sentiments exactly," he breathed against my skin, planting soft, sweet kisses along the curve of my neck while he cupped and caressed my breast with his hand.

Squirming a little, I moved beneath him, opening my legs for him to lie in the cradle of my hips, his hard length nestling tantalisingly close to my still-pulsing sex.

"I want you inside me," I whispered, making my wishes perfectly clear. While I could not promise Edward forever, for as long as we *were* together, I would give him everything.

Groaning, he moved his body higher so that the tip of his erection pressed against me. Lifting his head from my shoulder, he reached a hand to caress my cheek. His eyes gazed into mine with a look that seemed to express such deep feeling that I was forced to swallow against a lump that formed in my throat.

"I love you, and I want you in every way," I declared, covering his hand with my own, and he clasped my fingers in his and lifted them to his lips for a tender kiss.

"Darling Bella," he murmured, before lowering his head to capture my eagerly waiting mouth with his own.

I gasped, tasting myself on his lips, and he took the opportunity to invade my mouth with his tongue. Uncertain about the taste—it was slightly bitter and decidedly musky—I hesitantly stroked my tongue along Edward's until his own sweet taste mingled with mine, and pleasure burst inside of me. Moaning, I writhed

beneath him, hungry for more of him...for *all* of him, until surging forward, he filled me with one smooth stroke.

"Oh...yes," I cried, his strong, muscular body moving above and over me as he filled me again and again.

Wrapping my arms and legs around him, just as he had wrapped himself around my heart, I held him tight, welcoming him into my body and flexing my hips to meet his powerful thrusts.

"God, yes..." he gasped, moving faster...harder...

Holding his weight on his arms so as not to crush me, he captured my lips again. While tasting and caressing my mouth with passionate kisses, his steel, hard member penetrated my body in long, driving strokes again...and again...and again until I was whimpering with desire and heightened need.

Before long, I felt myself climbing toward the magical peak that Edward had introduced me to for the first time only the night before. Three times now he'd gifted me with an experience of such sublime pleasure that I knew, in some fundamental way, that he had changed the very fabric of my being. While my love for him had transformed my heart and my hopes, the bliss I'd discovered in his lovemaking had changed the way I viewed my body...my very self.

I was an innocent girl no longer, for I had become a woman in Edward's arms.

Crying out as ecstasy overwhelmed me, I felt my inner muscles contracting tightly around him as he continued to move inside me. Grasping him tightly with pulsing pleasure, my body milked his, and he joined me in reaching the peak of our passion. His cry of completion was like music to my ears, and I held him close as he throbbed inside me. For long, blissful moments, we shared the joy of our wonderful union together, shuddering and trembling in one another's arms.

When we finally...*finally*...came back to earth, floating softly on a warm cloud of sensuality, Edward rolled us over so that I lay on top of him...our limbs entwined...our bodies still intimately connected. Bringing my hands to rest carefully on his chest, I pushed up just far enough to look into his face...his too beautiful face.

"I love you," I whispered, leaning down to gently brush my lips over his. "I love you, and I always will."

"As I love you," he murmured, reaching up to run his fingers through my hair,

wrapping the loose curls gently around his fingers. Looking me directly in the eye, he repeated the words that I wasn't sure I'd heard correctly.

"I love you, Bella...with all my heart."

Tears welled in my eyes, and I could not stop them from spilling over onto my cheeks.

"Ah...sweetheart." Smiling softly he reached to wipe my tears away. "Don't cry. We're going to be so happy together—you and me—for always."

"Always," I echoed. Cupping his face with my hands, I kissed him again and again, doing my utmost to express all the love that I felt in my heart. I wanted to show him in every way possible how I felt about him...to put into action what I was unable to express in words.

Groaning, Edward's body surged beneath me, his rapidly hardening member coming to life inside my body.

"Bend your knees, darling," he urged. "Now sit up with your legs on either side of my hips."

Curious, I did as he instructed, my hands coming to rest on his warm, muscular chest.

"Now what?" I whispered, wriggling a little to seat him more deeply inside me.

"Now *you* get to ride *me*," he explained, his voice a hoarse rasp, and he proceeded to show me what he meant. With his hands on my hips, guiding my movements, I soon found the perfect rhythm and began to—quite literally—ride up and down his length.

I gasped when he brought his hands up to squeeze and shape my swollen breasts, teasing my tingling nipples until they were pert buds beneath his palms.

Flexing his hips, he rose beneath me to meet my downward thrusts, forcing his erection even deeper inside me...deeper than I had thought it possible for him to go. The feeling was almost too much to bear, and yet I wanted more.

"Edward," I cried his name, arching my back and pressing against his hands and his driving member.

"Lean forward," he ordered, raising his upper body from the bed.

I complied, and he captured one of my breasts with his mouth. Drawing the nipple deep, he suckled it fiercely with his tongue, creating a pleasure so intense it was almost pain, arcing from my breast to my sex as if the two places were somehow connected by his actions. Then he reached between us and began to stroke the sensitive nub at the apex of my thighs, rapidly overwhelming me with sweet, torturous pleasure.

The combination of Edward's mouth pleasuring my breasts, suckling first one pouting bud and then the other, his fingers stroking my sex and his huge, hard member moving inside me, was really quite a lot to manage at one time. It was all I could do to maintain the rhythm I had established as my cries of pleasure filled the air.

Then he grasped my hips, urging me to ride him harder...faster...while he thrust his member even deeper inside me. His mouth abandoned my breasts, and he arched beneath me, groaning his pleasure.

For a fleeting moment, I thought that this time he was going to reach the peak without me—not that I minded. Bringing Edward pleasure brought me such joy, and besides, he'd already brought *me* to the very same peak...with his mouth. But I was mistaken. His driving strokes, the look of ecstasy that transformed his features, and his guttural cry all combined to push me over the edge...and we fell into rapture together.

With our cries and moans mingling into a song of passion, I collapsed against his chest as he continued to pulse inside me. Waves of bliss rippled out from my core, causing us both to shudder with every delicious tremor.

"Oh...my..." I managed to gasp just before the ecstasy overwhelmed me, and I was no longer capable of coherent thought or speech.

~AFL~

When I awoke, the room was in darkness, and I tensed...afraid that Edward might have left me.

"Shh..." he crooned close to my ear, and I relaxed against him.

He was wrapped around me from behind, his warm, naked chest pressed close to the curve of my back with our legs nestled together. With one arm across my

stomach, he held me against him, his hand gently cupping my breast.

"I'm here," he whispered. "I told you I would stay."

"Hmmm..." I murmured, snuggling into his extremely intimate embrace. "I'm so glad you did."

"Oh...and why would that be?" he teased, his seemingly perpetually aroused member prodding insistently against my bottom.

Turning a little in his arms, I reached over my shoulder to cup his cheek with my hand.

"Maybe because I thought we could...*talk*?" I teased, my voice a husky whisper.

"*More* talk?" he growled, rocking his hips against mine.

"You did say we could talk...*after*," I purred, pressing back with my bottom.

"*After* implies that something is over or finished," he murmured against my ear, while trailing his hand across my belly on a determined journey to the rather damp curls at the apex of my thighs. "And, my darling, lovely girl, I am far from...*finished*."

"You aren't?" I panted, finding it increasingly difficult to speak with Edward's long, mobile fingers doing wicked, intimate things to my body. Our positions didn't seem conducive for what he clearly had in mind. But when I tried to turn to face him, he held me firmly in place.

"Edward?" I whimpered, puzzled and a little wary when he lifted my leg and moved his erection between the curves of my bottom.

"It's all right, darling. You can trust me," he murmured, as he guided himself to the entrance to my sex, slowly entering me from behind. Rocking his hips, he pushed inside a little further with each movement, until he was all the way inside me...again.

Was there no end to the possibilities? I marvelled. Or to his—*our*—appetite for one another?

"Oh...my..." I whispered, and then giggled, surprising us both.

"You find this funny?" he rasped as his hand moved up to capture my eagerly

waiting breast. Arching backwards, I pressed against him, moving my body in rhythm to his slow, gentle thrusts.

"You seem to have a detrimental effect on my vocabulary," I admitted, gasping at the sensations his repeated penetrations engendered in my slightly tender, but incredibly welcoming flesh.

I had a feeling I would be quite sore on the morrow, but it would be worth it...very...very worth it.

"Well you have a very *beneficial* effect on me," he responded. "Every...single...aspect," he breathed against my shoulder as he continued to move inside me.

"But we *will* get to talk some more...*later*," I panted, determined to gain his assurance before I was once again swept away by the power and passion of his wonderful lovemaking.

"You have my word," he groaned, increasing the tempo of his movements and our combined enjoyment until we were moaning in unison. "But most definitely...*later*."

I didn't disagree, the arrival of yet another sweetly sensual climax apparently imminent.

"Oh, Edward," I cried, moving my hips faster as I began to tighten around him.

"That's it, darling," he murmured, as the pleasure built inside me until I reached another glorious peak. Crying out in joy, I felt the intense, overwhelming satisfaction roll over me in wave after blissful wave.

"Yes," he growled triumphantly, while I writhed and trembled in his arms.

To my surprise, he didn't follow me this time but encouraged me to roll over onto my stomach. Willing to oblige him in any way he wanted, I did as he asked, enjoying the feel of his weight pressing me into the mattress, as he continued to move inside me from behind. His hands clasped mine, holding them to each side of my head, and his long, muscular legs stretched along the outside of mine, trapping me...but in the most wonderful manner.

Rather than feeling threatened by the position or frightened in any way, I felt cherished...protected...though maybe a little dominated by his superior strength.

When he lowered his head to nuzzle the back of my shoulder, I cried out at the renewed round of rapture that pulsed low in my belly. Stunned by the sweet sensations his touch created in my sensitive skin, I pushed back as he entered me, wanting to bring him the same pleasure he was giving me.

Hearing the growls rumble in his throat, I was confident that I was well on the way to being successful in my quest. Groaning, he thrust harder, until it was *his* turn to come apart, and he collapsed against me, shuddering as ecstasy overtook him.

As soon as he was able, Edward lifted his weight, considerably rolling us to our sides while keeping me securely tucked against him.

"I love you," he whispered sleepily, and my last, coherent thought matched the drowsy, blissful smile upon my face.

Oh...My...

~AFL~

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, as I'm taking a break from lemon writing for a little while. It might be an awful lot of fun, but some plot progression is required, or I'll never get them out of the bedroom! ;)

xxx TLSue

Hopes

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

Thank you so much for all the wonderful reviews, and welcome to all the new readers.

Thanks to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro. Mwah...

Updated: Thursday January 12th 2012

Words: 3562

Chapter 37

Hopes

BPOV

Reluctantly opening my eyes, I blinked at the sight of pale spring sunlight streaming across my pillow. The heavy, velvet drapes had been opened and the light grey sky was visible through the lace that covered the window.

Groaning, I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes, clutching the sheet to my breasts when I realised that I was completely naked. I could not recall having ever slept without my nightclothes...or this late in the day. But then, I'd never experienced a night quite like the one before, either.

"Bella?" I heard Angela's softly spoken query, and I looked up to see her standing in the doorway to the sitting room.

"Sorry to wake ye," she continued. "But it's almost noon, and his Lordship said he'd be coming to take ye for a walk in the gardens after lunch."

"He did?" My eyes widened when I registered the time. "Oh, my goodness. I can't believe I slept so late."

"I can," Angela retorted wryly. "If the state of the room and yer messy hair is anything to go by, I'd say ye had quite a night."

My flaming cheeks confirmed her conclusion, though I detected no censure in her tone.

"You may be right about that," I acknowledged sheepishly, relieved to see her smile at my admission. But then her smile faded, and she ducked her head.

"So, Lord Edward...he treats ye well?" I had to strain to hear her whispered words.

There was no doubt about that, I thought, my blush spreading like a rosy flush across my entire body at the memory of the night I'd spent in his arms.

"Yes...yes he does," I replied, and she lifted her eyes to meet mine.

"I'm glad for ye. He *is* the Duke's son, so I figured 'im for one of the better 'uns."

I didn't dispute her assessment, though I was sorry that my relationship with Edward was undoubtedly causing unpleasant memories to surface in her mind.

"Do you think..." I began and then hesitated. "Do you think you will ever be able to move past what happened to you, Angela? To find love one day?"

A soft smile lit her face. "Love ain't the problem," she admitted, and I imagined by the dreamy look in her eyes that she was thinking of the groomsman, Ben. "It's what comes later on I ain't so sure about."

Her face fell with her second statement, and I nodded sympathetically. I couldn't even begin to imagine being intimate with a man—now that I knew what that entailed—after having been through an ordeal of the magnitude that Angela had suffered. But I hoped for her sake that being with a man who was loving and gentle might make a difference one day.

"You and Ben?" I queried tentatively, and it was her turn to blush.

"Aye," she admitted softly. "He says that he loves me and he'll wait for as long as it takes. I do like his kisses, so maybe one day." She shrugged uncertainly.

"I hope it works out for you both," I cautiously offered, not wanting to overstep the mark.

Not seeming offended by my words, she answered more boldly, "Oh, aye...so do I, Miss."

"What's this 'Miss' business?" I scolded teasingly, but Angela took it a step further and dropped a curtsy.

"If I'm to be yer lady's maid—and 'specially considering yer a real life lady and not just pretendin' to be one—I think it be best if I started playin' me part right," she explained.

Wincing, I responded carefully. "That's very kind of you, Angela, but do you think you could wait until we're no longer at Worthington Hall?"

"What do ye mean, 'we'?" She frowned, and I recalled I'd yet to ask her if she would like to accompany me when I went with Edward to live in London. A part of me was uncertain if I should still do so, as the more knowledgeable I became regarding my new station, the more precarious I realised it to be.

"Bella?" she persisted and sighing, I moved to the side of the bed.

"How about we continue this discussion while I bathe and dress?" I suggested, and Angela hurried to bring me my robe. Once I was soaking in a tub filled with hot water and bubbles, I told her about Edward's plans and my desire for her to accompany me if she were willing.

"I'll ask Edward if Ben could come also, if it's what you both want," I explained. "As he said, I'm to have my own horses and carriage, so I'll need a good groomsman. Do you think Ben would be interested?"

"Aye, I'm sure of it. 'E thinks Lord Edward is brilliant when it comes to 'orses, and e'd jump at the chance to work for 'im," she replied. "And it means we could stay together, too."

Taking a deep breath, I broached the less palatable aspect to the situation.

"Before you make your decision, you need to keep in mind that you'd be in service to a gentleman's...*mistress*. Not quite as respectable as working in the household of a duke, I'm afraid."

"It don't bother me none." Angela shrugged and gave me a shy smile. "Besides, if yer Lord Edward has 'alf a brain, 'e'll work out that yer a *real* lady of quality and marry ye quick smart," she retorted, and I gasped, her words rekindling the seed of hope that had sprung up within me the night before.

"I...I don't think there's any way for that to happen," I contradicted, but not as

forcefully as I might have, adding one more topic of conversation to the list of questions I had yet to ask Edward.

After a light luncheon that Stephens delivered on a silver tray—his demeanour surprisingly amenable—I awaited Edward's arrival. With my hair freshly coiffed and dressed in a lovely gown that had been delivered that morning, I felt quietly confident in my appearance. It wasn't something I'd worried about overly in the past, but considering my current circumstance, I needed every advantage I could get.

The dress I'd chosen for my afternoon meeting with Edward was made from a very pretty sky-blue fabric, with lace-trimmed three-quarter-length sleeves, a gathered bodice and flowing skirt, bolstered by a ruffled lace petticoat. While the bustline of the gown would probably have benefited from a corset, I was relieved that enduring the discomfort of the device would not be necessary. Servants did not normally wear corsets, and adapting to the torturous garment wasn't something one could do in a single wearing...it had taken me weeks. The fact that I'd have been able to move around relatively freely, without passing out from lack of breath, would have raised suspicions.

Seeing myself in the full-length mirror looking more like my old self stirred up memories of home that I'd been doing my best to suppress. I found myself wondering how Jake and Leah were doing, along with their families. Had they stayed on working for Lord Hunter or left to try and find work elsewhere? And what of our friends and neighbours...had they readily believed Lord Hunter's lies and welcomed him into Forkston society, or had they defended me in my absence against the scandalous accusations?

Taking a seat by the window while I waited, I contemplated my options. I could leave Lord Carlisle a letter, detailing the true events of my father's murder in the hope that he would take it upon himself to investigate and make Lord Hunter accountable for his crime. But how would I explain my decision not to come forward without Edward's father becoming aware of my current circumstance...and the part his son had played in my ultimate downfall?

Lord Hunter had given the name Elizabeth to the authorities, showing how little I had meant to him since he couldn't even recall my name correctly...and leading me to hope that the local community had rallied to try and protect me as they'd not corrected the error. But once Edward heard the name 'Isabella,' I could not imagine it would take him long to work out my true identity and comprehend my original reason for making the journey to Worthington Hall. Lord Carlisle knew me as Bella, and I rued my decision not to choose an entirely different name as part of my

disguise as a servant. But then...hiding my identity from the man I'd travelled across the country to find, in the hope that he would protect and assist me, had not been part of the original plan.

Sighing, I felt the weight of my circumstances bear down upon my shoulders...and my heart. There seemed to be no way for me to remain with Edward for any length of time without my identity becoming known, and I could barely begin to imagine his reaction once the truth was out. I'd lied to him...repeatedly. I hadn't trusted him with my secret when I'd had the chance—the man I loved and who I now knew loved me in return—and now it was too late...or was it?

Allowing the tentative hope to burgeon in my heart, I shooed Angela aside and went to answer the door myself when the knock finally came, eager to see Edward again. But when I opened the door, all I could see were...*flowers*, every imaginable type of spring and hothouse flower artistically gathered into a rather large bunch.

"Edward?" I queried, and the flowers lowered to reveal his smiling face.

"Good afternoon," he offered politely before executing a bow. "I trust you slept well?"

Quickly dropping a curtsy in response, I ushered him into the room, taking the flowers he offered and handing them to Angela who took them to arrange in a vase for me.

"Yes, thank you. I slept...very well," I responded, feeling suddenly shy. "And thank you for the lovely flowers."

Clearly Edward had changed his mind about bringing me flowers, but I decided not to tease him about it. They were beautiful, and while the rest of the Hall may have been teeming with blooms, the bunch that he'd brought me would be a lovely addition to my suite.

"You are very welcome," he replied, capturing my hand and raising it to his mouth for a kiss. It was a courtly gesture or would have been if he'd immediately released my hand. Instead, he used it to pull me into his embrace, this time capturing my lips with his for a sweet but undeniably passionate kiss. When he finally released my mouth, his eyes had darkened, but I forestalled any...*diversions*.

"You're taking me for a walk in the gardens?" I asked, breathless from his kisses, but smiling to make my eagerness known.

Smiling ruefully, Edward took a deep breath to compose himself. "It's a little overcast, but the head gardener has assured me that if we keep our eyes peeled we may catch a glimpse of the sun this afternoon," he acknowledged wryly, and I nodded, pleased at the possibility. Other than my trip to the village on market day, I'd barely been outside Worthington Hall since my arrival.

"And we can talk?"

"Yes, my darling, we can talk," he agreed and after helping me on with a new pelisse and bonnet, he escorted me on his arm through the house and out to the gardens.

To my relief, we did not come across any of his family members, though I ducked my head when we passed members of staff, avoiding eye contact. Not wanting anything to spoil the afternoon that Edward and I were to spend together, I decided that if anyone was looking at me with censure, I'd rather not know.

The formal gardens were beautiful, and we strolled along the pathways together for a while before I raised the first of a number of issues I wanted to discuss with Edward. Within a short period of time, I'd received his agreement that Angela and Ben could accompany me when we left Worthington Hall, though my uncertain future caused me to feel a little guilty about encouraging them to do so. My hope was that Edward would make sure they were taken care of if...*when*...I was required to flee.

By the tightening in his jaw, I could tell that he was very displeased with the news I gave him regarding Jessica and Mike. But to my relief, he assured me that he would speak to his father's estate and business managers about arranging for work and housing opportunities so that the couple could marry.

"Let's sit for a while," he suggested once these matters were settled, guiding us to a seat in a vine-covered gazebo overlooking the lake. Turning to face me, he cocked his head to the side, studying me intently.

"What is it?" I asked, and he smiled.

"While I admire your concern for others, I'm curious to know if there is anything you would ask for yourself? Are there any questions you have regarding what I've told you about our plans for the future?"

"Not *exactly*," I murmured, catching my lower lip between my teeth, as I wondered about the wisdom of my next request.

"But there is something?" he persisted, reaching to release my lip with his thumb and then stroking it caressingly. The soothing kiss that followed distracted me for a moment. But I took a deep breath and decided to broach the subject that had been playing on my mind...teasing me with its inherent hope for a very *different* future than the one Edward had mapped out.

"Edward..." I swallowed hard and he nodded for me to continue, his brow furrowing at my hesitation. "What if I *wasn't* a commoner? What if I was a member of society, like you, though not as highly ranked, of course. But say...the daughter of a retired officer or maybe a country squire? I wouldn't be a *lady*, per se, but as a member of the gentry could we be together...properly?"

"By *properly*, do you mean as in marriage?" he asked, and I nodded barely able to breathe as I waited for his response.

His eyebrows shot up, and then an indulgent smile curved his lips...not quite the reaction I was expecting.

"Oh, sweetheart," he crooned, enfolding me in his arms and rocking me against him. "I know this is difficult for you, the way things must be between us, but there really is no other way. Please don't misunderstand." He continued, pulling back to meet my puzzled gaze. "If anyone could pull off such a ruse, it would be you. Your father and governess have done a truly remarkable job preparing you for entry into a higher level of society than you were born to.

"Heavens, with the right background story and someone willing to provide an introduction, you could waltz into any ballroom in London and have the society mamas eating out of your hand in no time...not to mention every wet-behind-the-ears young buck fresh from the country wanting to fill your dance card and all the damned rogues and rakes wanting to...well, never mind. But your beauty and grace would only get you so far. The best you could hope for under the circumstances would be marriage to a very minor member of society...possibly the youngest son of a lord if he was particularly determined—and enamoured—but without a dowry and prominent family backing, even that would be doubtful."

"But not a marquess," I added softly. "Not even if my position was legitimate and not a *deception*?"

Shaking his head, Edward ran his fingers gently down my cheek.

"I must gain the approval of the Crown before I marry, Bella. My future wife—preferably the daughter of a duke or an earl...a viscount at the very

least—must have a lineage that is above reproach and easily verifiable. There was talk of an alliance with one of the royal houses of Europe for a while, though considering the state of affairs on the Continent, I think the King would rather reinforce ties closer to home. And of course, my father has his plans in that regard, as he wishes me to make the most politically advantageous alliance possible."

His voice and expression became rather bleak, and he turned to stare unseeing over the lake as he spoke. My heart broke at the loveless future he described...for both of us.

"What would happen if you *were* to marry without the King's approval, to a woman of your own choosing?" I whispered, not daring to meet his gaze.

"I'd lose everything," he answered flatly. "Be stripped of my titles and inheritance, as well as bringing untold disgrace upon the family name."

My breath caught in my throat, and my eyes shot to his face.

"Everything?" I whispered, stunned. I'd known the chances of us being able to marry were small—that's if Edward would even have me once he knew that I'd deceived him, regardless of the circumstances—but I hadn't realised they were virtually non-existent.

"I've a small estate that I inherited from my maternal grandmother that can't be taken from me, and I've managed to make some reasonable investments with its profits over the last few years, but everything else is tied to my various titles," he explained, smiling ruefully. "But darling, even if I *could* marry you...I wouldn't want to. I thought you understood that."

I couldn't keep the hurt from my expression at his words, and I went to stand, needing to get away as tears filled my eyes. But Edward held me in place with his hands around my upper arms.

"Don't go, my love. Let me explain," he murmured, reaching to wipe the tears that spilled over onto my cheeks. "Of course I want us to be together, but it is so much better this way. I would rather have you as my mistress than my wife any day."

"How can you say that?" I cried, trying and failing to understand.

"Because wives are cold-hearted creatures, more concerned about keeping up appearances and maintaining their position in society and competing with the other matrons than loving their husbands...that's if they were even capable of love. It's a

well-known fact that only a fool falls in love with his wife. Not only does it make him a laughing stock amongst his peers, but he will most definitely live to regret his folly when his tender feelings are used against him or thrown back in his face."

"But *I* wouldn't be like that...cold and unloving," I argued, appalled by the picture of marriage that he described and the bitterness in his tone. "If you were married to me, I would love you as I do now, in every way and with all my heart."

Groaning, he closed his eyes, and for a moment I allowed myself to hope that he was imagining how wonderful our life could be together: not having to hide our relationship and our children growing up to take their rightful place in society as his legitimate heirs.

"Bella...Bella..." he admonished gently. "Just when you have me doubting your heritage, you say something like that...so sweetly adorable but incredibly naive."

"Don't mock me, Edward," I drew back from his arms. "I've seen happy marriages before, where there is real love between the couple and mutual respect."

"Yes...amongst the *common* class, my darling, and there are times when I envy those of your strata. But there is no place for such sentimentality amongst the leaders of the upper *ton*. You may have seen a semblance of congeniality amongst the society couples that stayed at your father's inn, but not the sort of passionate love we're talking about, Bella. I wouldn't trade what we have for the world."

"And certainly not for the respectability of marriage," I whispered.

"Not when marriage would ruin everything," he added with a shrug, and I let the tiny seed of hope I'd been holding onto in my heart shrivel and die.

I couldn't agree with Edward's blanket assessment of the state of marriage amongst members of the *ton*, my own parent's relationship being a perfect example of the sort of loving union that he seemed to think was impossible. But how could I argue the point without giving away the truth of my heritage? And what did I really know of life amongst the highest echelon of our society?

Recognising my disconsolate response to his words, Edward reacted predictably and lifted me onto his lap.

"Bella, don't be sad. The passion we share is priceless, and I'll do anything to protect it—to protect *you*—and for us to be able to be together."

Anything but marry me, I thought, but I did not pull away from his embrace.

"I love you," he murmured before kissing me, softly at first. But then he angled his head, the gentle but insistent pressure of his lips urging me to give him the access he desired. Moaning, I parted my lips, and his tongue stroked my mouth, tasting, questing and so very easily arousing me regardless of the state of my emotions...or hopes.

No matter how disappointed, hurt or confused I felt, I could not resist him...I didn't even want to try.

~AFL~

Thanks again for all the lovely reviews. Next chapter up soon...I hope. :D

xxx TLSue

Introductions

Stephenie Meyer created Twilight. I created a bit of an angsty nightmare with AFL. What was I thinking?

Thanks for all the amazing reviews for last chapter. There were a few complaints (too slow, too angsty, too many lemons, Edward is too much of a **, Bella is too weak, etc), so I sat down and reread it from the beginning to see if I had 'lost the plot' so to speak. I'm pretty happy with how it's going, but then I know where I'm headed which makes it easier. ;)

Thanks to telaviv for giving A Forbidden Love its 4000th review. Amazing!

And a huge thank you, as always, to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, for all your hard work and ongoing support.

Updated: Sunday, January 15th 2012

Words: 3104

Chapter 38

Introductions

BPOV

The following days passed blissfully, as long as I kept my mind off thoughts of the future...and the past. It wasn't as difficult to do as one might think since living in the present with Edward was preferable by far to entertaining my many worries and fears. His words had hurt me, though not as much as they might have if my expectations had been more fully developed. The hopes that he'd unwittingly crushed had been tentative at best. I was aware that it hadn't been his intention to cause me sorrow—he was only speaking the truth...as he knew it—but his confirming the impossibility of my situation increased my determination to make the most of our fleeting time together.

Lord Carlisle and Lady Esme were expected to return three months after embarking on their journey, which gave me a little over a month to enjoy being with Edward and to store up enough memories to last me a lifetime...unless I could solve the conundrum my choices had created in a way that would allow us to remain

together.

Maybe I could convince him to run away with me? I mused self-mockingly.

He'd not taken the customary grand tour upon reaching his majority, with the war having only just ended and the resultant chaos across Europe. But normalcy was returning to the Continent, and I wondered if I could talk him into taking an extended journey...impulsively... without waiting for his father to return from his honeymoon or mentioning me in any of his correspondence.

Sighing, I returned to working on a sketch of Edward lounging across my bed in a scandalous state of dishabille. The image brought a smile to my face, banishing my depressing thoughts as I recalled the lovely afternoon we'd spent preceding his posing for the picture.

He never again summoned me to his office but visited me each day in my rooms—and not always for...*that*. We talked, read poetry and laughed a great deal. He also happily posed for me while I worked on the preliminary drawings I needed for the portrait of him that I planned to paint...a slightly more *formal* composition than the one on which I was currently working.

When the weather was fine, we walked in the gardens, even taking our lunch outside on one occasion—a picnic by the lake. Some evenings, Edward and I dined together at a table set before the fire in my sitting room. And every night we made love until I fell asleep in his arms.

The night after our first walk in the garden, I insisted he take whatever precautions were available to him to prevent my becoming with child and not just rely on the so-called "safe days". My confidence in that particular method had waned after I'd mentioned it to Jessica, and she'd mocked its reliability.

"Hmmm...me second cousin Louisa got sweet-talked by a fella who knew all about the 'safe days'." She grimaced. "Wouldna' been so bad if 'e'd stayed around to help raise the twins she 'ad nine months later."

Edward's alternative methods were a tad shocking, but he seemed to have faith in their effectiveness, not that he was as concerned as I about failure. He assumed that if I were to have his child, he would be there to protect me. Only I knew that our days together were numbered, and I could not risk finding myself alone, on the run...*and* with child.

More than willing to take responsibility for preventing what he thought of as a

premature conception, he utilised a supply of what he called "French Letters" that he'd managed to obtain—with difficulty, I gathered, as the implements were not strictly legal. The intriguing inventions required a certain amount of preparation before they could be used...time well spent, as far as I was concerned, considering the delightful ways Edward chose to fill the minutes while we waited for the 'letters' to achieve the necessary degree of malleability.

The other method involved a small sponge soaked in vinegar, of all things, and a surprisingly pleasant method of application...or maybe *insertion* was the more accurate term.

All in all, I received an education that I was quite positive women of my class weren't normally granted access to, but for which I was exceedingly grateful. While I would have loved to bear Edward's children one day, I did not share his belief that their legitimacy, or rather lack thereof, was of so little consequence.

Despite the pleasantness of my days—and *nights*—and my attempts to "impersonate an ostrich," as Miss Brewer would no doubt have accused me of doing, it was not possible to completely ignore the reality that loomed storm-like on the horizon.

Twice now, I'd looked up to see Lady Rosalie watching us from a window while Edward and I were walking together in the gardens. Even from a distance, her bitter fury had been unmistakeable, and I'd stepped closer to Edward's side. A woman originally scorned and then publicly humiliated was not one to take lightly as an adversary. The fact that she'd yet to try and do me any further harm worried me more than if she'd been openly attacking.

A few days earlier, we'd turned a corner in the hallway on our return from a visit to the library and come face to face with Lord Emmett blocking our path.

"Good morning," he greeted us, his frown deepening as he did a virtual double-take at my altered appearance.

As far as I knew, Edward's cousin had only ever seen me dressed as a maid and not in the height of spring fashion as I was currently attired, looking for all the world like a respectable young miss enjoying her stay at a pre-eminent country manor.

Unsure how to respond to the situation, I fell back on the manners that had been instilled in me since earliest childhood and immediately lowered my eyes, curtsying demurely. To my surprise, Emmett responded by proffering a modest but definite

bow.

"Aren't you going to introduce us, cousin?" he queried upon straightening, and I could feel the muscles in Edward's arm tense beneath my hand.

"Yes...of course," Edward ground out between his teeth, his jaw rigid. "Emmett, may I introduce Miss Belinda Brown. Bella, my cousin, Lord Emmett Cullen, Viscount McCarty."

"It is a...*pleasure* to meet you, Miss Brown," Emmett offered, reaching for my hand.

"How do you do, Lord Emmett?" I replied after a moment's hesitation, and Emmett's eyebrows shot up, no doubt in response to my cultured tones. After receiving a reluctant nod from Edward, I tentatively reached my gloved hand towards his towering cousin who grasped it gently. Surprising me again, he bowed over my hand in a manner both polite and respectful...except for the fact that he held onto my fingers for a fraction longer than was customary.

"Emmett," Edward growled, but his cousin merely smiled, releasing me.

"Oh, don't be such a bore, Edward. I just wanted to meet your lovely young... *friend* and offer her a sincere apology for *my* boorish behaviour the other day."

My breath hitched in my throat, and I took a step closer to Edward's side.

Emmett's expression turned rueful. "I am sorry, Miss Brown, for any distress my ill-considered words may have caused you. In my defence, all I can say is that I was not feeling...*myself* at the time. Will you accept my apology?"

His words seemed sincere, and though my heart was pounding at the memory of the dreadful things he and Lord Jasper had said that morning in Edward's study, I nodded my acceptance.

"Excellent," Emmett declared, smiling broadly. "Because it is obvious that Edward plans on keeping you in his life—common sense and well-meaning advice be damned," he added in an aside to Edward, who merely grunted in reply. "Not that I can blame him, for I have to admit, I've never seen my prone-to-melancholy cousin in such good spirits. Having now made your acquaintance, Miss Brown, it is not at all difficult to see the appeal."

Edward's grumbled response to Emmett's words seemed more light-hearted than

previously, and he didn't appear to take offence when his cousin pounded him rather heartily on the shoulder.

"Enjoy yourself, Edward," Emmett added, reminding me—as if I needed it—that despite superficial appearances to the contrary, this encounter was still very much outside of the normal parameters of polite society. "Because I can guarantee that Uncle will have your balls in a vice when he finds out what you've been up to, which I imagine will put quite a dampener on your fun."

Ignoring my shocked gasp and Edward's sudden fit of coughing, Emmett then grasped my hand again. Bowing over it he lifted it to his mouth, quite inappropriately kissing the back of my gloved fingers.

"Until next time, Miss Brown," he offered in parting, along with a cheeky grin and a wink, leaving Edward and I standing in the hallway.

"Goodness," I exclaimed, turning to face Edward, who looked decidedly discomposd. "Your cousin is certainly an interesting fellow. Is that true what he said...that your father will want to, er...*punish* you for...because of..." Floundering, I waved my hands in the air, indicating the two of us.

Edward's shrug was noncommittal, though the way he ran his fingers through his hair—tousling the ruthlessly controlled coif that I was certain must have taken his valet some time to accomplish—gave me cause for concern.

"But I thought you said it was common practice for gentlemen of your stature to take a mistress," I commented once we'd obtained the privacy of my rooms. "Why would your father be concerned that you are following the usual trend? I know you mentioned a need for discretion due to your involvement with lobbying for changes to the laws concerning slavery and child labour. Has it to do with that?"

Taking a seat and drawing me down beside him, Edward took a moment to answer.

"Yes and no," he responded, leaving me initially none the wiser. "Of course, discretion is imperative as our political opponents will use every opportunity to discredit our cause...including searching for any hint of moral weakness. Damned hypocritical of them, if you ask me, considering their own proclivities," he added wryly, and I hesitated to ask what those "proclivities" might be.

Sighing, he continued in a slightly different vein. "My father had a change of heart after my mother died. He no longer approves of the keeping of mistresses, though,

of course, he kept several of his own over the years."

"Of course," I murmured, disconcerted by Edward's casual disclosure about Lord Carlisle, though I supposed I shouldn't have been. "What caused him to change his mind?"

"Utter foolishness," he muttered, and then clarified in response to my puzzled expression. "He fell in love," he added with a shrug.

I was a bit taken aback by Edward's answer. He was in love with me...or so he said, and didn't seem overly upset by the situation. Why would he think his father a fool for experiencing the same joy?

"Who did he fall in love with? One of his mistresses?" I frowned at the thought that a gentleman, even one of Lord Carlisle's calibre, could have any number of mistresses over a lifetime—as well as a wife, of course—but then my eyes widened. "No...with Lady Esme. He fell in love with his new bride."

Edward's raised eyebrows confirmed my conclusion.

"But I thought you said it wasn't done for a gentleman, especially a *lord*, to marry for love?" I whispered, more than a little confused but not daring to allow the hope to resurrect which my understanding of our truly disparate stations had ruthlessly quashed.

"It's *not* done!" he barked, and I jumped, at which point he lowered his voice though there was no hiding the cynicism in his tone. "My father has taken leave of his senses, and will no doubt pay the price for his folly when his new wife's true nature is revealed."

"But...but I've heard that Lady Esme is lovely...caring...compassionate. She rescued Angela from that evil man she was married to, Lord Haversham. The servants have nothing but good things to say regarding her," I defended the lady I would have been honoured to meet if my circumstances had allowed.

His expression softening, Edward drew me to his side.

"Maybe you're right." He shrugged. "She does seem to be a rather extraordinary woman, not that I know her well, and Father does say she makes him happy. This is a second marriage for them both, their positions in society are quite secure, and they do seem to have found...*something*," he admitted albeit reluctantly, allowing me a whisper of hope that his mind may not be quite as closed as it could sometimes

appear.

Not that I blamed him.

I'd heard enough from the other servants to know that Edward's mother had not been well liked. A cold and intimidating woman, she'd kept her husband and children at a distance, reigning over her domain with icy reserve and a scathing tongue...yet she'd been considered an exemplary duchess.

No wonder Edward didn't think very highly of the women of the upper *ton* or of the institution of marriage for anything other than the purposes of duty, I mused, returning my attention to the sketch in front of me. He seemed to have neatly compartmentalised the entire female population according to class, attributing aspects that I would have thought had more to do with character, upbringing and education than...*breeding*. Though, of course, he wasn't the only member of society to do so.

Where I fit, I no longer knew.

~AFL~

With Angela's encouragement, I ventured back to the kitchen one afternoon when Edward was busy with estate matters. Despite her assurance that all would be well, I'd been decidedly nervous and had seriously questioned the wisdom of my actions. With Angela's company and Edward's regular attention, I could have easily chosen to remain in my rooms, having more than enough to do with my reading, sketching and even a little sewing to keep me occupied. But I missed baking and the camaraderie of the kitchen...and I had an ulterior motive.

Though it pained me to do so, my thoughts were regularly exercised with trying to devise a plan for an eventual future *without* Edward's support and involvement. The picture he painted of the life we would lead together was incredibly appealing despite the less than honourable role I would be playing. But I couldn't see any way for it to occur without my identity becoming known...a risk I could not take for the sake of either family's reputations. If I was required to earn my living, finding employment as a pastry chef seemed my best and *safest* option, in which case, references from Mrs. Cope and Chef Peters would prove invaluable. Becoming aware that my mother's pearls were probably worth a great deal did not mean that I had any idea how to translate that worth into a nest egg or income to support me when I was alone. Lord Hunter's name was no longer being mentioned in the papers, but I had no doubt that he would still be on the lookout for the pearls...and me.

To my immense relief, I was welcomed warmly in the kitchen upon my return. One or two of the servants looked at me askance, but word had spread of the efforts I'd gone to on Mike and Jessica's behalf, bolstering my good standing with all but the most morally rigid individuals.

The young footman had been offered a position as a clerk in one of the Duke's factories, apprenticed to the bookkeeper—he was good with numbers, apparently—and he surprised me by thanking me in person for my efforts.

"It was very kind of ye, Miss, especially after, well...ye know," he offered with an embarrassed shrug. "I didn't mean no 'arm by it."

Archly raising a brow and using my most severe tone, I responded in a manner that I hoped would benefit Jessica...though I had my doubts.

"You're to be a husband and father now, so I suggest you focus your attentions on your wife in future and make the most of the opportunity you've been granted," I admonished, and Mike at least had the decency to blush.

It was only after he doffed his cap and made his escape that I realised we had an audience who were eyeing me curiously. In my desire to make a point with the impudent footman, I'd completely forgotten the role I was supposed to be playing. Edward's treatment of me—as if I were a peer, of sorts—and Angela's determination to act the part of my lady's maid, had undoubtedly contributed to my reverting to behaviour befitting my previous position in life...as Sir Charles' daughter.

Fortunately, nothing came of my lapse, and I was able to spend a pleasant afternoon baking tarts and poring over the French recipes that I continued to transcribe with Chef Peters while he planned the week's menus. I looked forward to returning to the kitchen again though my priority was time spent with Edward...time that was rapidly running out.

~AFL~

A knock at the door roused me from my reminiscing, and I glanced at the clock on the mantle. Edward was early, and a smile lit my face. With Angela busy attending to my laundry, I was pleased to have the opportunity to welcome him personally. He didn't normally knock, and I opened the door half expecting to be greeted by another bunch of flowers or some other surprise as he'd taken to bringing me gifts: chocolates, fripperies, even a pretty bracelet to which he'd added several charms.

But the surprise that greeted me was of an altogether different nature.

"Good afternoon, Miss Brown," Lord Jasper offered politely, but there was no disguising the grim determination in his tone. "I think it's time you and I became a little better acquainted."

~AFL~

I know...more angst. But the plot is starting to move along, and the angst won't last forever... ;)

xxx TLSue

PS: I almost forgot! Ro Nordstrom has created a wonderful new banner for AFL using some great images from Bel Ami. The URL i p: /tinyurl 7hemqkq - You just have to take out the spaces. :D

Suspicious

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for their hard work and support.

Sorry about the 'cliffie' at the end of last chapter...I forgot how much turmoil they create. I normally love reading cliff-hangers at the end of a chapter, but I guess it's a bit different when you can just turn the page to read on rather than having to wait a few days for the next instalment.

For those who were particularly concerned after last chapter, just a reminder that as earlier promised, there will be no rape, graphic descriptions of horrible abuse or cheating by the main characters (grrr!) in any of my stories. Despite the angst, I'm very much in this for the fun, fantasy and eventual HEAs. Real life has enough heartache without creating more as far as I'm concerned.

Updated: Tuesday, January 17th 2012

Words: 2304

Chapter 39

Suspicious

BPOV

I was not fooled by Lord Jasper's gentlemanly appearance. Edward's friend might be tall, handsome and elegantly attired, but he was also dangerous. Reminded of the dreadful things he had said to Edward that day in his study, my heart lodged in my throat when he pushed past me into the room, closing the door decisively behind him.

My first thought was dismay that Angela wasn't present to act as chaperone, followed by relief that she was absent with a hope that she did not return anytime soon. The last thing I wanted was for the vulnerable girl to be put at risk.

"How may I be of assistance, m'lord?" I asked, falling back on politeness when I

was actually quite terrified and unable to keep my voice from wavering.

"You can assist me, Miss *Brown*, by telling me who you are and what game it is you are playing," Lord Jasper replied, eyeing me severely while he paced the room. He boldly perused my meagre possessions, taking several moments to look through the pages of my sketch book.

"I don't know what you mean," I responded, swallowing against the lump in my throat.

"Come now...enough of this nonsense. You will not find me so easily duped as my companions. Emmett can't see past a pretty face and Edward...well, let's just say that you have my normally sensible friend wrapped around your little finger and leave it at that. I've been observing you for some time, Miss *Brown*, and it is clear to me that you are not what you say you are but something closer, I'd gauge, to what you actually appear."

"I...I am a commoner who has received an uncommon degree of education," I repeated the lie that had begun to feel like the truth, I'd told it so often.

"I find that very difficult to believe." Lord Jasper raised a sardonic brow and walked purposefully across the room to crowd me against the wall. "Your speech...your comportment...your innate grace...*You*, Miss *Brown*, would not appear out of place if you were a guest in this home, whereas I am yet to meet the daughter of a commoner, no matter how wealthy or successful, who does not betray her ancestry within five minutes of opening her mouth regardless of the money, time and effort put into gilding the lily.

"Who...are...you...really?" he demanded, placing a hand to either side of my head against the wall, effectively trapping me in place. "A young lady who has fallen on hard times...or something more sinister, I fear? If we were still at war, I would suspect you of being a spy sent by the French, though I imagine they would have devised a more plausible cover than your paper-thin story. I *will* have the truth, Miss *Brown*, or so help me..."

"Please," I whimpered, barely able to hear myself speak over the pounding of my heart.

"Please what?" he murmured, the softening of his fierce expression giving me no comfort. His eyes darkened, and he raised a hand to run his finger gently down my cheek. It was the same simple caress that Edward had used many times, but I shuddered in dismay at Lord Jasper's touch, and tears welled in my eyes.

"Please don't hurt me," I managed to whisper with a throat so dry it had almost closed.

Frowning, he let his hand fall but did not move away.

"I have no intention of *hurting* you, Miss Brown. Your appeal is undeniable, it is your purpose and intentions that elude me. But I do not force unwilling women, nor would I encroach on a friend's territory...no matter how tempted. I am here for the answers that Edward would have demanded if you hadn't managed to so completely beguile him. Is it money that you are after? I'm not sure how much Edward has offered you. Are you open to a higher bid?"

There was no denying the provocative nature of his question, and I gasped as outrage replaced some of my fear, emboldening me a little.

"I don't want money...yours or anyone else's." I denied his horrid accusation, and his eyebrows rose. "I *did* fall on hard times. My father died leaving me orphaned, and I came to Worthington Hall to find employment in a supposedly safe environment...and that is all."

"Ahh...but you've found a great deal more than that, *Miss Brown*...if that is even your name. No matter how enamoured he may be, Edward will never marry you. If this is some misguided attempt to entrap him, you'll be sadly disappointed and quite ruined when the truth comes out, I'm afraid."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," I insisted, though my heart ached at hearing my sad reality spelled out for me, albeit with a sordid twist. "Lord Edward pursued *me*, not the other way around. He offered me his protection, and I accepted. The only thing I am guilty of is naiveté, as I did not truly understand what was involved," I admitted, hoping that speaking as much of the truth as I was able might convince Edward's overly protective friend of my sincerity.

Lord Jasper eyed me closely for another long moment and then stepped back, allowing me to release the breath I'd been holding as I sagged against the wall.

"Do take a seat before you fall down. You look decidedly pale, and I am in no mood to deal with female vapours...real or feigned."

I had no idea what Lady Alice saw in him, the odious man, and it pained me to do as he suggested. But I did feel rather faint, and it was with considerable relief that I took a seat nearby.

To my further dismay he came to stand over me.

"If you are telling the truth, then you shall have my apology and Edward my congratulations for finding a paramour of exemplary quality in the most unlikely of settings." He bowed slightly in a manner I could only suppose was mocking. "But I am warning you, if this is some sort of ruse to discredit Edward or his father, or an attempt to extort financial gain from a family well-known for their generosity and kindness...you will sincerely regret your deceit."

"My intentions in coming to Worthington Hall were without guile." I defended myself. "I never set out to *entrap* Edward or to become his mistress—I had no idea that such a role existed." Despite my continued attempts at subterfuge, I could not keep the dismay I felt over the fact that gentlemen even *kept* mistresses from my voice.

"How could you *not* know?" Lord Jasper mused, and I saw red...the hurt and betrayal I felt at the hypocrisy I'd discovered inherent in my own class causing me to act without circumspection.

"Does Lady Alice know that you are busy pursuing anything in a skirt while supposedly courting her at the same time, or that you have absolutely no intention of honouring your vows after you wed? Or that you will expect her to behave as if she has a heart of stone, readily denying her the passion and pleasure that you will take as your right?" I blurted, immediately regretting my words and covering my mouth with my hand. I'd spoken the truth but my opinion was clearly inflammatory, the words apparently circumventing my brain...or at least my common sense.

Lord Jasper's initially stunned expression turned calculating.

"I hope you are not threatening me, Miss Brown."

Feeling at a decided disadvantage with him towering over me, I took a steadying breath and stood to face him head on.

"Of course not," I placated earnestly. "How could I? It is not like I will ever get to meet Lady Alice as a peer, and what warning could I possibly give that she would believe? I'm just pointing out that a young woman who has been sheltered in her upbringing would have no reason to be aware of such things."

"Confirming my suspicion that you are from a background other than that which you have purported." Lord Jasper pounced on what he saw as inconsistency, once again inciting my ire.

"Why...because only female members of the *ton* are raised in ignorance? What is it about the so-called gentlemen of the *ton* that makes you assume that a girl of common heritage has no reputation to protect or would automatically welcome the attentions of any man who wishes to take advantage of her?"

Lord Jasper blinked at my outburst. "Are you saying that Edward *forced* you?" he asked, and my anger drained away with his query.

"No...not at all. The *choice* was mine," I added wryly and then sighed. "I may not agree with his views in regard to the acceptability of married men keeping mistresses...views shared by most of *proper* society I gather, along with a determination to keep their maidens assiduously in the dark. But I care for Edward a great deal and would never do anything to intentionally harm him...or his family."

Lord Jasper continued to study me, no doubt testing my genuineness, and I could think of nothing else to say to prove my innocence...as far as my motivation went. Unfortunately, his postulations regarding my identity were frighteningly close to the truth.

"Don't think I didn't notice your use of the word *intentionally*," he accused, and I shrugged helplessly. Edward had asked for my promise that I would never leave, but what choice did I have?

"Why do I get the impression that you have no intention of *remaining* in the role of mistress?" Lord Jasper continued when I made no further comment. "You must know that, regardless of your heritage, it is the only role available to you."

"That does not make it an *honourable* one," I replied disconsolately. "Lord Edward must marry one day, and I could not in good conscience..." My words dried up as I realised that I was only adding fuel to the flames of Lord Jasper's suspicions by sharing my opinions.

"Your sympathies lie with the wife?" Jasper seemed amused by my admission.

"My sympathies lie with women of all classes who are forced into untenable situations by the unrealistic expectations of a society determined to keep them in their place...whatever that might be!" I retorted and then sighed again, quite certain that I was wasting my time and breath. The system I was criticising weighed too heavily in favour of the men who perpetuated it for them to be willing to recognise its flaws.

"I don't know what else to tell you, Lord Jasper, other than that I care for Edward

a great deal and have no desire to hurt him."

"I begin to suspect that I may have misjudged you, Miss Brown," Lord Jasper murmured speculatively after studying me for another long moment. "And I find myself in a rather perplexing situation. I came here expecting duplicity, in which case I was ready to demand that you leave Worthington Hall and never bother Edward with your presence again, but now I am concerned that is precisely what you intend to do. Are you sure that such a drastic move is the only one available to you? Edward is clearly very taken with you. It was not my purpose to deny him your company merely to make sure that he was not at any...risk."

I smiled sadly at Lord Jasper's wording and his rather rapid about-face in opinion and purpose. That Edward and I were taken with one another was not in doubt, but the risks inherent in my staying with him were both real and as far as I could tell...insurmountable.

To my surprise, Lord Jasper and I parted on surprisingly good terms, certainly much better than when he'd arrived. I kept my responses regarding my future plans as vague as possible—which wasn't difficult as I was still wholly undecided as to what to do and having no desire to part from Edward unless it was absolutely necessary.

"I love Edward, and the thought of him being harmed in any way is anathema to me," I allowed, not daring to admit that it was my ongoing presence in his life that I feared could do the most damage...to his reputation and that of his family.

"Having made your acquaintance, albeit in rather unconventional circumstances, I now fear your absence from his life may do the greatest harm," Lord Jasper mused, and my heart clenched. "But I can I see that you have my friend's best interests at heart and will desist from pressing you further. Despite the harshness of my prior accusations, I hope that you might consider coming to me if you should need assistance in the future," he concluded.

His complete turnaround in manner and opinion astonished me, but I knew I would never take up his surprisingly kind offer...my trust did not stretch that far.

I'm afraid that my greatest fear was still of being handed over to Lord Hunter as my father's heir and my self-purported guardian. For all I knew, he had even forged paperwork to back up his spurious claims...though what he would do with me now that I was a *fallen woman* I dreaded to think.

When Angela returned, I chose not to mention Lord Jasper's visit, not wanting to

distress her. But I was on decided tenterhooks while I awaited Edward's arrival, desperate for the comfort and reassurance of his presence. Pacing the floor of my sitting room, I found myself fervently wishing for a way to take up his offer of permanent protection, as I held to one last, tentative hope.

~AFL~

Hmmm...what hope could that be?

For those of you, like me, that have a decidedly soft spot for Jasper, I hope you were relieved to see that he's not a total jerk in this story, though he does have a lot to learn. (Don't they all?)

Next chapter is off being beta'ed so should be up soon. Thanks for all the encouragement and support.

xxx TLSue

Courage

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT! A Forbidden Love will be removed from Fan Fiction Net on February 24th 2013. My reasons for doing so are detailed in Ch 74.

Stephenie Meyer created the Twiverse. No copyright infringement intended.

Thanks for all the wonderful reviews. They've been a ray of sunshine in some otherwise dark and dreary days.

Thanks to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, for beta'ing so diligently despite RL being challenging all round - and for not charging me 'billable hours'!

Updated: Sunday, 22nd January 2012

Words: 2469

Chapter 40

Courage

BPOV

If Edward was surprised by the way I virtually threw myself into his arms when he arrived that evening after Lord Jasper's departure, he made no comment other than his usual words of endearment. I didn't tell him about his friend's visit, afraid of his reaction and of giving away more than I should. But it saddened me to add one more prevarication to the list of those I'd already told. Sometimes it felt that the only truly honest interactions between us were at opposite ends of the spectrum: the relatively superficial sharing of our ideas and opinions or the intimate sharing of our bodies. Though, of course, my heartfelt avowals of love and commitment were given with all the passion and sincerity I could impart...especially knowing that they would have to last a lifetime.

After spending time acquainting each other with the events of our day—mine a heavily edited account—we dined in my suite before sitting and reading by the fire, something we'd done on several occasions. When it was time for us to retire...early,

which was also our habit, as we were inevitably impatient to lose ourselves in one another's arms...Edward turned to me with a request.

"I thought we could spend tonight in *my* bed, if you were agreeable," he asked, surprising me with his somewhat diffident manner...the choice was clearly mine. "Not that I've slept in it for a while, but I dreamed about having you there with me so many nights before we were together that I'd like to make it a reality on at least one occasion while we're at Worthington Hall."

I smiled my assent, still somewhat astonished to think that he had wanted me so badly right from our very first meeting. A part of me couldn't believe he wanted me now, but his caring, considerate deeds, almost constant expressions of love and commendation, the eagerness he felt to be with me and which he did not try to hide and, of course, his passionate lovemaking all combined to bolster my belief in the genuineness of his affections. As to my worthiness to be the recipient of such bounty, who was I to deny a man of such high standing exactly what his erudite tastes demanded? I mused with an inner chuckle, but then my smile faded.

If only I could have been *everything* he wanted and needed...fulfilled *every* role in his life and not merely the one available to me.

The thought reminded me once again of the temporary nature of our sojourn here in his father's home, and I shyly broached the one remaining possibility that left me with any hope for us to be able to stay together for a more protracted length of time.

"Edward, do you think we might take a trip abroad?" I asked, keeping my tone casual when in actuality his answer was so very important to me that my heart began to race.

"Yes, of course, that would be splendid and something I've considered also," he responded delightedly, causing my hopes to rise ever so slightly. "We could visit your mother's homeland together and all the other places we've read about but not seen in person...Switzerland...Italy...We could explore the Continent together."

"That sounds wonderful," I answered on a sigh, picturing us strolling arm in arm together along the boulevards of Paris, Rome or Prague, places I'd read about but had never in actuality expected to see with my own eyes. "Do you think we could go sooner rather than later...*before* we set up home in London?"

"I don't see why not," Edward replied with an elegant shrug, closing the distance between us to draw me into his embrace. "Is there any particular reason for a hasty departure?" His question lacked suspicion, the tone more in the way of expressing

idle curiosity, and I released the breath I'd been holding.

"No reason, other than that I think I would enjoy the opportunity for us to spend time together away from the pressures of society's expectations," I answered, grateful that with my head tucked beneath his chin he could not see my eyes even if my words were surprisingly close to the truth. "And I've always wanted to see the sights I've only ever read about." In reality, my prior travel aspirations had not ventured further than London, but I decided it might be wise to leave out that particular detail.

"Let me look into it, and I will see what I can arrange." Edward offered, rocking me in his arms. "But we'll have to wait until my father returns so I can hand over the reins, so to speak. And then I'll need to check on my own estates before we can embark on a journey of a prolonged duration," he continued, and I felt my hopes wilt like a daffodil left too long in the sun without water.

"There's no way we could just take up and go...and leave your estate managers to deal with matters here?" I murmured, knowing even as I spoke that the question was futile.

Leaning back to capture my reluctant gaze, Edward stared at me, clearly perplexed.

"What is it you're wanting to avoid?" he asked, and I ducked my head. "Or maybe I should say...*who*? My father?"

My eyes shot to his face. "I...I'm just worried about his reaction to you having taken a mistress, especially one of his household. I merely want to save you...well, both of us in truth... the distress of facing his ire."

Edward's eyebrow's rose, but then he smiled reassuringly.

"Darling, there's no need to worry. My father is not an ogre...far from it. He's considered by all and sundry—myself included—to be the epitome of reasonableness and compassion. You have absolutely nothing to fear."

"But what of his reaction to your breaking his rules, and this important alliance you've mentioned...the one that you think your father might consider jeopardised by your taking a mistress?" While I was not aware of all the details, Edward had explained that his father was courting the vote of the Earl of Denali who, if he could be won to the cause, would prove a powerful political ally in the fight against slavery and child labour.

"Ahh, my sweet girl," Edward murmured, leaning down to softly brush his lips over mine. "Please don't bother yourself with such things as political expediency. I'll find a way to keep everyone happy...though *your* happiness is my priority."

"Of course," I murmured indulgently as his kisses deepened, but I wasn't willing to be distracted from this particular line of conversation...just yet.

"I would still prefer not to have to meet your father, if you didn't mind," I persisted, and Edward lifted his head to eye me with surprise...and concern.

"I really have imparted the wrong impression, haven't I? My father won't be angry with you, Bella, or me for that matter...well, not overly. I've been thinking a great deal about our conversation of the other day, and though I'm still concerned about the wisdom of his decision, I'm hopeful that my father's recent experience with love will make him more amenable to my having 'broken the rules,' as you say, in pursuit of the same."

"Oh...well, that's wonderful then," I murmured wanly, disguising my dismay by breaking away from Edward's arms and heading toward my bedroom. "Give me a few moments to change, and I'll meet you in your suite," I called over my shoulder, fighting back tears and a growing sense of despair. If I pursued the matter I would only incite Edward's curiosity further and eventually his suspicion...not that it was easily aroused. It really was a wonder how many inconsistencies he was willing to ignore in the name of love.

The thought brought a rueful smile to my face, as I considered the abundance of justifications—both moral and practical—that I'd been willing to make to allow myself to be with Edward. Having compromised on so many points, at times I barely recognised myself, though my previously sensible nature was doing its best to assert itself. Not that I could imagine having made any other choice.

Time spent with Edward was extraordinarily pleasant...my limited vocabulary neither poetic nor extensive enough to properly express the joy and gratitude I felt at having had this opportunity to be with him...but time was slipping by all too quickly.

Lord Carlisle's and Lady Esme's return was a matter of weeks away, and I still had only the vaguest of plans for my departure. As soon as possible, I would seek out Jessica to ask for her advice...a priority, as she and Mike would be leaving the Hall to begin their new life shortly. I hoped that there might be someone amongst her plethora of cousins and second cousins who could assist me in finding a buyer for my mother's pearls...someone who would ask no questions nor feel inclined to

contact the authorities to assuage their suspicions. Undertaking such an endeavour was no doubt fraught with risk, but so was my continued residence on at Worthington Hall.

My days with Edward were numbered, and after the disconcerting confrontation with Lord Jasper whose suspicions *had* been well and truly aroused, and Edward's less than helpful response to my request for us to disappear together—albeit temporarily—I could not help but think that number might be even less than I'd hoped.

Putting aside my depressing thoughts, I focused my attention on the night ahead, not wanting to waste a precious minute of the time that Edward and I had together with regrets. There would be more than enough time for that when I left Worthington Hall...and Edward...behind.

The thought brought a sudden pain to my chest, as if I'd been wounded and there was a gaping hole where my heart should be. I gasped, taking a moment to catch my breath and force aside the premonition that this dreadful pain and feeling of emptiness would be a permanent affliction when all I had to hold onto was the memory of our time together...and my love for him that I seriously suspected would never fade away.

When I entered the dressing room, Angela was waiting for me, having returned from dinner with the other staff to assist me with preparing for bed. I never thought to say such a thing, but I missed being able to dress and undress myself without assistance. Not that I was pining for the horrid maid's uniform or preferred wearing my button-front blue dress day in and day out, but at least I could don and remove them myself. Fashions for the upper classes were deliberately designed for the wearer to require assistance with dressing, evidence of their exalted position in society. Only members of the *ton* could generally afford the requisite lady's maid or valet.

While I had harbored the hope that Angela would be able to accompany me in my new life, the more aware I became of the perils I faced the less that seemed a reasonable possibility. No matter how tempted I was to take Edward up on his generous offer—at least until he was required to wed—try as I might, I could not come up with a feasible way of doing so that would keep my identity hidden. As much as it pained me, it seemed that I would have to find a way to support myself alone, and while my mother's pearls might provide me with a sufficiently sized nest egg to establish a respectable life, that was not an eventuality I could depend on. The greater likelihood was that I would be required to support myself with my baking as an assistant pastry chef in another household or possibly a village

bakery...if I could find a safe location.

With that thought in mind, I made a mental note to discuss with the seamstress who had adapted my new wardrobe ways to make a few of the plainer gowns wearable by a lady who was required to dress herself.

After receiving her assistance to change into one of the lovely but relatively modest nightgowns that I presumed had once belonged to Lady Alice, I wished Angela a goodnight and then reassessed my attire. There were a few items of clothing that a lady could don without aid...ones that were even easier to remove.

Crossing to one of the many dressers, I opened a drawer and removed the white silk negligee and robe that Edward had provided for me to wear on our first night together. Of course, on that nerve-wracking occasion, I'd been far too shy to consider agreeing to his scandalous wishes...well, at *first*. But something about tonight felt right, and I quickly changed before my courage failed me.

Tempted to avoid looking at my reflection in the full-length mirror, I nevertheless checked my appearance before leaving the relative safety of the dressing room.

My long brown hair hung in waves almost to my waist, covering my shoulders and partially cloaking my breasts, which were otherwise clearly visible through the gown—a mere whisper's breath of silk and sensuality that floated in graceful yet intimately revealing folds to the floor. My breath hitched in my throat at the sight before me, and I momentarily reconsidered my decision. But then I attempted to view the situation—and *myself*—from Edward's perspective, and a soft but far from shy smile lit my face as my courage returned.

~AFL~

Getting angstier, I'm afraid, with time running out...but I'm still working on that HEA. ;)

xxx TLSue

Contemplation

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I hope her life is less angsty than mine.

Thank you...thank you...thank you all so much for your truly wonderful reviews. They were a huge encouragement and made all the difference to me this week.

Thanks to my betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar...as always.

Updated: Wednesday, January 25th 2012

Words: 1454

Chapter 41

Contemplation

EPOV

After changing into my black silk pyjama bottoms and a matching robe, I dismissed my valet and awaited Bella's arrival. Her curious proposal had captured my attention, and I contemplated her motivation while standing by the fire, sipping a brandy. Though she'd valiantly tried to hide her distress, there was no doubt in my mind that she been upset when I was unable to acquiesce to her request that we drop everything and virtually...*disappear* together. It was a ludicrous suggestion, though heaven knew a part of me was sorely tempted. A life with Bella "away from the pressures of society's expectations" as she'd put it, sounded extraordinarily tempting.

Absently rubbing my chest, I realised that my heart ached for her. Bella had not been raised to live the life that I'd practically coerced her into. The dubious morality of the situation—something that I'd admittedly not considered in any great depth prior to our being together—did not sit well with her. And it worried me that she would not cope with the exigencies of the situation when I was forced to wed. Her innate sense of decency and compassion, along with a degree of naiveté inexplicable in one of her class, forewarned me that her conscience would likely make it difficult for her to continue with our relationship if I was...*technically* committed to another. The truth of the situation was that my heart was Bella's and always would be.

Sighing, I could see no solution to our dilemma other than an increased determination to so completely fix her affections that she would be unable to live without me regardless of the circumstances...as I was her.

At least Emmett had stopped accusing me of taking leave of my senses. After impertinently demanding an introduction, he'd been thoroughly taken by Bella during the short discourse we'd shared in the hallway. When he compared the way I felt for her to the feelings he harboured for his wife, I decided he deserved even more pity than I had previously allowed, as our situations could not have been more different. Bella returned my affection genuinely and unashamedly, and I could only begin to imagine Emmett's torment at feeling the way that I did for a woman who was wholly unable to respond in kind.

Something in my demeanour must have alerted him to the conclusion I'd reached, for he attempted to allay my concerns with a rather surprising revelation.

"Rosalie is not quite as incapable of true feeling as you believe her to be," he defended his wife, my response a look of perplexity. I'd never denied Rosalie's ability to feel...it was the nature of the emotions she chose to express with which I took umbrage.

"For a certainty, she's been well trained for her role and position in society...*too* well trained, unfortunately," he concluded with a disconsolate sigh. "But there have been several occasions...well, two and an *almost*...when I've managed to crack that icy veneer and connect with the passionate woman beneath."

I harrumphed uncomfortably, both embarrassed and a little shocked by Emmett's revelation.

"Oh, come now, Edward...don't be priggish. We've shared pretty much everything two young men can experience in our misspent youths."

His words elicited a chuckle considering that he'd recently reached the grand old age of twenty-six and I was only approaching twenty-four, but I understood his meaning. We'd been through a lot together since he'd arrived on the doorstep of Worthington Hall orphaned and bewildered after the death of his parents...the cousin I'd rarely seen becoming the big brother I'd always wanted. But we weren't foolish lads any more and no longer sought endless frivolity or distraction.

"Why are you telling me this?" I queried, though not unkindly. It had been a while since we'd trusted one another enough to share our thoughts...before Emmett's marriage a year and a half earlier. Rose's pursuit of me when Emmett had already

declared his interest had created a tension between us that we'd been unable to dispel...to date.

"I just wanted you to know that I understand how you feel about your lovely Miss Brown, and I wish you both all the happiness in the world. And, I suppose, I wanted to apologise—or rather confess—as it is Rose to whom I owe the apology for my moment of madness."

"I gather you're referring to the declaration you made the other day in my study?" I surmised, and he nodded, his expression grim.

"I could never have gone through with it...bedding Miss Brown if you'd been willing to share. Not that she isn't lovely, of course, but..."

"But she's not Rosalie," I answered for him, accurately predicting the surprising direction of his thoughts.

Acknowledging me with a rueful shrug, he went on to attempt to convince me that it was Rosalie's upbringing and the rigid expectations society placed on its young maidens that had perverted her ability to express true love and affection...not the result of generations of superior breeding. My father had hinted that he'd arrived at a similar epiphany during the short time I'd spent with him before his recent nuptials...but I'd not been particularly receptive to such implausible and, dare I say, wishful thinking.

The conversation with Emmett stayed with me, replaying in my mind...particularly the part where he'd said he was determined to convince Rosalie that they could have as warm and loving a relationship as Bella and I enjoyed. I would have liked to discuss the issue with Bella, curious as to the inevitably fascinating insights she would have had to share regarding by cousin's somewhat revolutionary way of thinking. But I could see no way to broach the subject without appearing insensitive to her situation and feelings.

Hurting Bella, even unintentionally, was at the top of my list of events to avoid at all costs.

Thankfully, Jasper had remained quiet on the topic though I was sure he had his opinions...in general and regarding my relationship with Bella. We'd mended our fences easily enough after our initial altercation, but I could tell I did not have his unreserved approval for the course of action I was pursuing. I'd considered asking him what it was about my taking Bella as my mistress that engendered his disapproval, as considering his own proclivities, it seemed rather hypocritical of him

to oppose it based on any sort of moral grounds.

Not for the first time, I found myself feeling unsettled by the thought of Jasper's propensity for dalliance in regard to his prospective role as my sister's husband and protector. He was intent on marrying her and should have had my wholehearted support. I knew of no finer fellow in terms of position, wealth, education and temperament. But when I found myself considering a marriage between my sister and my closest friend, I found it difficult to picture either of them in the roles required.

My mother's absence during these last few highly formative years had allowed Alice an uncommon degree of freedom to develop without the usual limitations placed on one of her station and gender...with unexpected consequences. The esteem with which she held Jasper reminded me more of the delightfully unrestrained manner in which Bella expressed her feelings for me—without the physicality, of course—than the more constrained regard a young lady of good standing was supposed to have for a prospective suitor. That she cared for him a great deal was obvious, and I had a difficult time aligning my long held beliefs regarding matrimony and the desires I had for my precious sister's happiness.

If a husband of my class was considered foolish for developing tender feelings for his spouse, I could only imagine the misery that a wife would experience if she was unwise enough to find herself in a similar position...loving someone who was more than capable of responding with the same degree of affection but who chose *not* to.

For the first time, the almost blasphemous thought crossed my mind that there was in actual fact no reason stopping Jasper from developing the same feelings for my agreeable young sister as she appeared to be developing for him other than the fact that it just was not done...or so I'd always assumed.

The alternative, a marriage that followed the more predictable course of events with the two parties co-existing in a state of formal detachment, treating each other with cool, polite and distant regard—while Jasper no doubt indulged his passions elsewhere and Alice...*denied* hers altogether, I supposed—left me with a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Was that what I wanted for my sister...a loveless marriage that fulfilled society's considerable expectations but none of her own?

~AFL~

Just a short chapter, but I wanted to show that Edward's making some

progress with his antiquated thinking, not that it was antiquated for the time - ugh! Next chapter will be up in two days (it's longer!) but prepare yourself for a bit of fluff. I'm afraid I needed something light before I threw myself into writing all the angst we've been anticipating/dreading but needs to happen for this story to move along. ...dun...dun...dun...

xxx TLSue

Imagination

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have the most supportive husband in the world. Just saying.

Thank you so much for your lovely reviews and for not giving up on AFL even though it's taken me a while to get to the action...though just a reminder that we're looking at *ahem* action of a different nature this chapter. ;)

Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar - thanks for beta'ing and for everything else. :D

Updated: Friday, January 27th 2012

Words: 2464

Chapter 42

Imagination

EPOV

A gentle knock at the door roused me from my peculiar contemplations, and I quickly set my glass aside while taking one last look around the room to make sure that all was in order.

The fire blazed, though not too hotly, and before it I'd placed a soft, padded quilt and at least a dozen pillows. Candles placed strategically around the bedchamber cast a soft glow, and if I did say so myself, I thought the effect was rather magical.

Smiling at the whimsy that my desire to please Bella inspired, I strode toward the door, secretly grateful that neither Emmett nor Jasper were aware of quite how completely I was smitten or the lengths to which I was more than willing to go to bring a smile to my beloved's face.

Unaccountably nervous, I took a deep breath before opening the door. It was a good thing that I did so, since one look at Bella knocked the air from my lungs, rendering me completely incapable of speech, movement and logical thought for some time.

"May I come in?" she asked, her voice soft and tentative when I continued to block the doorway in my stupefied state.

"Yes...yes, of course," I managed to utter, forcing my leaden legs to move and ushering her into my room.

"Oh my," she gasped, coming to a halt a few steps inside the door and taking in the room's ambience. "How lovely."

How lovely indeed, I mused, awestruck by the stunning sight before me.

Bella was attired in the negligee and robe I had intended for her to wear on our first night together. But no amount of imagining on my part could have prepared me for how the sheer, white fabric would look draped enticingly over her breathtakingly gorgeous body. I'd been privileged to see her naked many times now, with her lovely hair cascading around her in a silken cloud, but seeing her like this was something else altogether.

She turned to face me, and with a mind of their own, my eyes slowly, indulgently and incredibly gratefully perused her body from top to toe and then back up again. Lingering over every enticing curve, dip and swell, my gaze eventually met hers to find a justifiably self-satisfied smile on her rose-coloured lips.

Bella *owned* me...and she knew it.

The thought should quite possibly have left me feeling ill at ease—knowing I'd given so much power over my wellbeing into another's hands—but I trusted her with my life...and my heart.

Overwhelmed by a sudden sense of possessiveness, I closed the distance between us and drew her into my arms, glorying in the warmth of her body as she nestled against me. My hands met smooth silk that slid enticingly over even silkier skin while my lips claimed her soft, sweet mouth in a passionate kiss.

"Bella," I groaned, and she whimpered beneath the onslaught of my hands and mouth.

With gently caressing strokes, I brushed my tongue across her lower lip, before sliding between her lips and teeth and over her velvet soft tongue to revel in the delicious recesses of her mouth. Our moans mingled as I reacquainted myself with her taste...her heat...her lush femininity.

Of one thing I was certain. I would never, *ever* tire of the feel of her in my arms.

When we finally drew apart, breathless and a little dazed, I marvelled at the desire I saw in her eyes...a desire that she didn't try to hide and that would grow to fever pitch in us both before we found release in one another's arms. But before we could continue on our journey of shared passion, she looked around again, a dreamy smile lighting her lovely features.

"Hmmm...So, you're finally going to 'have me' on the floor by the fire," she mused, a teasing tone to her voice.

I frowned, initially puzzled. Then, groaning, I clapped a hand to my forehead.

"You're referring to that morning in my study when I told you all the ways I'd imagined having you," I acknowledged sheepishly, barely able to meet her eyes.

"You do realise that I had absolutely no idea what you were talking about at the time?" she replied, her expression rueful.

"I do now," I admitted. "I was such an ass."

"Ahh..." she whispered, reaching up to capture the hand that was tangled in my hair and easing it away from where I was attempting to 'snatch myself bald' as she'd accused me on several occasions. "But what an irresistible 'ass' you were."

"Bella..." I gasped, shocked to hear her say such a thing...and secretly pleased. She thought me irresistible?

"Oh, you'd rather I referred to you as a *pompous* ass?" she asked in all innocence, her eyelashes fluttering endearingly.

"Pompous! You think I'm pompous?" I retorted, appalled at the accusation, but she did not instantly rescind her words. In fact she pinched her thumb and forefinger together in front of me, eyeing me archly.

"Hmmm...just a little," she bantered.

Growling, I shrugged my robe from my shoulders and lifted her up into my arms before bussing her neck with my lips—such impertinence clearly demanding a response— and eliciting one of her truly delightful giggles. Smiling contentedly, I carried her to the love nest I'd created by the fire with her hands linked behind my neck and her body snuggling into mine. Kneeling down with Bella in my lap, my

teasing kisses changed tenor as our ardour rose.

Having Bella...in my arms...in my bed...in my life...was such a privilege that I winced when I recalled the way I'd treated her in the initial phase of our relationship.

"I'm sorry if my uncouth words hurt or offended you in any way," I murmured against her sweet lips, relief flooding me at her smiling response.

"Well, no one could ever accuse you of lacking imagination."

"You inspire me," I admitted with all sincerity. "My imagination...my fantasies...my dreams."

"Well, that's all right then..." she sighed, moving to straddle me. Wiggling a little, she positioned herself so that her feminine heat and softness aligned with my decidedly masculine hardness. "...since you are the man of *my* dreams."

Punctuating her words with tantalising kisses, she rocked against me, and I groaned at the feel of her body connecting intimately with mine.

Her silk covered breasts brushed against my naked chest, the taut nipples clearly visible through the sheer fabric and calling to me until I ached to taste them. But rather than remove the gown she'd honoured me by wearing, I leaned down to nuzzle at her breast through the negligee, brushing it with my lips and laving the hard bud with my tongue until the silk was wet and clung to her tender flesh. When I blew puffs of air across the damp fabric, she gasped with surprise and delight, arching her back, eager for more of my attention. Willingly obliging her, I drew the pert peak into my mouth and suckled her through the wet fabric until she moaned and whimpered, her hands tangling in my hair and holding me in place.

After I'd favoured her other breast with the same attention, I slipped the thin straps of the gown over her shoulders and let it pool around her waist. My breath hitched in my throat at the bounty before me, and my hands reached to cup and caress her creamy, rose tipped flesh while she rocked against me.

"Now, Edward...I can't wait any more," she pleaded, and I tugged her gown up to reveal her naked thighs and bottom. Releasing the ties on my silk pants, I allowed my throbbing erection to spring free.

She grasped me in her hand and lifted high up on her knees to guide me to her entrance, and I couldn't quite stifle my own whimper of need.

"Oh...yes..." I gasped. The feel of her hot, slick, velvety softness sheathing me as she slowly lowered herself onto my shaft was better than any dream or fantasy my mind could conjure.

Moving slowly and seductively, she rose up on her knees so that only my tip remained inside, and then she lowered herself as far as she could go so that I was buried deep within her silken sex. Groaning, I could not stop my hips from flexing upwards in rhythm with her sensual ride...but I kept my movements gentle, ruthlessly controlling my inner beast.

Her lovely breasts swayed before my eyes with her movements, and I gladly captured a tantalising tip with my mouth. Gently sucking the peak between my lips before drawing it deeper, I tasted her sweet, sensitive flesh with my tongue while she moaned and rode me harder. Worried I was going too deep, I forced myself to stop and seized her hips with my hands, desperate to regain the control that her passionate response was wresting from my grasp.

"Edward?" she whimpered, and I gasped for breath.

"I don't want to hurt you," I managed to utter, and smiling, she reached to cup my face with her hands.

"Never," she whispered. "I want more of you...all of you..."

"Tell me if you need me to hold back," I panted, her words and the way she continued to wriggle and squirm against me, pressing lower...deeper...until it felt like I'd penetrated her to her very core, driving me to the very edge of reason.

"I promise," she breathed, softly brushing my cheek with her fingers. Then she moved one hand to rest on my shoulders so that she could lever herself up and down my aching shaft. With the other hand tangled in my hair, she guided my mouth back to her breast.

Delighted at her boldness, I indulged her desire and suckled her deep, tugging and tonguing her nipple until she cried out her pleasure. All the while I thrust inside her in sensual counterpoint to her erotic ride.

Our moans and cries filled the air as, bathed in golden firelight, we moved together with increasing abandon. Anticipation tingled down my spine, as I felt Bella's body begin to clench around me. The expectation built higher and higher until we climaxed simultaneously in a veritable starburst of ecstasy, the pleasure pulsing through us in wave after wave of seemingly endless rapture until I couldn't

tell where Bella ended and I began.

Slowly returning to a warm, loving and very satisfying reality, I smiled indulgently at the gorgeous young woman nestled sleepily in my arms. After slipping the gown all the way over her head, I lay her down on the fire-warmed blanket, gently cushioning her head on a pillow before divesting myself of my pants. Then wrapping my body around her, I pulled a soft quilt over the two of us and pulled her close.

I must have dozed for a while, for I awoke to find her leaning on one elbow, staring down into my face. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, and a stab of alarm rekindled the ache in my chest.

"What is it, sweetheart?" I asked, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

Swiping at her eyes with the back of her hand, she shook her head but didn't speak.

"Please. Whatever it is, you can tell me," I murmured, drawing her down to rest her head on our shared pillow.

She didn't answer, but there was no disguising the sadness and longing in her eyes.

Lying on our sides facing one another, we were pressed together along the length of our bodies, intimately connected by the delicious warmth of our bare skin. I couldn't imagine caring for anyone the way I cared for Bella, and I didn't want her to be sad.

Frowning, my mind scrambled to find the source of her sorrow. Was it the reminder of how our relationship had begun that was troubling her, the way it had recently begun to harass my only partially placated conscience?

My motivation had not been completely self-serving, as protecting Bella was my highest priority. But I'd ignored what I hadn't wanted to acknowledge—her innocence which had been all but trumpeted by a village crier—and made her mine regardless. I'd been gentle, attempting to show her my love in every way I knew how, every way that was available to me, but there were times when it didn't feel like it was enough.

My arms tightened automatically around her, drawing her partly atop my body.

"Please, Bella, tell me what's bothering you," I beseeched before brushing my lips

across hers with a tender kiss.

She reached to smooth my hair back from my forehead, a soft smile curving her lips as she looked down at me.

"It's nothing, my darling. Just thinking how much I love you...how much I love being with you like this."

Relief flooded me at her admission, though I forbore from teasing her for her display of emotion. Bella was not as prone to tears as some females I'd encountered who cried at the slightest provocation, in fact she'd impressed me on a number of occasions with her courage and pragmatism. Besides, if I was honest, I found the love I felt for her a tad overwhelming myself, and I was forced to swallow against a distinct tightening in my throat.

"I love you, too," I murmured hoarsely, nestling her head against my shoulder to give myself a moment to regain my composure. She sighed, her body relaxing against me and the tension drained away with my continued caresses.

Laying comfortably, our fingers tangled together while we enjoyed the freedom of our embrace. Then Bella lifted her head, once again perusing our surroundings.

"What is it?" I murmured, curious to hear her thoughts.

"You've gone to quite a bit of trouble here," she mused, a mischievous smile curving her lips.

I shrugged, pleased that she'd noticed and appreciated my efforts.

"So I'm thinking that there might be one or two more creative ideas lurking in that wicked imagination of yours," she continued, a teasing tone to her voice.

I cocked my head, my brow quizzing as to her meaning.

"Fantasies of yours we've yet to fulfil," she elaborated, her voice a seductive purr while she stretched enticingly against me.

"Well...now that you mention it," I mused, rolling her over onto the cushions and pinning her beneath me with my weight. "I have had some rather interesting dreams involving the two of us, and there is still a position or two we've yet to try."

"Truly?" she mused, her eyes widening in mock surprise...or maybe it was

genuine.

"Truly," I growled, and proceeded to show her just how imaginative I could be.

~AFL~

I know some of you didn't want any more lemons to delay the drama, but this chapter was for me, I'm afraid. I can tell you that 'somebody' is showing up next chapter. Any guesses who it might be?

xxx TLSue

If

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I own a new sling and an icepack. Sigh...

Hmmm...it's like this. I survived running a garage sale in 42 degree heat for a friend who needed some help (107.6 Farenheit), so I decided to reward myself with a little swim with hubby at the beach...only to have my arm broken by a runaway surfboard. One handed typing is not fun!

Thanks to everybody for everything. :D

Updated: Monday, January 30th 2012

Words: 3125

Chapter 43

BPOV

When I finally awoke late in the morning, I lay for a while just staring up at the canopy above Edward's enormous bed. He'd left earlier to go for a ride and to attend to estate business, and I'd thoroughly enjoyed watching him wander around the room naked while he prepared for the day...until his valet had arrived, at which point I'd dived under the covers, mortified. Chuckling, Edward had come to lie upon the bed once he was fully clothed, lifting the blankets to peer in at me.

"Don't worry about Jenks," he assured me. "He approves of you wholeheartedly. Says he's never seen me in such good form."

"Oh," I murmured, slowly lowering the covers, though I was relieved to find the room empty of servants, approving or otherwise. "I'm glad. I think you're winning Angela over also, which is saying something considering what the poor girl has endured."

Edward's expression darkened at the reference, reminding me of his appalled reaction when I told him more about her horrifying history—with her permission, of course. Angela's hope was that her story might inspire him to act on behalf of other girls who found themselves in similar positions, and Edward had been only too willing to discuss the possibilities.

Having heard more of Lady Esme's role in Angela's rescue, he seemed sure she must already have something in place, or be connected in some way to a charity devoted to assisting girls needing to escape abusive situations. He'd spoken animatedly about finding ways to support any such existing projects and to develop more.

I was excited to learn about the charities that Edward and his father supported to help victims of abuse and the laws they were hoping to see changed so that such abuses could not occur so easily. It was incredibly important work with the potential to improve the lives of countless people, especially vulnerable young women and children, and I wanted to help in any way I could...which is why I'd not blurted the truth to Edward the night before when I'd so desperately wanted to.

While he'd slept by the fire in between our bouts of lovemaking, I had lain watching him—the man I loved so completely...so recklessly—and forced myself to consider the one angle to all of this that I'd continued to ignore...what my leaving would do to him. I was in no doubt that Edward loved me or, at least, the person he believed me to be. If I left without a word, he would be devastated, and I imagined he would search for me. He might even consider foul play to be involved, and I began to see the folly of my plan.

But what were my alternatives?

For a time I allowed myself to ask the "what if" questions I'd dared not consider until now.

If I told Edward who I really was...

...and if he didn't assume I'd set out to entrap him, could appreciate the reasons for my ongoing deception and was able to forgive me...

...and if he was willing to keep my identity a secret to protect my father's name and keep me safe from the clutches of Lord Hunter and the authorities...

...and if he was willing to forego marriage indefinitely, as I still could not imagine myself being party to a horrid deception perpetuated against his legitimate wife. Nor did I believe I could ever bring myself to *share* him with another...

...and if he didn't decide to 'throw himself on his sword', so to speak, and give up everything to marry me, thereby depriving himself of his heritage and position in society, forever damaging his family's reputation and jeopardising the vital work that he and his father were integral to in terms of its success...

...then maybe we could stay together.

It was hardly surprising that my eyes were filled with tears when Edward awoke and caught me gazing at him. I wanted to beg him to never let me go when it was I that must find a way to leave him...a way that he would actually allow.

~AFL~

With the morning all but gone by the time I had luxuriated in a bath and dressed for the day, I didn't get the chance to seek out Jessica to ask her advice regarding the disposal of my mother's pearls. My heart broke a little more at the thought of relinquishing my only real connection with my home and past, but I was pragmatic enough to see that I had no real choice. More and more, I was convinced the pearls must be valuable, as I could see no other reason why my father would have insisted I bring them with me. But my fact-finding mission would have to wait until the morrow, as Edward was due to collect me for a picnic luncheon.

"Somewhere special," he'd said. "A favourite location of mine since I was a child growing up here on the Worthington estate."

To my surprise, when Edward escorted me outside, we were greeted by a lovely spring afternoon and a horse and buggy.

"All set?" he asked once I was seated beside him, my bonnet firmly fixed in place to ward off the delightful sunshine...not that I'd ever minded the occasional freckle. It had always seemed a fair exchange for enjoying the feel of the sun on my face.

I nodded my affirmation, and smiling happily at one another we set off on our jaunt, the dappled grey horse soon settling into a comfortable trot.

Breathing deep of the fresh, country air, I relaxed against the seat and determined to put my cares aside for the time being. The previous night with Edward had been extraordinarily special, and I knew that I would relive the moments we'd spent together many times in the days, months and years to come, no matter what the future might hold. This afternoon had the same feel about it, of being somehow outside of time...a treasured memory in the making.

We chatted desultorily while winding our way along tree-shaded lanes beside lush green fields. Half an hour into our journey, we passed through a dense copse of trees and then came upon the loveliest flower-strewn meadow I'd ever seen.

"Oh, Edward," I breathed, staring around me in astonishment. "It is so beautiful."

Wildflowers of every description, many that I had never seen before, carpeted the ground with colour.

"I had a feeling you'd like this place," he answered, a grin on his ever so handsome face.

"*Like it? I love it!*" I exclaimed, impatient for him to assist me down so that I could explore the surroundings. The meadow was almost perfectly circular, ringed by tall trees that gave it a wonderful feeling of seclusion. A small stream ran merrily to one side, and it was easy to imagine a deer drinking from the cool waters.

Leaving Edward to unhitch the horse and attach the hobbles that would keep it from wandering too far, I carried the picnic blanket to a central location, wanting to make the most of the spring sunshine. After spreading the blanket on the soft grass, I discarded my bonnet and removed the pins holding up my hair, deciding that the risk of a few freckles was entirely warranted. While I was no longer certain where I fit in the scheme of things, there were times when the freedom to ignore society's demands and restrictions was actually quite exhilarating.

Edward placed the heavily laden picnic basket down on the blanket I'd spread, and then holding hands, we set off like two errant schoolchildren to explore the fairytale setting.

"I used to love coming here as a boy," he told me, the smile still curving his lips. "Emmett and I would spend hours fishing in the little stream...not very successfully, mind you. That's when we weren't climbing trees or attempting to knock squirrels down from the branches with the slingshots we'd made."

"That's an awful thing to do," I laughed, remembering Jacob and his cousins doing something very similar back home while I'd cried and threatened to tell my father if they didn't stop. It seemed that boys would be boys, regardless of their position in society.

"I'm surprised you were allowed so much freedom," I admitted, and Edward shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Father may have been absent more often than not, but he made sure we had excellent tutors who believed that a boy's education could not be solely found in books and the schoolroom."

"And what of your sister, Lady Alice?" I asked, curious to hear if I my upbringing was in any way similar to that of a duke's daughter. "Did she also experience the

same freedom to explore, or were the two of you too old to be bothered by a pesky girl?"

Edward's smile faded, and I wondered if I'd hit upon a sore spot.

"I'd like to think I would have welcomed her, despite the five-year age gap. But my mother controlled Alice's education, which meant she was restricted to only those pursuits considered acceptable for the training of an exemplary young lady."

"Pity," I murmured. "This is such a magical place. I can't imagine anyone not loving it...especially a child."

"She enjoys it now." He smiled and helped me cross the pebbled stream to explore the shaded bank on the other side. "Alice was fourteen when Mother died, young enough to still be up for a lark when I came home from university during the summers. She's a much better angler than I, if the truth be told, and has actually been known to catch our lunch...something I can't say Emmett or I ever achieved in all our years of trying. She fished further on where the stream joins the river and runs a little deeper, whereas we boys never had the patience—or the *wisdom*—to find the perfect spot."

"She sounds wonderful," I acknowledged, wishing there was some way for us to meet but knowing that we never could...not now.

"I can't believe how many different types of flowers grow here in this one location," I marvelled when we crossed back to the other side of the stream and sat together to enjoy the sumptuous bounty the cooks had provided for our luncheon.

Ducking his head at my words, Edward ran his hand across the back of his neck, his expression sheepish.

"What is it?" I queried, intrigued by his reaction to my innocuous words.

"That's actually *my* doing," he admitted, and I cocked my head, puzzled.

"From the time I was old enough to start badgering the head gardener, I convinced him to order in wildflowers from the catalogues that I would pore over whenever I got the chance. There are blooms here from all around the country, as we trialled anything with even a vague chance of surviving in 'my meadow' as I thought of it. I've actually recreated the same setting near Masen Park...well, as closely as I could. You're not the only one who likes 'flowers in general'," he admitted, quoting my words from the morning he'd bombarded me with questions as

to my likes and talents.

"Well, I think it is extraordinary," I praised him. "A veritable wonderland and a perfect location for children to explore and learn to appreciate the countryside...so long as they are not allowed to torment the local wildlife with slingshots!"

"Oh, come now," Edward teased, tugging me down beside him on the blanket. He leaned over me, staring down into my eyes while I lay back, enjoying the feel of his body pressing along the length of mine. "Can't you just see a little boy of ours playing by the stream catching tadpoles with which to taunt his sister when they grow into frogs? Or a little girl, all big brown eyes like her mother, making necklaces out of daisies while you and I lounge nearby, me reading French poetry or some nonsense while you sketch the bucolic scene?"

My smile faded, and I sat up, fussing over packing up our luncheon as a blatant distraction. The problem was that I *could* see it all too clearly...the little boy, a miniature version of Edward, right down to his bronzed locks and emerald green eyes...the little girl, smiling at her father, the look of adoration in her eyes mirroring the expression in my own.

"Bella?" Edward murmured intently, stilling my hands. "We can have a good life together...you, me, our children...I promise."

One of my eyebrows arched of its own accord, and I found myself wondering if all men were such dreamers and so willing to ignore the obvious when it did not suit them.

"Of course we can," I demurred, not wanting to spoil the afternoon, but then I realised that it was already spoiled, and that this was the opportunity I'd been looking for, one I could not miss. Taking a deep breath, I straightened my shoulders and faced him.

"Doesn't it bother you?" I asked, looking him in the eye. His brow quizzed, and I continued. "Loving me and yet knowing that you must marry one day to a...a *suitable* lady who will provide you with an heir?"

"It's my duty." He shrugged, clearly nonplussed by my question.

"But you're talking about having a child with another woman...a *child*, Edward...your own flesh and blood. Will you love it the way you would love our children?"

"Of course," he retorted, sounding affronted.

"But you have no intention of loving your wife," I added sadly.

"Well...no." He frowned. "I explained this before, Bella. A man of my station marries for duty and to form the most advantageous alliance, not for love. Besides, I'm already *in* love...with you."

"So, when you marry, you fully intend to promise—before God and man—to love and be faithful to your wife without any intention whatsoever of honouring your vows?" I queried, unable to hide my distress.

Edward's eyes widened, and he appeared taken aback by my words. "I thought you understood how these things work?"

"Oh, I'm coming to understand how society works all too well," I replied, the bitterness evident in my tone. "But that does not mean I find it agreeable...*or* the least bit honourable."

"You think it would be more honourable if I brought shame on my family's name by marrying a commoner?" he demanded angrily.

"Of course not," I retorted, my tone rich with irony. "Everybody knows that entering into a contractual agreement with one of your own class based on expediency and lies is preferable by far to an honest relationship with a person who is unworthy by virtue of her lowly birth."

Jerking back as if slapped, I could see that my words had shocked him immeasurably, and yet they were nothing but the truth.

Now that I had finally put voice to my opinions, the anger I felt over the hopelessness of the situation broke free. I leapt to my feet and stalked away. The frustrating thing was I knew that Edward was right, and that I could not accept such a proposal from him in the unlikely event that it was offered. The degree of dishonour such a decision would bring upon his name and family, not to mention all that would be lost and all that was at stake, made it impossible for us to be together in any respectable way. My mind understood the logic and reasoning but that did not stop the pain from overwhelming my heart.

~AFL~

Thankfully, Edward gave me a few moments to calm down before coming to stand

beside me overlooking stream. Reaching to clasp my hand, he squeezed it gently.

"Bella, I'm...sorry." He grimaced, but I did not push him to tell me what he was apologising for.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," I murmured, and he shrugged but said nothing more.

It was a quiet drive back to the Hall, the tension between us palpable. We were almost home when Edward pulled the horse to a halt and turned to face me.

"You do know that I would give you *everything* if it were in my power to do so?" he asked, his emerald eyes burning with sincerity.

Nodding, I blinked away the tears that stung my eyes. "I love you, too, but some things are outside of our power. And some things not even love can overcome."

Edward stared at me for a long moment, his expression pained.

"Why do I get the feeling that I'm going to lose you?" he queried, his voice hoarse.

Not knowing how to reply, I bit my lip to keep it from quivering, my eyes dropping to my hands.

"Just promise me one thing," he persisted, and I reluctantly lifted my gaze to his. "Don't leave without telling me, without giving me a chance to try and make things right between us or at least to set things up so that you'll be safe, whatever you decide."

A sob caught in my throat, and I nodded jerkily. Though how I could honour my promise, I did not know.

We drove on, approaching Worthington Hall from the rear. It was only when we rounded one of the corner towers that we saw the commotion occurring near the main entrance. Several large four-horse carriages were parked in the circular driveway, and servants scurried to and fro bearing bags and trunks inside.

My heart caught in my throat, and I turned to Edward in alarm. "Has your father returned?" I cried, unable to hide my panic.

"I wish," he muttered, shaking his head. "I'm afraid we're being graced with the august presence of the Earl and Countess of Denali and their eldest daughter, Lady Tanya...no doubt."

Sighing with relief, I wondered at the annoyance in Edward's tone.

"But isn't that the earl with whom your father is so keen to form an alliance? The one whose vote could make all the difference in the House of Lords?"

"One and the same," Edward acknowledged, running his hand raggedly through his already tousled hair.

"So why are you displeased at their arrival? Is there a problem?" I persisted, and his expression turned decidedly grim.

"The problem is the *nature* of the alliance upon which the Earl's vote currently depends, not that I've agreed to it, of course."

"What alliance?" I asked, my voice the barest whisper as a feeling of dread sent a shiver down my spine.

Groaning, Edward turned sideways in the seat to face me and grasped my hand in his.

"The Earl wants me to honour the betrothal that Countess Denali and my mother arranged between Tanya and me when we were very small children."

The full import of Edward's words took a moment to register in my brain, but when they did it felt as if the world suddenly stood still.

He was betrothed...

...to a lady of eminent suitability...

...whose father's vote could make all the difference to the passing of a law that would change the lives of thousands of suffering individuals, possibly millions...

...and he'd never said a word.

~AFL~

A couple of you guessed it was going to be Tanya, but I'm thinking there might be a few more arrivals before too long.

xxx TLSue

Conscience

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight, and I doubt she wrote any of it one-handed.

I have to admit to being proud of myself for getting this chapter out relatively quickly all thing considered, though middle of the night bouts of insomnia due to an aching arm and a lazy first day back at work before the craziness began may have helped. (I wasn't writing lemons at work...I promise!)

Thanks for all the lovely reviews, and apologies in advance to those of you who are dreading the coming angst.

Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro...you guys are fantastic betas, and I appreciate your support immensely.

Updated: Saturday, 4th February 2012

Words: 2737

Chapter 44

Conscience

EPOV

The colour drained from Bella's face, and for a moment I feared she was going to faint. Calling myself every kind of fool, I halted the horse before turning to steady her with my hands.

"I didn't say that I had *agreed* to the alliance," I stated firmly, shaking her shoulders ever so slightly when it seemed like she wasn't listening. "Remember...I told you that my marriage was not something we had to worry about for a *long* time?"

She nodded jerkily, but her eyes seemed almost dead, the sparkle I adored having faded with my ill-considered words.

"I *meant* it, Bella. I'm not going to marry Lady Tanya Denali or anyone else my

father parades before me for whatever reason, however noble or expedient, until I'm good and ready."

My pronouncement did not seem to reassure her, and Bella's shoulders shook in a half-sob, half-laugh.

"It doesn't matter anyway," she whispered, a shudder running through her. "If you have no intention of marrying for love, then it makes no difference who you marry...or when," she continued, her tone and expression so lifeless that I feared I had somehow lost her already. "I'm sure Lady Tanya is eminently suitable in all regards. Your approval from the crown is guaranteed if you marry the daughter of an earl—there can't be too many of those around, so I'm guessing you shouldn't miss your opportunity. At least if you agree to this particular alliance, *something* good could come out of the arrangement other than an heir...a child..." she finished on a sob, and before I could react, she turned and clambered down, unaided, from the carriage seat.

"Bella!" I called, hastening to tie off the reins so that I could leave the horse untended.

"Wait!" I demanded, hitting the ground running, and to my relief she obeyed. Catching up with her in half a dozen strides, I grasped her shoulders and spun her to face me.

"Please, Bella, don't be like this. Let me explain."

"Oh, I think you've explained the situation very well," she demurred, her words harsh but her tone devoid of bitterness. "I don't blame you for the way the world is, Edward. But you can't expect me to just fit into your plans like a piece in a puzzle. I wasn't raised to live this life that I've unexpectedly ended up leading. When I think of the way I've compromised my morals and reputation... My father would be appalled if he knew."

Tears sprang to her eyes, rapidly spilling over onto her cheeks, and for one of the few times in my life I cursed the elevated station into which I was born. The privilege, the wealth, the position...in that moment I would have given them all to relieve her misery.

"Bella," I groaned, moving to pull her against me, but she resisted, pressing her hands firmly to my chest.

"We have an audience," she stated flatly, glancing towards the house. "You must

let me go before you make a scene."

I wanted to shout that I'd damned well make a scene if necessary, considering that I feared she was about to break my heart. But I'd been raised too well for such melodramatic outbursts, and she was correct...we were being watched.

Looking past her shoulder, my eyes locked with those of my father's friend, Lord Eleazar, the Earl of Denali, who along with his wife, his daughter and my cousin-by-marriage, Lady Rosalie, stood near the main entrance to the Hall observing us with abject curiosity. My hope was that we were too far away for them to have heard the content of our dialogue. But explanations would need to be made, and my mind scrambled to come up with a plausible excuse for my behaviour.

The malicious smile on Rosalie's face was impossible to miss, even from this distance. For a fleeting moment, I pictured my hands around her throat, choking the life out of her. She'd arranged this visit without informing me ahead of time to spite me, of that I was sure. Having missed her own chance at my title, she was determined to see me wed to her childhood friend having concluded that being the close acquaintance of a future duchess was the next best thing to actually *being* a duchess. What she hoped to achieve from having the Denalis witness my interaction with Bella, though, I had no idea.

A part of me wanted to tell them all to go to hell, the whole damned lot of them, so that I could resolve this matter with Bella before the rift I saw opening between us widened any further. But I had a duty to represent my father in his absence and to the cause that we both espoused. The only reason I could imagine that the Earl and Countess would have come calling, knowing that my father and his new bride were absent on their honeymoon, was to discuss with me the details of the alliance he and my father hoped to forge.

It seemed that I had not made my position sufficiently plain on the matter, and I would have my work cut out for me if I hoped to salvage any sort of relationship with Lord Eleazar once I informed him that I would not be marrying his daughter...let alone one whereby the earl would commit his support—and *vote*—to the bill my father was hoping to see passed by the House of Lords.

Groaning, I returned my attention to the girl who had come to mean more to me than almost everything else in my life put together. Reluctantly releasing her shoulders, I stepped back a pace, running a hand through my hair.

"Bella," I pleaded, not exactly certain what I was requesting.

"It's all right, Edward," she murmured, before curtsying low while keeping her back to my unwelcome visitors. "Let me go around the corner to the servant's entrance, and you go ahead and greet your guests. Maybe you could tell them that I am the daughter of a tenant whom you saw walking along the way and kindly gave a lift up to the Hall. You could say that I've come to visit a relative who works in the kitchen. Yes...I could be Chef Peter's niece. That would work."

I wanted to shake the life back *into* her—her enervated tone frightening me more than if she'd thrown a fit of histrionics. But her suggestion held considerable merit.

"Very well...I'll do as you suggest. But tonight we *will* talk and have this out once and for all. Agreed?"

She nodded, but her eyes did not meet mine. Reluctantly, I held my ground and did not chase after her when she turned and walked away, her back straight and head held high.

~AFL~

The afternoon was not as difficult as it could have been, the Denalis only too willing to accept the fabrication that Bella suggested I use to explain the scene they'd witnessed. Whether they believed it was another matter, but keeping up appearances was always the highest priority of the *ton*, and I used that to my best advantage.

Rosalie was unimpressed when I cut her as deliberately as I dared without triggering the need for Emmett to challenge me to pistols at dawn. But my message was delivered unequivocally, silencing her snide comments and leaving her at least partially subdued.

"Lord Edward, how lovely to see you again. It has been *far* too long," Lady Tanya greeted when I bowed over her hand, her smile as superficial as my own and her politely spoken words dripping censure.

Her beauty was undeniable, but not for the first time, I found myself comparing Tanya's icy reserve to that of certain cold-blooded creatures I had observed over the years. Like Rosalie and my mother, it was impossible to imagine her responding with passion, unless she were thwarted in obtaining something she desired, in which case I imagined her fury could be formidable.

Lord Eleazar, on the other hand, had always struck me as a reasonable individual. If he didn't have a separate agenda—marriage between his daughter and me,

thereby joining the two great houses of Cullen and Denali—he may well have come around to my father's way of thinking regardless.

Or maybe not, I mused.

The opposition our cause faced in the House of Lords was considerable, whether the issue was slavery in far-off lands, better conditions and support for our returned soldiers, or the protection and education of the children of the working classes. Changes to the laws affecting any of these deplorable situations would come at a cost, and the elite were determined not to bear it nor to disrupt the status quo which had worked to their advantage for generations.

As was customary for those of our class, matters of business or importance were rarely approached directly or quickly and *never* when the ladies were present. Consequently, the remainder of the afternoon was spent in polite social discourse, something I was not overly fond of at the best of times, finding the art of speaking about nothing tedious to say the least.

Unwisely, I attempted to engage Lady Tanya in a discussion regarding the reforms our two families, along with our political allies, were hoping to see accomplished. But she made her disinterest plain, ever so politely rebuking me for "forgetting myself and discussing such inappropriate matters as politics and the distasteful condition of the masses with a lady."

Sighing, I'd turned the conversation to more *suitable* topics: polite gossip regarding the goings on of the local society members and gentile compliments for the ladies' fashionable attire. But I couldn't help thinking of the fascinating conversations and heated debate that Bella and I readily engaged in regardless of the topic. The passionate interest she displayed for improving the lot of the less fortunate was a natural extension of her innate compassion and goodness and a refreshing change from the self-absorbed and extremely limited interests of the ladies of the *ton*.

Jasper and Emmett thankfully came to my aid on several occasions when my mind wandered so far afield that, if left to my own devices, my responses would have been deemed both inadequate and quite possibly unforgivably inappropriate. To say that I was distracted was a distinct understatement.

I couldn't stop wondering how Bella was faring, not to mention what, if anything, she was planning to do.

I considered visiting her when I went to my suite to change into formal attire for

dinner. But our time would be unavoidably short, and I had a sinking feeling that it was going to take all of my not inconsiderable resources and charm to resolve this issue once and for all. As to the certainty of seeing the outcome I desired, my confidence was uncharacteristically low. Bella seemed quite set in her views regarding the keeping of marital vows and fidelity in marriage—pertinent issues affecting both honour and morality that I was chagrined to admit I'd not previously thought of. In a short space of time, she'd swayed my thinking to such a degree that I'd begun to reconsider opinions I'd once held as inviolable—not that I could see a clear way out of the conundrum set before me.

Dinner, a triumph of culinary delights that lasted for course after interminable course, was followed by brandy and cigars for the gentlemen separate from the ladies, whom we would join again later in an adjacent drawing room.

"Edward, might I have a word?" Lord Eleazar surprised none of us by requesting a few moments after the ladies had left us to our gentlemanly pursuits.

"Of course," I replied with forced congeniality, my stomach knotted with dread as we crossed the room to stand in front of a modestly blazing fireplace.

"I think we both know why I am here," he began, his expression forbidding. "Your father and I have had many a heated discussion about the direction of his political leanings, not to mention the odd religious ideas he has come to espouse. This newfangled notion that those of us from a privileged background have some sort of responsibility to care for the less fortunate seemed like a load of Sunday School nonsense when he first raised it...all very well for the clergy to wax lyrical about, firing up the odd charitably-minded spinster with too much time on her hands. But hardly appropriate dogma to apply to the running of an empire," he harrumphed, and I wondered if he'd changed his mind about supporting my father's vote.

A surge of relief at the potential reprieve was followed swiftly by a wave of guilt at the self-serving nature of my thoughts...and dread in regard to the decision that I saw looming before me. While I'd been adamant in my avowal to Bella that I had no intention of marrying any time soon, doubts had begun to assail me as to my likelihood of success when it came to reconciling my conflicting agendas.

Bella was correct in recognizing that I had no choice but to marry well, and if—as she'd stated herself—it did not matter *whom* I married, then what great difference did *when* actually make? The only real benefit I could see to prolonging the inevitable was that it would give me more time to convince Bella to overlook the squeamishness of her conscience and accept the only role I could offer her in my life.

The alternative—a life without Bella in it—was simply inconceivable.

"But..." Lord Eleazar continued, galvanising my attention and causing my hopes to plummet. "That silver tongue of your father's...along with the literature he keeps forcing me to read and the visitors he's thrust upon me—Wilberforce and the like—have worn me down, I'm afraid...that and the fact that time stops for no man, earls and dukes included."

Here it was...the ultimatum I'd been dreading.

"Therefore, I've come to a decision which seems appropriate that I bring to your attention in your father's absence. I have decided to throw my not inconsiderable support behind his admittedly idealistic cause—though heaven knows how much of a difference it will make, considering the formidable opposition he faces—on the condition that you, my boy, stop your dilly dallying and marry my daughter before she turns twenty-one and is forced to suffer the indignity of being slated an old maid by the vicious harridans of the *ton*!

"You've had plenty of time to sow your wild oats—doing a bit of that this afternoon with that pretty dark-haired piece from the village, no doubt...not that I blame you, or expect you to change your ways, as long as you're discreet, of course—but you're almost twenty-four, Edward, and it's high time you settled down and produced an heir.

"I want grandchildren! And you, my young lord, are duty bound by the promises your mother made to my wife...promises that have kept me from accepting any number of offers for my daughter's hand.

"Enough, I say! Tanya is ideally suited to fulfil the position as your marchioness and as the future Duchess of Worthington, which you cannot possibly deny. If you expect me to support your father, then you must stop wasting time and set a date. Have I made myself clear?" he concluded, grimly.

"Perfectly," I acknowledged, swallowing hard. "Though I would like to point out that you are speaking of promises made on my behalf when I was but a child and which I have never agreed to, publicly or otherwise."

"Oh, poppycock!" he retorted, and Jasper coughed to cover his snort of ill-timed laughter. It was all very well for him to find my situation humorous. He wasn't being blackmailed into marrying a woman he neither cared for nor who had any intention of caring for him. He *wanted* to marry my sister—and a wonderful wife she would make him, if he were to actually love her and treat her the way she deserved to be

treated—whereas the only woman I wanted in my life and bed was one who could never be my wife...Bella.

The thought brought me up short, and I had to turn and walk away to hide the emotion that I was certain was suddenly written all over my face.

I loved Bella.

I would only *ever* love Bella.

She was right. How could I, in all good conscience, stand before God and man and promise to love another?

~AFL~

And so the angstiness begins...but at least it brings us one step closer to the HEA. (Bet you're all wondering how I'm going to pull that off, aren't you?)

xxx TLSue

Suitable

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have a sense of humour, and boy have I needed it lately!

Thanks to Squeaky Zorro (sorry I got impatient) and Chloe Cougar for your wonderful beta'ing skills. And thanks to all my lovely readers for their terrific reviews, support and incredibly inventive ideas. I'm not sure what you're going to make of the next few chapters, but here goes...

Updated: Wednesday, February 8th 2012

Words: 2682

Chapter 45

Suitable

BPOV

"What to do? What to do? What to do?" I chanted beneath my breath, but no miraculous solutions to my dilemma were forthcoming.

I'd promised to inform Edward of my intentions before taking any drastic action. If I fled without telling him why, he would undoubtedly come after me. He loved me—or at least, the person he thought me to be—but I still could not conceive of telling him the truth of my identity without risking dire and unpredictable consequences. While I could try to convince him that I simply did not *want* to be with him under the circumstances he was offering, my alternatives were so ridiculously limited that I feared he would laugh me to scorn...or worse, interpret my concerns as an attempt to manipulate him in some way.

"Are ye *sure* ye can't trust Lord Edward with yer secret?" Angela repeated the question she'd put to me earlier when I'd burst in upon her and spilled the news of the Denalis arrival. Shaking my head, I continued my pacing...the only thing that was keeping me from giving in to the futility of tears.

"I know I said ye can't trust the toffs," she persisted. "But I've been watching the two of ye together these last weeks, and 'is Lordship's so taken with ye...I think 'e'd forgive ye just about anything. Wot wiv the circumstances and all, 'e'd understand

the need for yer deception. I'm sure of it."

Coming to an abrupt halt, I allowed myself to seriously consider Angela's words. *Could* I trust Edward with the truth? In my heart of hearts, it was what I wanted to do, even if I could see no way for us to have a future together...especially now.

"But he's betrothed, Angela, *betrothed*, to the daughter of an earl!"

"Not formally," she reminded me. "It's not like it's ever been announced in the papers and there's been no posting of the banns."

The breath hitched in my throat, but then I released it along with my meagre hopes on a forlorn sigh.

"Formal...informal...it doesn't matter. He will marry eventually, and with so much at stake, I think he *must* marry Lady Tanya. Besides, she sounds so...so...*suitable*," I wailed, an image of Edward exchanging vows with the regal-looking woman I'd caught a glimpse of earlier—at the front of a huge cathedral and with the entire *ton* looking on—tormenting my thoughts.

"But he loves ye, not her," Angela consoled, coming to sit beside me where I'd crumpled to my knees, my skirts bunched around me on my sitting room floor. "If ye tell 'im that yer a *proper* lady, I'm bettin' 'e'll do the right thing and marry ye instead."

"But that's what I'm afraid of...why I dare not tell him the truth," I cried, biting on my lip to stifle the sobs that were determined to break free.

Angela frowned, confused—not that I blamed her—and I attempted to explain the complexities of the class system that ruled all our lives.

"Edward and I may both be members of the *ton*, but the difference in our stations is almost as vast as if I truly were a servant. He is of the nobility, in line to the throne, whereas my father was merely the great grandson of a baron. Despite his knighthood and the fact that he was a wonderful man, Papa was not a personage of any great note in society. He never even went up to London for the Season. I'm a...a...*nobody*, I'm afraid, and Edward must marry a lady from the highest echelon of society, approved of by the King himself, or he will lose everything," I exclaimed, angrily swiping at the tears that persisted in coursing down my cheeks.

"What do ye mean *everything*?" Angela puzzled, her sweet brow creased in a frown.

"His inheritance, titles, wealth, properties...he would forfeit it all if he married me. I'd be responsible for denying him the life of privilege and power he was born to lead."

"Oh, I see." Angela's shoulders slumped, and I hadn't even mentioned the ruination that would be brought upon both Edward's and my family's names if the story behind our relationship ever became fodder for the gossips.

"Edward may love me now," I murmured despairingly. "But I fear that he would come to despise me if he married me as a matter of honour, sacrificing his heritage and position in society in the process. Besides, he doesn't want to marry me. He's already told me that while I have the makings of an exemplary mistress, I am not *suitable* wife material for one of his station."

Understandably, Angela had no rejoinder for my bitter words, and we sat together for a time while she soothingly patted my hand.

"Are ye *sure* ye couldn't bring yerself to accept 'is Lordship's offer?" she asked, and I lifted my weary gaze to her face. "'Tis the way of the world for powerful men to 'ave both wives and mistresses," she continued with a shrug. "At least ye'd know who he was wiv when he wasn't wiv ye."

A shudder ran through me at her pragmatically spoken words, though I couldn't deny I was tempted by her suggestion. Despite allowing myself to be drawn into my current, highly illicit relationship with Edward, I refused to lower myself to continue as his mistress once he was legitimately married to another...or so I had virtuously declared. I feared my conviction had begun to waver, along with my courage, now that the time to act was upon me.

"I know yer planning on leaving Lord Edward and striking out on yer own," Angela continued, refocusing my attention on her kindly expression. "But I still say it ain't safe, Miss Bella. Even if ye can get a good price for ye lovely pearls, yer too pretty for yer own good, and without 'is Lordship's protection, yer sure to fall prey to some evildoer. Whether the fellahs that hurt ye are loftily placed or lowly, it won't matter none in the end. Ye'll regret holding onto yer genteel morals when yer trapped in a situation from which there's no escape."

Another shudder ran through me at the dreadful picture her words created in my mind. What would be worse; a life as Edward's mistress, with all the complexities that entailed, or a life of potential horror at the hands of faceless, nameless, merciless men?

Without some sort of protection, I could so easily end up mocked indeed for my righteous stand. Angela's words reminded me that there were far worse fates than the life that Edward had offered me and that shame and heartbreak came in many forms for the defenceless.

"What is Lady Tanya like?" I asked, my voice the barest whisper.

"Well, she and Lady Rosalie are best friends and two peas from the same pod, if ye ask me, so, like ye said earlier, she's certainly suitable for the role of a duchess. It's not like she'll be expecting Lord Edward's undying devotion, or would want it for that matter. A right cold one, she is...just like Lady Rosalie and his mother before that, from what I've 'eard."

The disclosure brought me little comfort. Despite my drastic and permanent change in circumstance, I couldn't help seeing myself in the role of the betrayed wife and imagining how it would feel to know that my husband preferred the arms of another. It may be the way of our world—not that I'd been instructed to expect infidelity in marriage. I could only assume that particular titbit would have been imparted to me *after* the ceremony and once I could do absolutely naught about it—but that did not make it right.

"Yer conscience'll be the death of ye, Miss Bella," Angela admonished, accurately reading my expression.

I didn't contradict her, but I did come to a decision that would require at least some compromise...one which came with a large degree of uncertainty.

"I think you're right, Angela," I declared, rising to my feet and brushing down my crumpled skirts. "I must take the risk of telling Lord Edward the truth and hope that he is willing to help me in a way that will not further compromise either of our futures."

Glancing at the clock above the mantle, I saw that it was not yet four o'clock. Knowing that it would undoubtedly be very late before Edward made his escape—and unwilling to endure the hours of waiting and worrying that loomed ahead of me pacing in my room—I decided to don my servant's uniform and went with Angela to offer our services to the harried house staff. Not surprisingly, we were welcomed with open arms. Directed to assist Chef Peters, I was forced to endure only a spattering of sympathetic glances and the odd arched brow from the various servants I encountered on my way. Taking no notice, I kept my head down and gratefully set to work mixing, baking and icing, content to do my part in creating a meal fit for the esteemed members of the upper *ton* currently gracing

Worthington Hall with their presence.

There'd be no complaints from the likes of Lady Rosalie and her companions if the kitchen staff had any say in the matter, and it was a blessed distraction to feel like an integral part of such an efficient and hard-working team. At times like this, if the conditions had not been so exhausting or fraught with occasional danger, I could almost have preferred the life of a servant.

The remainder of the afternoon and evening passed quickly, allowing no time for fretful introspection or bouts of self-pity. But I admitted to a degree of exhaustion when Angela and I made our weary way back to my suite later that evening. It was only then that I discovered my monthly visitor had made a slightly early arrival. While I was relieved that Edward's intriguing methods of protection had been effective, I could not help feeling a little sad. A baby would have tied us together far more effectively than the marital vows I feared he would feel compelled to utter once he knew my true identity...vows that I also feared would be little more than prettily spoken but ultimately empty promises.

~AFL~

I awoke alone in my bed and saw Angela curled up in the padded chair by the wall. My first thought was that she'd spent the night there, but then I took in her neatly done hair and pressed uniform, and I was relieved to realise that she must have returned this morning and was merely taking a rest.

"Angela?" I whispered, and her eyes fluttered open. "Did Lord Edward not come by last night?"

"He came real late, Miss, but ye'd fallen asleep and he didn't want to disturb ye. He told me to tell ye that he'd see ye later this morning."

"Oh...very well," I murmured, my feelings a contradictory mixture of disappointment and relief at the unexpected reprieve. The conversation awaiting us was not one I anticipated going easily or ending well.

"But that's not all," Angela continued, coming to sit beside me on the bed. "There was a huge ruckus last night with the staff kept up to the wee hours toing and froing like mad."

"Goodness!" I exclaimed, sitting up and clutching the counterpane in front of me. "Whatever happened?"

"Well..." Angela began, first taking a large breath, her eyes as wide as saucers. "I 'eard from Jessica, who 'eard from Mike, who says 'e 'eard from Billy who opened the door to pass Stephens an extra bottle of brandy for the gentlemen 'cos they was gettin' low and they couldn't risk the brandy runnin' out, that the earl was tellin' Lord Edward that he had to hurry up and set a date to marry Lady Tanya or 'e'd not support the duke with those important laws 'e wants passed."

Concentrating hard, I followed Angela's words, nodding for her to continue. While it was painful to hear my fears confirmed, Lord Eleazar's ultimatum was no less than I'd expected.

"So what did Edward say?" I urged her to continue, my heart in my throat.

"Well...apparently 'e walked away, all upset lookin', then 'e turned and told Lord Eleazar that 'e could not marry 'is daughter 'cos 'e was in love with another and had decided that 'e would never marry rather than tell lies in church!"

I gasped, my hand rising automatically to cover my gaping mouth and forcibly silence any outbursts. While utterly disbelieving, I did not want to interrupt Angela's shocking tale.

"Then the earl tells him to stop being ridiculous, and that of course 'e'll 'ave to marry to provide Worthington with an heir, but Lord Edward told 'im that Lord *Emmett* can provide the heir in 'is stead, and then the shouting started and the ladies came rushing in and it was a right hullabaloo."

"Carry on...carry on..." I urged, rising up onto my knees in eagerness to hear more.

"Well, as you can imagine, Lady Tanya was not impressed and called Lord Edward all sorts of horrid names. But then Lady Rosalie realised what Lord Edward was sayin'...that Lord Emmett would be his heir—but only if Lord Edward dies, I'm thinkin' so she still could have a very long wait in front of 'er'—and that she'd be the duchess one day, and she started to support Lord Edward in 'is stance. And then Lady Tanya turned on Lady Rosalie and said that everyone knew that she was barren and wouldn't be *able* to provide an heir, so Lord Edward would 'ave to marry or the Worthington line would die out altogether.

"Then Lord Jasper tried to calm everyone down—real voice of reason 'e was apparently—but it was no use. The earl got raving mad and said that 'e'd had enough of all the nonsense and that Lord Edward 'ad three days to come to 'is senses or 'e...the earl...would not only rescind 'is support for the duke's cause, 'e'd

do everything in his power to see it defeated and Wilberforce and the like discredited throughout the empire. Then 'e ordered 'is carriages brought around and everything that 'ad just been unpacked packed up again, and they all left to return 'ome in the middle of the bloomin' night! Beggin yer pardon for swearin', miss."

"Perfectly understandable, Angela," I whispered faintly, far worse swear words dancing figuratively in my head. I'd never, for the life of me, expected my outburst in Edward's lovely meadow to have precipitated such a dramatic series of events. While I was incredibly moved by his grand gesture, with so much else at stake, I couldn't allow him to continue down this foolhardy path.

Leaping from the bed, I ran toward the dressing room then halted in the middle of the room, my thoughts in total disarray.

"What are ye goin' to do, Miss Bella?" Angela asked, coming to stand beside me.

Straightening my shoulders, I turned to face her, reluctantly putting into words the painful plan that had begun to coalesce in my mind.

"I'm going to speak to Jessica and find out if she knows anyone who could help me in case things go badly and I need to sell my mother's pearls. Then I'm going to take a risk and trust Lord Jasper with my secret. I believe he has Edward's best interests at heart, so maybe with his help I can get Edward to see reason."

"And what reason would that be?" Angela asked, her tone filled with trepidation.

With my heart breaking at the expediency to which I was now willing to bow, I uttered the words that I'd never expected to speak.

"That Edward needs to marry Lady Tanya for the greater good and then let me go. Unless I can bring myself to continue as his mistress...the only role for which I am *suitable*."

~AFL~

I'm ducking for cover here...but go ahead and tell me what you think.

xxx TLSue

Unannounced

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight...and probably lots of copies of Breaking Dawn 1. Whereas, I don't own one single copy because they're not in the stores when they said they would be. Grrrrrrr!

On a positive note, after being stymied by FFn for the last day and a half, I'm finally posting the chapter many of you have been waiting on for quite a while now.

Thank you so much for all the reviews, recs and support, and special thanks to Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar...betas extraordinaire.

Updated: Saturday, 11th February 2012

Words: 2640

Chapter 46

Unannounced

BPOV

"Are ye sure ye shouldn't have left the pearls behind?" Angela whispered in an aside as we hurried, side-by-side, towards the servant's domain in search of Jessica.

"Probably," I agreed, acknowledging the wisdom of her advice. But with all the uncertainty I faced, once I'd taken my mother's pearls from their hiding place, I couldn't bring myself to part with them and had tucked them in the pocket of my apron instead. "She may want proof," I justified lamely.

"What will ye tell her to explain why ye have such valuable jewels in yer possession?" Angela persisted with her concerns, and I hesitated in my stride. While I had come to quite like Jessica, I was not about to trust her with the truth of my identity.

"I could say they were a gift from Lord Edward. Do you think that would work?"

"Oh, aye." Angela nodded, her expression lightening. "I've 'eard stories of gentlemen giving their mistresses gifts like yer lovely pearls that later get sold when

the lass falls on 'ard times."

"And what 'lovely pearls' might these be?" an imperious female voice demanded, interrupting our conversation. "I knew you were just another gold-digging tart, but you can't possibly expect to dispose of anything of value and get away with it."

Gasping, I spun to see Lady Rosalie standing in a doorway, one brow arched as she eyed us disparagingly.

"Lady Rosalie," I murmured, appalled that she'd overheard us. Ducking my head, I curtsied in unison with Angela.

"Hand over the pearls," Rosalie demanded. "You may have earned the odd trinket from my cousin with your whoring, but he has no right to give away jewels that rightfully belong to the duchess...or me."

My hackles rose at her insulting words. "The pearls were my mother's and not a gift from Lord Edward," I contradicted.

"Don't be ridiculous, you insolent tart. Now hand them over, or I'll call for a footman and have the jewels forcibly removed from your person."

Bristling, I reached into my pocket and reluctantly withdrew the bag containing the pearls. The last thing I wanted to do was hand them over to Lady Rosalie, but flustered as I was, I could not think of an alternative...and I did *not* fancy being manhandled. Yanking the bag from my hands, she quickly removed the pearls and began to run them through her fingers.

"Just as I suspected," she mused aloud, tossing the bag aside. "These are of the finest quality...a Worthington heirloom of which I've not been apprised." She sniffed with disdain and proceeded to fasten the pearls around her neck. "Edward really has taken leave of his senses, giving such priceless jewels to his little whore, not that you could possibly appreciate their worth," she spat my way.

"Please, they belonged to my mother," I pleaded, but my words fell on deaf ears. Turning, Lady Rosalie walked away without a backward glance, leaving me to stand and stare after her, my hands clenched in impotent fists at my sides.

"Oh, Miss Bella, what are ye to do now?" Angela interrupted my bitter reverie, while I wondered what more could possibly go wrong in my life.

"I'm going to find Edward," I replied with bitter-sounding determination. "It's time

I told him the truth...past time. Once he calms down, I'll ask him to retrieve my pearls from Lady Rosalie, though I don't imagine that will be his highest priority."

"What do ye think that will be?" Angela queried warily.

Throttling the life out of me, I imagined, though I didn't put voice to my fears.

"We'll just have to wait and see," I mumbled instead, my tone as disconsolate as the feelings of gloom and despair pervading my senses.

"What about Lord Jasper? Do ye think it would be worth trying to get him on side first?" Angela suggested.

Fighting back tears, I shrugged, not knowing the answer to her question. All I could think was that I wanted—no, *needed*—to see Edward, whatever the outcome.

Turning the corridor into the main hallway, we came to a sudden halt, surprised to find a procession of staff carrying all manner of luggage.

"What now?" Angela demanded, mimicking my thoughts exactly.

"I don't know, but I intend on finding out," I murmured, keeping my voice low as we ducked and weaved amongst the tired-looking servants.

My best guess was that the Denalis had returned, but surely Edward would have at least spoken to me first if he'd decided to send word to the earl that he'd changed his mind and would accept his ultimatum.

Or maybe not, I thought bleakly. It wasn't as if he required my permission or approval to do whatever he wanted.

We'd almost reached the end of the long hallway when we spotted Jessica approaching, a tray laden with cakes and dainty sandwiches in her arms.

"Oooh, thank 'eavens," she cried, pushing the heavy tray into my hands before I could protest. "Can ye deliver this to the green drawing room, Bella? Mister Henson's lookin' for ye anyway, so it'd be killin' two birds with one stone. The babe's pressin' on me bladder somethin' wicked, and I've got to run."

"Of course," I responded automatically. "But can you tell us what's going on?"

"Work...work...work...and not a damned bit o' rest for the wicked. That's wot's

goin' on," she grumbled. "Ye'd best head down to the kitchen, Angela, as they're in a right uproar wot with all the comings and goings," she called over her shoulder, disappearing down the hallway.

"I'd better go," Angela murmured with a wan shrug, heading in the same direction that Jessica had taken and leaving me to my errand.

Nodding at her retreating back, I turned and made my way to the green drawing room. It was at the very front of the house in the central wing near the main entrance and normally only used for larger gatherings.

Though I still wasn't entirely certain what I was going to say to him, I hoped I would see Edward and at least find out when he would be available to meet, assuming I was even allowed inside the room. The more likely outcome was that Henson would relieve me of my burden and send me on my way to help out in the kitchen.

"Ah...there ye are, Miss Bella. I was sent to look for ye." Stephens hurried towards me as I crossed the vast foyer. "Yer needed inside, so ye might as well deliver the cakes at the same time."

Puzzled, I wondered who could possibly need me and why, but before I could utter the question forming in my mind, the footman opened the door and ushered me inside.

The drawing room seemed crowded despite its size. To my surprise, Lady Rosalie was present, and it galled me to see my mother's pearls gracing her elegant neck. She and Lord Emmett were seated to the left conversing with a distinguished-looking lady with caramel-coloured hair.

Scanning the room, I spotted Edward, and despite the dreadful uncertainty I faced, I couldn't suppress a smile at the sight of him...which quickly faded when I saw how close he was sitting to a very pretty girl with dark hair styled in a short, curly cloud around her attractive face. She was smiling adoringly at him, though her arm was entwined with that of Lord Jasper, who sat on her other side. Both men seemed to be sitting far too close to her for propriety...though who was I to talk?

Then I looked to the right and saw a golden-haired gentleman standing angled away from me and engaged in what looked like a very animated conversation with Henson. His bearing was familiar, and as he turned towards me, the tray I was holding fell from my suddenly nerveless fingers.

Lord Carlisle had returned home...unannounced.

I didn't think that Edward had noticed my entrance into the room, but he shot to his feet even before the tray hit the carpeted floor. Moving towards me, he was cut off by his father who'd not seen Edward's reaction and blocked his way.

"Isabella! Thank God you're safe!" Carlisle exclaimed, striding towards me and deftly avoiding the scattered plates and cakes at my feet before gathering me into his embrace.

"You brave, wonderful girl. Charles did the right thing telling you to come to Worthington—no better or *safer* place for you to hide. I'm just sorry I wasn't here when you arrived. But let me look at you." Pulling back, he studied me closely, taking my hands in his. I can only imagine that I looked as stunned as I felt.

"Billy Black's son told me you planned to masquerade as a servant, you clever girl. It's a hard life, but you've obviously managed it, Isabella. Well done! I bet you've been baking up a storm in the kitchens...they won't want to let you go!" Carlisle continued to gush, and while I could understand his relief at finding me unharmed, his air of jubilation made no sense.

"Uncle Carlisle." The name I'd called him as a child came unbidden to my lips. "Papa is dead. Lord Hunter killed him and threatened to take me away."

Carlisle's smile faded, his expression sobering as he looked at me with his clear blue eyes, their shape and intensity startlingly similar to Edward's gaze despite the difference in colour.

"Your father isn't dead, Isabella. He survived the shooting and is eagerly awaiting your return."

Frowning, I tried to make sense of Carlisle's words.

Papa was alive?

A strange buzzing noise cut off the rest of Carlisle's words. From the shape of his lips, he seemed to be calling my name, but I was unable to respond, as the room began to revolve slowly around me. Catching me as I began to fall, Carlisle carried me to a chaise longue in the centre of the room where he laid me down, cushioning my head with a pillow.

"Would someone tell me what the hell is going on?" I heard Edward demand as my

hearing returned, his voice rising above the hubbub that had erupted.

"Edward, language...in front of the ladies!" his father rebuked. "I've trained you better than that. You *all* must be wondering about this lovely young lady who's been working in your midst these past two months. I will explain everything, but first, someone fetch me a glass of water. Alice, would you mind, my dear?"

I struggled to sit up, and Carlisle supported me with an arm around my shoulders. Then he passed the glass of water that the pretty, dark-haired girl offered with a shy smile.

Alice...Edward's sister.

Unable to hold the glass with my shaking hands, I looked to Carlisle who steadied it against my lips. After taking a sip, I chanced a quick glance around the room.

Edward looked bewildered, Lady Rosalie downright calculating, and Emmett and Jasper both decidedly grim. Glancing back at Carlisle, I tried once more to make sense of his words.

"My father is alive?" I heard myself ask, my voice a tremulous whisper.

"Yes, my dear girl. He was grievously injured and came very close to death. But Mrs. Black concocted some of her herbal poultices, and he has made a slow but miraculous recovery. Billy Black and Harry Waters kept him hidden, coming up with an elaborate plan to fool that rogue, Hunter, so that your father could heal in peace. As soon as Charles was able, he sent word to my lawyer in London, but it took a while for the men the attorney commissioned to track us down.

"As soon as we were notified of the dreadful news, we travelled directly to Forkston before coming to find you, collecting Alice on the way. We had to virtually tie your father down he was so determined to come with us...which says a great deal about his concern for your safety considering his inability to travel. He's desperate to make sure you've come to no harm, but we didn't want to risk his recovery with what could only be a very trying journey. I told him I'd return you safely to his arms as soon as humanly possible."

I followed Carlisle's explanation with some difficulty.

Papa was alive...and waiting for me to come home?

Glancing jerkily from Carlisle's enthusiastic smile to Edward's stunned expression,

I closed my eyes against the onslaught of joy and pain warring within my heart.

"Father...would you *please* tell me what's going on?" he pleaded, the frustration in his tone undeniable.

"Of course, explanations and introductions are definitely in order." Carlisle smiled comfortingly at me, but nothing could have brought me reassurance in that moment.

Wrapping my arms tightly around my middle, I ignored the fact that my actions were neither ladylike nor graceful; that was the least of my worries. I may have just received the best news imaginable, but my world was about to come crashing down.

"Isabella, I'd like to introduce you to my lovely new wife, Esme."

Lady Esme came over to where I sat and leaned down to kiss me on the cheek in greeting. She was a duchess, I reminded myself, and I should be curtsying. But when I went to stand, she restrained me with a gentle hand.

"No, Isabella, don't get up...you've had a terrible shock," she said, patting me on the arm. "It's so lovely to meet you, my dear. I've heard so much about you."

Edward groaned, and I looked up to see him tugging roughly on his hair.

"And this is my daughter, Alice," Carlisle continued, seemingly unaware of his son's frustration.

"Isabella!" Lady Alice squealed and launched herself at me from where she'd been waiting impatiently across the room, hugging me tight. "I've been desperate to meet you. I just *know* we're going to be the best of friends. What an adventure you've had! Father says we're to debut together this season. You're going to sweep all before you when word gets out of your bravery. Ohhh...it's so romantic."

I stared at her in horror, my mouth agape.

"Everyone else you will have already met...in a fashion," Carlisle continued with a chuckle, oblivious to the rising tension. "This is my son, Edward," he gestured to the man who I knew more intimately than any other and who was staring at me with a completely stunned expression on his face. Shuddering, I let my eyes move over him, my attention drawn to his father's words.

"This is my nephew, Emmett, his wife, Rosalie and over here we have Edward's and Alice's friend, Jasper. I'm sure you're well aware of their various titles, but

you're practically family, Isabella, so there's no need to stand on ceremony," he added in an aside and then looked up from where he sat beside me to the variously smiling and stunned onlookers.

"And now, I have the pleasure of *formally* introducing this lovely young lady whom you may have previously heard referred to as Belinda Brown, but who is in actual fact, Miss Isabella Swan, the daughter of one of my closest friends, Sir Charles Swan...the man who saved my life during the war and one you've all heard me speak of many, many times."

"Bloody hell..." Edward swore softly, staggering backward as if struck, his face bleaching of colour until it was impossibly pale.

~AFL~

Yeah...evil cliffie, I know. But next chapter will be up soon and you can all enjoy seeing the *ahem* "poop" hit the yet to be invented fan. ;)

xxx TLSue

PS...almost forgot. I have some great stories to rec. Check out Squeaky Zorro's new one shots, My Impotence and Inner Fire Rekindled...both really lovely. And for a longer read, check out theladyingrey's String Theory. It's a complete AH story with a very sweet and cute Geekward that I thoroughly enjoyed.

Sacrifice

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I still don't own a copy of Breaking Dawn 1 on DVD because it hasn't been released yet in Australia. *sulk*

I was going to post this chapter tomorrow for Valentine's Day, but then I decided that wasn't really appropriate considering the ridiculously angsty content. So, in an effort not to be too mean and in gratitude for the 250 reviews you guys left for last chapter *WOW!* I'm posting today instead. I just hope you don't hate me for it too much.

Thanks to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for all your help and support and for indulging my logophile tendencies and letting me use as many esoteric, arcane and downright sesquipedalian words as I like...because it's fun. ;)

Updated: Monday, 13th February 2012

Words: 3557

~AFL~

"And now, I have the pleasure of *formally* introducing this lovely young lady whom you may have previously heard referred to as Belinda Brown...but who is in actual fact, Miss Isabella Swan, the daughter of one of my closest friends, Sir Charles Swan...the man who saved my life during the war and one you've all heard me speak of many, many times."

"Bloody hell..." Edward swore softly, staggering backward as if struck, his face bleaching of colour until it was impossibly pale.

Chapter 47

Sacrifice

BPOV

Emmett and Jasper both cursed loudly, their language shockingly crude.

Lady Esme gasped and lifted a hand to her mouth while Lady Alice looked on,

bewildered.

Standing abruptly, Carlisle's delighted smile disappeared, replaced by a furious scowl.

"Esme, please take Alice with you and arrange for suitable accommodations for Isabella. You'll need to ask the housekeeper to collect her possessions from the servant's quarters." Carlisle spoke quietly, but there was no mistaking the steel in his voice.

Rosalie began to laugh, drawing everyone's attention and adding to the sensation of unreality that pervaded the scene.

"Rosalie," Emmett warned, but she took no notice.

"There's actually no need, Uncle Carlisle. Your dear *Isabella* already has quite lovely accommodations, doesn't she, Edward?" Rosalie's tone was deceptively sweet, but there was no disguising the spiteful expression on her face.

"Rosalie," Edward growled.

"Now, Edward, don't be shy. You've been such a good host. Don't you want your father to know how gracious you've been to his *best friend's* young daughter? How generous and insightful it was of you to offer her your protection...it's like you somehow *knew* she was one of us."

His face a mask of fury, Edward stalked towards Rosalie, startling Alice who cried out in alarm at the same time as Lord Jasper lunged for Edward, grabbing hold of his arms to restrain him from attacking his cousin's wife.

"Enough, Rosalie!" Emmett shouted, pulling her away from where she was defiantly taunting Edward with a sneering expression.

Turning on her husband, she hissed. "Don't you 'Enough Rosalie' me! Do you think I don't know that you and Jasper had plans for *Isabella* once Edward was finished with her? All three of you wanted a chance in her bed...that's if you haven't shared it already!"

The only sound that broke the silence after Rosalie's outburst was the faint whimpering I couldn't seem to suppress as I rocked back and forward on the couch, clutching my arms around my middle.

"Jasper?" Alice asked tentatively, looking from him to me and then to Edward, her face a mask of confusion.

"Esme, please get my daughter out of here," Carlisle requested with deceptive calm.

"Certainly," Lady Esme murmured, casting me a sympathetic look and leading a bewildered-looking Alice from the room.

"Emmett, take your wife to her room and keep her there. I don't want her conversing with anyone until this situation is sorted," Carlisle ordered, his tone brooking no argument.

"What! You can't do that!" Rosalie shrieked. "It's not *my* fault you men can't control yourselves around the little tart. Watch out Carlisle; she'll seduce *you* next!"

I gasped at Rosalie's vicious words, while all three of the younger men began to speak at once, defending me and denying her horrid charge.

"Silence! All of you!" Carlisle roared. "Rosalie, you'll have plenty of time to think over the wisdom of making any *more* accusations, baseless or otherwise, on your journey to the north of Scotland. The McCarty estates are in dire need of renovation and have been left to moulder for far too long. Emmett, you'll oversee the project...it shouldn't take much more than six months to set your father's estate to rights, twelve at the outside. I suggest you make the most of the opportunity to school your wife in civilized behaviour and get your marriage in order."

Rosalie gasped, her eyes spitting fire, but she added nothing further, appearing to realise that she was beaten. Emmett's hand gripped tightly around her upper arm, his expression grim as he led her towards the door.

"For what it's worth, Miss Swan," he said, pausing in the doorway. "I'd like to repeat what I said earlier *before* I knew who you were. I'm terribly sorry for any offence I may have caused you. I won't offer apologies on my wife's behalf as I could not vouchsafe their sincerity, but I can assure you, you'll have them in due course."

"Wait," I croaked, summoning the courage that had failed me earlier in the day. "Lord Emmett, could you please ask Lady Rosalie to return my mother's pearls?" I requested, my voice shaking but determined. With the way things were rapidly spiralling out of control, I realised this might be my only opportunity to have them returned.

Growling, Emmett demanded his wife remove the necklace, quickly covering her hand with his and warning her to be careful when she went to rip them from her neck, no doubt intending to send the precious pearls scattering across the floor. His expression grim, he passed them to me before returning to his wife's side and grasped her arm once more, cutting off the sound of her outraged cry when he closed the door behind them.

As the numbers in the room diminished, the tension grew.

"Lord Jasper, I'm not sure what part you've had to play in this matter, but I believe it might be more appropriate if you were to exclude yourself from the proceedings for the time being," Carlisle requested coolly.

"Yes, your Grace." Jasper nodded and then looked toward me, his expression pained. "But first I have an apology to make. I am truly sorry, Miss Swan, for my abhorrent behaviour and for failing to recognise what I now see is blindingly obvious...that you are a lady of quality and should have been treated as such from the outset."

Carlisle's eyebrows shot up at his daughter's prospective fiancé's admission, and I flinched, remembering Lord Jasper's dreadful words and the way he had initially threatened me when he came to my room. But I also recalled the way he'd been protective of Edward and had offered me his support. Consequently, my feelings were conflicted when I considered the inevitable lowering of his esteem his words must cause him in Carlisle's eyes.

"Don't go too far, Lord Jasper," Carlisle ordered, his voice now like ice. "There are clearly matters to discuss if you are to have any chance of continuing your courtship of my daughter. In the meantime, I will not tolerate gossip regarding this matter coming from any quarter that can be traced back to you. Have I made myself understood?"

"Of course. You have my word, sir, and my most humble and sincere apologies," Jasper replied.

"Yes, well, it's not I but my daughter and Miss Swan that you appear to have wronged," Carlisle retorted bitterly.

Stony-faced, Lord Jasper bowed, first to Carlisle and then to me. I did not rise to curtsy but nodded hesitantly before returning my gaze to my wringing hands.

"Father," Edward spoke as soon as Lord Jasper closed the door behind him. "Let

me say at the outset that nothing that has occurred, absolutely *nothing*, is Bella's fault in any form. She is totally blameless."

"You think I don't know that?" Carlisle thundered, closing the distance between them and poking Edward sharply in the chest. "She's seventeen! The maiden daughter of a cherished friend who came to *my* home in the direst of circumstances with the expectation of finding safety, and instead she found... she found..."

Turning abruptly away, Carlisle paced toward the fireplace where he braced himself against the mantle and hung his head.

"I was not aware of her true identity," Edward offered quietly.

"And you think that makes it all right?" Carlisle lifted his head to spear his son with a look of bitter anguish. "After everything I've taught you about the dignity of human life, of how to treat those weaker and more vulnerable than yourself, you thought it was acceptable to take advantage of an innocent girl working in service? Have my words meant nothing all these years? Have all your actions been empty gestures?"

"It wasn't like that." Edward defended. "I tried to stay away, but I couldn't keep her safe from a distance. I thought she was a servant, and so I offered her my protection, but it was never my intention to harm her...quite the opposite," he finished bitterly, and I hung my head in shame. *I* should have kept my distance. I should have somehow known what it was he was offering. But, of course, I hadn't known or understood until it was too late, and by that time the damage had been done.

Carlisle straightened to his full height and walked over to stand toe-to-toe with his son.

"Are you saying there was no other way for you to protect her than by taking her to your bed?" he queried cynically, and Edward winced, his reaction not lost on his father whose shoulders slumped with resignation. "So you don't deny it then," he sighed.

"No, I don't deny it," Edward answered, raising his chin. "But there is something you need to understand. I never meant to hurt Bella...I love her."

Carlisle stared at his son for a long moment and then slowly shook his head.

"I'm not sure you understand the meaning of the word love," he rejoined and

Edward flinched, the little colour that had returned to his face leeching away at his father's bitter words.

"Please, Uncle Carlisle...don't be angry with Edward," I interrupted, and both men turned to face where I now stood. My trembling stomach threatened to disgrace me further, but I couldn't sit by and let Edward take the blame alone for what had happened between us.

"Edward's telling the truth. He was only trying to protect me. He saved my life...more than once. I should have told him who I was when I first arrived, but I'd promised Papa that I would trust no one but you. Lord Hunter had spread the lie that we were betrothed, and I knew that he and Edward were friends. I was afraid that I'd be sent back to him or handed over to the authorities for stealing my mother's pearls."

"What?" Edward stared at me aghast. "You honestly believed that I would do such a thing...to you?"

"I wasn't sure in the beginning," I answered truthfully, my words tumbling together in my haste to try and explain. "Then, by the time I realised that I could trust you, things had gone too far, and we'd spent too much time alone together. Remember...you said that my reputation was already ruined, even though you hadn't...we hadn't..." Ducking my head, I raised my hands to my blazing cheeks, before taking a deep breath and forcing myself to continue. "But you said it didn't matter about my reputation because you thought I was a servant and..."

Edward groaned, and closed his eyes. I hadn't meant to hurt him, and my words trailed away, but Carlisle urged me to finish what I'd been about to say.

"I didn't want to bring any more shame on my father's name, and so I decided it was best if I kept my identity a secret and remained Belinda Brown...a *servant*... forever," I finished on a whisper.

"And what of my son's offer of protection? Did you understand what that entailed?" Carlisle asked, his tone gentle.

"Of course she didn't," Edward barked, running his hands through his already crazily tousled hair. "I manipulated her shamelessly, took advantage of her innocence and *seduced* her. But I never intended to use her and set her aside. I wanted to protect her and intended making her my mistress."

"You'll make her more than that, I'm afraid," Carlisle retorted. "The only way this

situation can be redeemed is through matrimony. I'll contact the bishop immediately, as the wedding will need to be arranged as quickly and discreetly as possible."

While I'd imagined all along that this would be Carlisle's response if he ever discovered what had transpired between Edward and myself, I gasped, a wild and unreasoned hope firing in my chest. For a fraction of a second, I thought I saw the same flash of exhilaration in Edward's face, but it faded abruptly at his father's following words.

"You have put your inheritance and the reputation of this family in grave jeopardy, Edward. I had hoped you would take your place beside me in the House of Lords; God knows we need every vote we can find to support Wilberforce and see an end to slavery and child labour, but you'll be unable to offer much support considering the battle that lies ahead of you now. It's unlikely the marriage will be approved, but at least you're wealthy enough in your own right to survive whatever decision the crown hands down. But without your titles and inheritance, you'll be severely reduced in position and influence. Maybe Emmett will rise to the challenge...an unlikely outcome but one can only hope. You will have to enlighten me as to his and Jasper's indiscretions in this matter, but that can wait for another time."

Edward hung his head at Carlisle's censorious tone, and my heart ached for him. The weight of his father's disappointment was a heavy cloud over both our heads.

Carlisle turned toward me, his expression softening. "Isabella, I would like to offer my sincerest apologies for your shameful treatment at the hands of my son and in my home. You have no need to fear for your reputation or future. Edward will marry you forthwith, and we will weather the storm of controversy with a united front."

Taking a deep breath, and willing back the tears that stung my eyes, I summoned the courage to act as I knew I must.

"That won't be necessary, but thank you, your Grace," I answered with intentional formality and as much dignity as I could muster. Miss Brewer would have been proud.

Both men stared at me with matching expressions of bemusement.

"Bella," Edward murmured coaxingly, moving to stand before me and taking my hands in his. "You *must* marry me. It's the only way you will survive without being utterly ruined."

"No, it is not the only way," I contradicted, pulling my hands free and turning to face Carlisle. I couldn't do what I needed to do and look at Edward at the same time, though I held firmly in my mind the memory of the many times he'd told me his opinion of marriage, in particular his reaction to my 'what if' questions regarding the possibility of a formal union between the two of us.

"I do not wish to marry your son knowing his opinion of the institution and the devastating consequences our union would cause." I forestalled any objections with a raised hand. "And I do not believe that marriage is the only solution to this problem."

"Bella, please...you're taking things out of context," Edward pleaded, but I kept my eyes purposefully averted from his mesmerizing gaze, deliberately moving a few steps away from him.

"What do you suggest?" Carlisle queried, cutting off his son's protests.

"The staff know me only as Belinda Brown. If we do not enlighten them as to my true identity, and I leave quickly and with as little fuss as possible, there is no reason for them to believe otherwise...with Henson's assistance of course." I nodded to where the butler was standing stoically by the door, a reluctant witness to the unfolding drama.

"Of course, Miss Swan, your Grace. You are guaranteed my utmost discretion."

"I've only been seen very fleetingly by a few guests to Worthington Hall, and then only in the role of a servant," I continued. "If I do cross paths with a guest in a different setting, I doubt I'd raise any suspicions as people tend to see what they *expect* to see. With Lord Jasper's promise and Lord and Lady McCarty er...occupied, the only members of society we need to be concerned about are the Earl and Countess of Denali and their daughter, Lady Tanya, not that we are ever likely to meet again. But I fear they would recognise me, having seen Edward and I together at fairly close quarters."

"Bella, there's no way Lady Tanya or her parents will keep silent once they discover your identity," Edward warned.

Still avoiding his gaze, I contradicted him. "I believe there is. You could guarantee their silence in exchange for giving them what they want, what they've always wanted."

"No!" Edward gasped. "Bella, you're being ridiculous. I don't want to marry Lady

Tanya. I love *you*."

"Since when does love have anything to do with marriage?" I stated bitterly, steeling myself to finish what I'd begun. "We both know your views on the subject, so really, what does it matter *who* you marry? You'll have no problem gaining approval from the crown if you marry the Earl of Denali's daughter. It won't put your position or inheritance at risk *and* you'll still have your place in the House of Lords and support for your father and Wilberforce, surely a more important consideration than any personal concerns?"

Edward stared at me dumbfounded. "But I've changed my views, Bella, you've changed them for me."

I almost crumpled at the pain in his voice, and it took all my strength to resist the temptation to take back everything I'd said. But I was determined to protect him from himself. I could not deny that Edward loved me, but if I cost him his inheritance...his *future*...that love would surely die amidst the bitterness of being excluded from the world to which he, by birthright, belonged.

"If we marry, word will spread of what has happened here between us, and you'll not only lose everything and jeopardise the good work you and your father are committed to supporting, but both our families will be publicly shamed. My father is *alive*, Edward, and he's waiting for me to return. Please...let me go to him."

"Isabella," Carlisle interrupted, his tone gentle but insistent. "Your father won't stand by and allow you to sacrifice yourself this way. He'll demand reparations, as is his right."

"Not if we don't tell him what has occurred here between Edward and me," I insisted. "Please...if you do as I ask, my father won't have to know, no one will."

"No one except for your future husband," Edward snarled, and I flinched.

Swallowing hard, I spoke the words that would seal my fate and finish things between us forever.

"That shan't be a problem," I murmured, purposefully keeping my eyes on his though I wanted to weep at the pain and anger in his expression. "Now that I understand the way of *our* world, I have decided that I shall never marry, and I seriously doubt that my father will force me to the altar. I would rather remain a spinster than be wed to a man who has no intention of honouring his vows of love or fidelity."

Edward's brow furrowed at my words, but he remained silent, his jaw clenched.

"Are you sure about this, Isabella?" Carlisle asked, looking from me to Edward and back again.

I nodded jerkily, unable to say more without releasing the tears that lay just beneath the surface.

"Your plan *could* work," Carlisle declared soberly, and Edward strode a few feet away, cursing.

"Edward...language in front of a lady," his father rebuked, and Edward spun back to face us with a humourless laugh.

"Oh, Bella's heard cruder language than that from me, I'm afraid, and been subject to far worse. No wonder she has no desire to marry a *gentleman*," he spat the word bitterly, coming to stand before me.

"Your decision is final? You are determined to turn your back on us?" he asked, and I nodded.

"There is no 'us'," I whispered, my heart splintering into a thousand pieces while I held grimly to my faltering resolve. "Not any more. I was willing to be your mistress when I believed my father was dead and there were no other choices left to me. We both know that I am not suitable to be your wife. It's time to let me go, Edward. My father needs me and I just want to go home."

Edward stiffened at my declaration, his face losing all expression.

"Very well, Miss Swan. You have my sincerest apologies for my deplorable behaviour. I wish you all the best for your future and thank you for your...circumspect advice."

Bowing, he took my hand and lifted it to his mouth, his lips briefly brushing the back of my bare knuckles. A wave of longing swept over me, and the tears I'd been suppressing sprang to my eyes. But I blinked them back and curtsied as I'd spent years training to do, knowing full well my sweeping gesture must look ridiculous in my dowdy uniform.

"Farewell, Lord Edward. I also wish you all the best for the future," I murmured, meeting his eyes for the briefest of glances lest he see the anguish in mine and discern my true feelings. "You have no need to worry about ever seeing me again, as

I have no intention of leaving my father's side once I am safely returned to my home in Forkston."

"Are you sure about this, Bella?" he demanded once more, grabbing my hand.
"Truly?"

"Yes...I am," I lied, my voice the barest whisper. I'd never been more uncertain of anything in my life, but I could see no other way.

Accepting my words with a sharp nod, Edward released my hand and strode from the room without a backward glance.

~AFL~

Okay...I'm dying here, and I know what's going to happen, so I'm guessing you guys are ready to arrange a lynching. Happy Valentine's Day?

xxx TLSue

PS: Jing...you were spot on about sending Rosalie north. Sharkjumper...sorry, but slapping her with a halibut just didn't quite fit - and to those that wanted me to aim the 'yet to be invented fan' Rosalie's way so she got splattered with poop...thanks for the laugh!

PPS: To those of you a bit annoyed with me last chapter for Bella handing over the pearls without a fight, I wrote that bit in the middle of the night under the influence of painkillers, so yeah...it was a bit lame...but I made sure she got them back. ;)

Discretion

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight and has about a billion fans. I own a car that needs a new dif (whatever that is...all I know is that it makes a horrible noise and is expensive to fix), and have about 8000 readers following my stories, which is pretty cool if you ask me.

Thank you so much to all the awesome readers who took the time to review the last two chapters (nearly 300 each). You guys make my day...many times over. :D

Thanks Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar - WBB...World's Best Betas. And thanks to Fan Fiction Net for finally getting your act together so I could post!

Updated: Thursday, 16th February 2012

Words: 3761

Chapter 48

Discretion

BPOV

When the door closed behind Edward, I gave in to the grief that welled within me and wept, unable to hold back my tears any longer. I wanted to run after him and beg him to stay, no matter what the circumstance or cost. But I held firm to what little self-respect remained to me and the painful decision I had made.

"Isabella, my dear girl. Come and sit," Carlisle encouraged me, putting an arm around my shaking shoulders and leading me back to the chaise longue. "There, there. Everything will be all right. Your father is alive and awaiting your return...cause for rejoicing. Don't take on so. We'll find a way through this muddle."

Sniffing back my tears in a most unladylike fashion, I gratefully took the lace-trimmed handkerchief he offered and dried my eyes.

"Thank you, your Grace," I murmured when I had at least partially regained my composure.

"Uncle Carlisle, please," he admonished gently. "Now, you must tell me the truth. Despite the fact that he has behaved abominably, taking advantage of you in your innocence and at a time when I can only imagine the depths of your fear and distress...do you love my son?"

Incapacitated by the pain I felt at his question, I could not answer straight away.

"It doesn't matter whether I do or not," I prevaricated when I could form words without weeping. "I should never forgive myself if I were the instrument of Edward's downfall. Besides, I don't want my father to know what has happened, especially after all he has suffered. I fear the shock could kill him."

Carlisle studied me soberly for a long moment before his eyes fell to the pearls that I had wrapped around my fingers in nervous agitation.

His eyebrows drew together. "Your mother's pearls," he stated, and I nodded. "I remember how she cherished them...a precious memento of her old life and the family she lost."

"Papa urged me to bring them with me when I fled. As much as I would have hated parting with them, I was considering selling them to furnish myself with a small nest egg. I thought to support myself, at least for a time, until I could have found employment elsewhere," I admitted.

"Thank God I arrived in time, then. Disposing of these would have created an easy trail for Hunter to follow, I fear, and raised questions both difficult and dangerous to answer considering their worth and origin," he replied, confirming my suspicions that the pearls were, indeed, valuable.

"What has happened to Lord Hunter?" I asked, no longer quite so afraid but suddenly curious to know the fate of the man responsible for my predicament. "How did Papa stay hidden, and why would the papers report that his body had been burnt? And what of the Blacks and Waters? Are they well? Did they stay at Swan Manor under Lord Hunter's authority?"

"Isabella!" Carlisle raised his hands, instantly silencing my barrage of questions. "One at a time," he laughed before his expression turned serious once more.

"Once your father was well enough to contact the authorities, a warrant was issued for Lord Hunter's arrest. He is most likely languishing in the Tower of London as we speak. He departed from Swan Manor quite early in the piece after fleecing it of virtually everything of value, I'm afraid, absconding to London with his ill-gotten

gains."

I gasped, a hand rising to cover my mouth at the thought of Swan Manor devoid of all the treasures that made it a home.

"Don't despair, my dear. James' father, the Baron of Penn, has been informed of his son's dealings. He'll make reparations to your father or face the unceasing censure of the *ton*. The consensus is that he should have reined James in years ago."

"But I don't understand?" I interrupted. "If Lord James is the heir to a barony, why was he so determined to gain control of my father's estate?"

"Because his father, the current baron, is hale and hearty and likely to live for many more years...and James is indolent and in serious debt due to his indiscriminate gambling and licentious ways," Carlisle explained, his answer hardly surprising. "Without an heir, the entailment upon your father's estate requires that it reverts back to the control of the barony from which your father is descended. Instead of being added to the general estate, the current baron passed Swan Manor directly onto his son as a...a *token*, I'm afraid. It is a relatively minor inheritance."

Carlisle's words were accompanied by an apologetic grimace, but he wasn't telling me anything I hadn't already known. In the larger scheme of things, my father was not neither particularly wealthy nor powerful. Not that we'd cared. We had more than we needed which, unfortunately, was enough to entice Lord Hunter into pursuing us.

"Of course, it wasn't expected that the inheritance would come due for many years," Carlisle continued. "By which time, it was hoped that Hunter would have learned some discretion and matured in his behaviour."

"Instead, he saw it as a temptation, a 'juicy plum, ripe for the picking'," I murmured, recalling the words I'd heard spoken so carelessly that day when I'd first served in the breakfast room.

"Tragically, you are correct in your assessment," Carlisle conceded, his tone and expression regretful.

"The Blacks and Waters hid your father in the village, in hopes of keeping him safe from Hunter and his associates while giving him time to heal. In an attempt to stymie Hunter and prevent him from taking control of the estate, they spun a yarn for the local authority, stating that you and your father had taken a journey. But Hunter and his compatriots staged a fire in the carriage house, sacrificing the life of

some poor vagrant or itinerant worker and passing it off as your father's. I gather you're aware of the rest of the lies he told to cover his actions and take control of Swan Manor?" Carlisle queried, his brows raised.

"Yes, but why would the authorities believe him?" I demanded, though I suspected the answer even before Carlisle gave it. "Didn't Billy and Harry tell them the truth?"

"They tried, but of course, it was their word against that of an heir to a barony and the newly incumbent lord." Carlisle shrugged, and I released the breath I'd been holding on a sigh. It galled me that the word of good, honourable men could be so easily discounted while the word of an utter scoundrel like Lord James was believed instead, despite his appalling reputation. All because of a position that he had not earned but been gifted by accident of birth.

"Your father's men didn't want to make too much of a fuss, what with Hunter still threatening both you and Charles and your father unable to speak for himself. They were also afraid of alerting James to your whereabouts, so they decided to lay low until I made an appearance. Better late than never." he smiled ruefully, but then his smile faded. "Though not soon enough for you, my dear, I fear.

"I am so very sorry, Isabella, that I was not in residence when you arrived at my home. I cannot imagine the difficulties and indignities you have endured, and now we find ourselves with this dreadful predicament and no clear way forward."

"It is clear enough, Uncle Carlisle," I insisted.

"So you say, but things are not always as they seem. At the risk of appearing indelicate, I fear you may not have considered all the possible implications."

Frowning, I puzzled at Carlisle's cryptic words and embarrassed demeanour. Then realisation dawned that he was referring—circumspectly, of course—to the possibility of my being with child. Mortification coloured my cheeks with fire, and I dropped my eyes.

"There is no need for concern in that regard," I whispered, staring down at my hands. "Edward took *precautions*. I am not...you don't have to worry about...there isn't going to be..."

"Oh. Very good, very good," Carlisle harrumphed, neither of us wanting to put a finer point on such a personal subject.

"Please, Uncle Carlisle," I pleaded, still unable to meet his gaze. "I need to go

home, if you'll assist me."

"Of course, my dear. I shall put a carriage at your disposal immediately, though I'm in a bit of a quandary as to how to undertake your transfer to Swan Manor without enlightening the staff as to your identity."

Looking up, I put into words the ideas that had begun to consolidate in my scattered thoughts. "Angela—one of the servants who befriended me when I first arrived and is now acting as my lady's maid—already knows the truth," I admitted. "I believe she and her beau, Ben, one of the groomsmen, would be willing to accompany me. Would it be possible for them to remain with me at Swan Manor? I trust their discretion and believe the life would suit them both. I'm sure my father would arrange to have your carriage returned at a later date when enough time has passed not to arouse suspicion."

"A workable plan, Isabella," Carlisle complimented me. "Though I'm not sure what to do in regard to chaperonage. It would be unseemly in the extreme for you to traverse the countryside without proper companionship and protection."

Suppressing an unladylike snort, I couldn't help thinking of the journey I'd undertaken to get to Worthington Hall in the first place. If I'd survived that, I could survive anything, I reminded myself, the thought bolstering my faltering resolve.

"Is there anyone we could collect along the way, someone you could recommend who doesn't live too close to Worthington Hall and would be unlikely to connect the various pieces of the story...or whom you would trust to be discreet if they did discern the truth?" I asked, and Carlisle's brow furrowed with concentration.

"Actually, I have someone in mind that would be perfect for the role, and would no doubt thank me for bringing a little excitement into her life."

Raising my brows, I waited for Carlisle to elaborate.

"My younger sister, Penelope," he offered. "She is widowed, her children—two boys—both in boarding school, leaving her at something of a loose end, I'm afraid. I'm sure she would jump at the chance to chaperone you on your journey. If she brought a driver and maid, she could leave you and your companions at Swan Manor and travel on with the carriage for a visit with her boys before returning home. A satisfactory outcome for all concerned, I believe."

Smiling wanly, I could not quite bring myself to agree with Carlisle's summation, but I was grateful that the arrangements for my journey home seemed to be falling

into place. The sooner I made a start the better, and the less likely that my secret would be revealed.

Thanking Carlisle for his kindness, I curtseyed and then excused myself to go to my room and start packing for the long journey ahead of me.

"Isabella?" he called after me just as I reached the door. "I do appreciate the courage that your decision has required, and I believe I understand the sacrifice you are making. You are an extraordinarily brave young lady."

"Th...thankyou," I stammered, dropping my eyes.

"Try not to give in to despair, my dear," he continued, his compassionate tone almost my undoing. "Things are not always as bad as they first appear...or as they seem."

After bobbing my head jerkily in response, I turned and fled, gratefully making my way unimpeded to my rooms.

To my relief, Angela was only too willing to accompany me on the journey to Forkston. Ben, as I suspected, would have followed her anywhere, and agreed to both the change in position and the need for secrecy without question.

Packing up my belongings took considerably longer than when I'd prepared for my harried departure from Swan Manor. As I carefully folded the dark blue dress I'd worn repeatedly on my original journey, the memory of being rescued by Edward from the evil men in the village markets and the dinner I'd shared with him afterwards at the local inn came to the forefront of my mind. I doubted I'd wear the dress again as it was looking quite battered from its repeated wearings, but I couldn't bring myself to discard it. At first, I wasn't sure if I should take the lovely new gowns I'd been given with me or leave them behind, but Angela urged me to make use of them.

"Ye don't want to be wearing the same dress the whole way back to Forkston, and these'll only be thrown aside or go back into storage if ye don't take 'em," she observed, and I acquiesced, though I left out the few that were not appropriate for the position in society to which I was returning.

Carefully tucking away the white negligee set I'd worn for Edward just two evenings prior, I did my best not to dwell on the events of that magical night. Though I suspected that I would relive it over and over in my mind in the lonely times ahead.

"Are ye goin' to take the pens and paints and yer wonderful pictures?" Angela asked, and I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat.

The temptation was to leave it all behind in the vain hope of dulling the pain of the memories that would be associated with their use. But in the end, I left the art supplies, having more than enough of my own back home, but I took the pictures I had drawn of Edward and of the two of us together and carefully secreted them in the bottom of a trunk that Lady Esme kindly provided for me to pack my belongings. I would have to be very careful to make sure that the images were not seen by eyes other than my own, but I could not bear to part with them. Along with the gowns and trinkets that Edward had given me, they were all that I had of him to take with me...all I would have to last me a lifetime.

With melancholy threatening to overwhelm me, I reminded myself that this situation was in part of my own making. My memories had not been wrong, and Carlisle appeared every bit as kind and caring as I recalled while, of course, being a man well accustomed to having his wishes obeyed and his word respected. My fear was that he would sacrifice a great deal, both on his and Edward's behalf, if I led him to believe that such a course of action was required. Chastising myself, I determined to improve my demeanour or risk the possibility of Carlisle changing his mind about allowing me to return home, jeopardising the plan I had set in motion to see that Edward was free to live the life he would have led if we'd never met...regardless of my breaking heart.

To my surprise, Lady Alice came to visit me before my departure.

"I hope you don't mind the intrusion?" she asked once we were alone, Angela having gone to pack her own few belongings and make her farewells. The story being told was that the three of us, Angela, Ben and me, were being sent to Edward's estate, a useful fabrication and explanation for our joint departure and quite a likely tale, as it wasn't unreasonable that the Duke would have demanded Edward send his new mistress packing upon his return. Emmett and Rosalie were also preparing for an imminent departure, and with the Duke and Duchess having only just arrived, the household was in considerable disarray, which worked to my benefit with few questions being asked.

Despite my surprise at Lady Alice's unexpected appearance, I demurred, curtsying politely while silently wondering at her purpose.

"You are very welcome, Lady Alice," I murmured.

"Please, call me Alice," she insisted, crossing to a grouping of chairs by the

window where she took a seat, directing me to follow suit. "I can't say that I fully understand the events that have transpired in my absence," she admitted and I nodded hesitantly. I would have been in the exact same boat if our positions had been reversed...perplexed and invariably curious.

"While I have my suspicions," she continued. "I fully expect that my family will contrive to keep me in the dark—for my own good, of course—regardless of whether these matters affect me directly or not."

I couldn't blame her for indignant tone, but I was unwilling to offer more than another cautious nod.

"Bella. May I call you Bella?" she asked, and I smiled hesitantly. "I had determined we would be the very best of friends, and I looked forward to meeting you with breathless expectation, but..."

She seemed at a loss for a moment—not that I blamed her—and I waited quietly for her to continue.

"Please...would you be honest with me and answer me one thing?" she pleaded, her earnest tone and expression battering at my wary reserve.

"Very well," I agreed, hoping she wouldn't ask something that I could not, in all good conscience, reveal.

"My brother thought you were a servant, and the two of you became *involved*?" she asked, and I nodded slowly, not seeing any harm in confirming her suspicion. She had surely heard enough to suspect as much during the time we were all in the drawing room together.

"Then why are you refusing to marry him?" she continued, clearly puzzled, and I gasped in a breath.

"How do you know that?" I asked as insistently as I dared.

"Edward told me before he rode out on Sabre. He seemed very upset, and I fear he intends to do something rash. I know there is an expectation that he will marry Lady Tanya one day, but he doesn't care for her in the least nor does she care for him—only the title he can give her," she uttered disparagingly. "I realise that most marriages amongst the upper *ton* are arranged for convenience and to improve or forge new alliances, but I *know* it doesn't have to be that cold-blooded. One only needs to spend a short while with my father and Esme to see that love is possible

between members of our class." Her words confirmed what Edward had said about his father and new bride, though she seemed quite taken with the idea of a love match not bemused or offended by it.

"It is obvious that Edward cares for you a great deal, so I don't understand why you won't marry him. Or do you not care for him after...after he took advantage of you when you were vulnerable?" Her voice trailed away, and I swallowed back the tears that seemed determined to make a reappearance.

"It is because I do care for your brother that I cannot marry him," I replied, going on to explain the situation as best I could.

"So you're determined to protect him from himself," she concluded, seeming to understand my motivation, or so I thought. "But shouldn't the choice be his also? And why is everyone so certain the King would not approve of a match between the two of you? Your father was a hero during the war, and didn't your mother have a connection to the French crown? I suppose that's a touchy subject, but still, why *can't* the two of you marry and live happily ever after?"

Alice and I were almost the same age, but after everything I'd been through during the previous two months, her sweet enthusiasm and naivety left me feeling *much* older.

"It's not that simple, I'm afraid," I murmured, wishing the world was the fairytale Alice still believed it to be. "Your father has confirmed my fears. The only way for Edward and I to be together is if he were to give up his position in society, his titles, his estates...*everything*."

Alice's shocked expression and the way she let the subject drop—not even bothering to continue with her impassioned argument—validated the decision I had made quite assuredly, though I took no great pleasure in the knowledge.

With the time of my departure rapidly approaching, I expressed my gratitude to her for her visit and then rose and ushered her towards the door.

"I will write to you often, and I expect a reply," she insisted, but I kept my answer noncommittal. In my opinion, it would be better for all concerned if the Cullens forgot about my existence entirely.

"There is one last thing I wish to know," she revealed when we reached the door, her voice suddenly shaky. "Lord Jasper...did he behave dishonourably towards you?"

Her startling blue eyes rose to meet mine, and I hesitated, uncertain how to reply.

"He did me no real harm," I eventually admitted. "And he offered me his assistance when I intimated that I was planning to leave before your father returned which was kind of him, considering he was suspicious of my motives."

"Oh, I see," Alice murmured in a small voice, her brow troubled. "There is so very much that I do not understand nor do I expect to be enlightened," she admitted bitterly. "I know it is customary to keep young ladies such as ourselves ignorant of any matter with the potential for unpleasantness. But I have come to suspect that the result of such a lack of knowledge is the eventual shattering of one's hopes and dreams rather than the blissful state it is supposed to engender."

Her heartfelt words, so similar to my own experience, drew forth a well of compassion and kinship within me as if I'd found the sister I never had but always wanted.

"Write to me, Alice," I offered, surprising myself, "and I will do my best to answer your questions...discreetly, of course. For I believe you are correct in your suspicions. In my experience, ignorance leads to unwise choices and unnecessarily tragic outcomes, and there is nothing blissful about either."

~AFL~

Hmmm... Whose idea was it to include a reverse New Moon in this story?

I was a bit worried about the direction I've taken the in the next chapter, but my betas have reassured me that I'm on the right track. I thought you might like to read what one of my lovely betas had to say -

"Oh my word! Sue! I can't even speak right now, having just finished FR on this chapter. You astound me with this story-absolutely brilliant. I can't wait for the next chapter!"

Phew...

Stay tuned...and thanks again for all those wonderful reviews. ;)

xxx TLSue

PS Apologies to my Once Bitten readers for the lack of an update this weekend. Real life chaos and all the AFL excitement and angst have gotten

in the way. Sorry.

Difference

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended. I can't think of any clever comments at the moment, as I caught a horrible gastro...ugh! And I thought writing with a broken arm was difficult.

Thanks to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, and to all my wonderful readers, old and new, reviewers and 'recommenders' for all your support. I hope you enjoy the rest of the journey.

Thanks to PeaceLoveEmpathy for posting A Forbidden Loves 6000th review. Wow!

Updated: Sunday, 19th February 2012

Words: 4638

Chapter 49

Difference

BPOV

A small, hidden part of me hoped that Edward would visit me before I left.

I told myself that I just wanted to see him one last time, but if I was honest, my aching heart held to the faint hope that he would see through my lies, reject my plan, and insist that we must stay together despite everything I'd said...despite the cost and the consequences and the impossibility of the situation.

But he never came.

He'd ridden out on Sabre and not returned, and I wondered if he'd gone to set things right with Lord Eleazar...and Lady Tanya.

The thought triggered a stabbing pain in my chest, and I gasped, struggling to catch my breath.

It was for the best, I told myself, doing my best to ignore the pain as I finished packing and waited for word that it was time to leave.

I had made my decision for all the right reasons; to protect Edward from ruin and the loss of his position in society, to ensure the political advances that Carlisle and his cohort were endeavouring to secure had every chance of success, to safeguard my father from the knowledge of what had occurred between Edward and me and from the disdain of the *ton*...and to guard myself against further sorrow.

Not that the last consideration carried significant weight, as I seriously doubted anything that occurred from this point forward would make a difference to the sad state of my already broken heart...other than seeing my father again, of course.

The grief I felt over leaving Edward would stay with me always, but my hope was that he would move on and find happiness without me, fulfilling his destiny and even forgetting me eventually. Alice seemed to think that outcome was unlikely and that I should have given him a greater say in the decision that affected us both. But he'd believed me so easily, agreeing with my plan after only a few relatively token protests.

Shaking my head in an attempt to dislodge the bitter thought, I reminded myself that it was what I wanted, after all. I'd practically begged him to let me go.

A scant two hours after our meeting in the drawing room, I was ready to take my leave. Uncle Carlisle and Lady Esme were exceedingly gracious in their privately spoken farewells, embracing me warmly and handing me letters for both Carlisle's sister and my father.

"Remember, my dear," Carlisle addressed me just before I was due to make my exit via the servant's quarters. "Things are always darkest before the dawn."

Smiling wanly at his cryptic encouragement, I thanked him for his assistance and gracious understanding. It wasn't until I was in the carriage with Angela beside me and Ben driving us away from Worthington hall, that I allowed myself the luxury of tears. When I could weep no more, I took a moment to regain my composure, and then I made a silent vow to lock my grief away. This had been my decision, after all, and as much as I was tempted to wallow in a sea of misery and self-pity, I owed it to my father and the brave inhabitants of Swan Manor—who had undoubtedly suffered their own travails in my absence—to put on a brave front.

The journey home to Forkston passed uneventfully. Lady Penelope, a beautiful blonde-haired lady with blue eyes like her brother, agreed immediately upon reading Carlisle's letter to escort me. She was accompanied by her maid and a driver, who would travel with her to visit her sons after a short stay with us at Swan Manor.

A truly lovely lady, she was both gracious and garrulous, with many exciting tales to tell about the travels she had taken with her late husband in the early years of their marriage. She spoke of him very fondly, and I found myself wistfully daydreaming of the life Edward and I could have led had things been different.

Passing through the same towns, though never staying in the same inns or coach-houses that I had frequented on my flight from Forkston, I suffered an odd sense of déjà vu. The two journeys could not have been more dissimilar, emphasising the disparate worlds one encountered depending on one's station and circumstance. A leisurely pace adapted to suit the genteel sensibilities of the ladies travelling, a respectful welcome from congenial hosts, well appointed drawing and dining rooms, good food, hot baths, and warm, comfortable beds made for an altogether different experience than the one Jake, Leah and I had endured.

As the miles and countryside passed, I found myself wondering what I would find when I returned home and precisely how much damage Lord James had inflicted on Swan Manor and its people.

While I looked forward to seeing my home and family, a part of me worried that the changes that had occurred in me during my absence—the things I had experienced...both good and evil—would somehow be obvious, written on my face and hands like the tattoos I'd read about that adorned the bodies of tribal warriors. I was a very different person from the one who had fled, grieving and in fear for her life two months earlier. I was no longer a child, yet I did not expect to be treated as the woman I had become due to my age and unmarried state, and I wondered how I would adjust...*readjust*...to the way things had been when I was no longer the same.

Of Edward, I tried not to think, for when I did it was as if a huge hole appeared in my chest where my heart should have been. The pain of it was agonising, and I gasped, hugging myself around the middle and rocking in a futile attempt to find relief.

"My dear, are you unwell?" Lady Penelope asked the first time such an attack occurred when she was awake to witness my distress. Angela had already seen me in this state and knew that the only thing that helped was to soothingly pat my shoulder—and remind me to breathe—as the lack of air entering my lungs seemed to be an intrinsic part of the problem.

"No, I'm fine," I panted, blatantly lying but not wanting to upset Carlisle's kind and caring sister...or to inadvertently reveal the cause of my discomposure.

"Travel sickness?" she persisted, and I smiled wanly once I'd regained at least

partial equanimity.

"Home sickness," I dissembled, though there was some truth to my words. I missed my father dreadfully and was desperate to see him. Now that I knew he was alive, the grief I had been suppressing all this time seemed to grow intensity rather than dissipate. With the resurgence of hope came a numbing fear that it might somehow be taken away, and I would return home to discover some new tragedy had befallen us.

I wouldn't rest easy until I saw my father face to face.

The grief I felt over leaving Edward was by far the worst of it, as I had no hope for a reconciliation to soften the pain. The decision had been mine, but the knowledge that I would never see him again literally robbed me of breath, and I wondered if any place would ever feel like home without him.

So, it was with restless anticipation that I counted down the miles on the last day of our journey, wondering what I would find and how I would react. Lady Penelope rose even further in my estimation when she did not rebuke me for my twitching and agitation, choosing instead to occasionally pat my arm and murmur reassurances.

"Finally," I breathed when Swan Manor came into view, before the shock at seeing it essentially unchanged rendered me speechless. I remained so until I saw the reconstruction of the burned-out carriage house that was occurring to the side of the main building and the workers toiling in fields that had been left neglected in my father's absence.

As our carriage approached the front of the house, our arrival was noted...and pandemonium ensued.

Barely waiting until the vehicle halted, I clambered down unaided, indifferent to the spectacle I was creating in my haste to disembark. Cries of greeting and welcome assaulted my ears as I was surrounded by smiling, familiar faces. Neither Jacob nor Leah was present, but knowledge of their whereabouts and wellbeing would have to wait. I only had eyes for my father who appeared on the front steps, moving determinedly towards me, supported on either side by his long time servants and companions, Billy Black and Harry Waters.

He was thinner than I recalled—much thinner—and his usually ruddy complexion was overlaid with a greyish pallor. But he was alive when I'd never expected to see him again.

A path opened before me, and I closed the distance between us, throwing myself into his arms.

"Papa!" I cried, quite literally, my tears soon soaking his waistcoat as he held me close, repeating my name over and over with a voice that rasped hoarsely with his own unshed tears. But then I felt one splash on my neck, and I looked up to witness the unprecedented sight of tears running down my father's cheeks.

"You're alive," I sobbed, my words overlapping with his declaration, "You're home!"

Laughing and crying simultaneously, we made our way slowly into the house.

Ignoring the bare walls and incongruous gaps where generations-old furnishings had once stood, I concentrated on seeing my clearly still weakened and recovering father seated in his favourite chair in the parlour. Then, before I could get my bearings, I was passed like a Christmas package from the arms of one person to the next in a flurry of reunion, finally coming to rest in the warm embrace of Mrs. Waters who nestled me against her ample bosom like she had when I was a child.

"Me girl's 'ome where she belongs," she sobbed, and it was my turn to offer consolation, my own tears having finally begun to fail of their seemingly endless supply.

"Oh dear, I forgot our guests!" I exclaimed when my scattered wits returned to me. Extricating myself from Mrs. Waters' hold, I turned to find Lady Penelope standing uncertainly just inside the door.

"Please, forgive my rudeness," I begged, her gentle smile reassuring me that she was not offended by my lapse in manners.

"Perfectly understandable, my dear," she murmured, coming to stand beside me.

"Father," I turned to where he was watching proceedings with a very pleased, if still slightly watery-looking smile. "I'd like you to meet Lady Penelope, Uncle Carlisle's sister. She very kindly accompanied me on the journey home."

"No, please don't stand, Sir Charles," Lady Penelope insisted, closing the distance between them to take the hand that my father stretched toward her. "I can see that you are well on the way to recovery after your terrible ordeal, but I would not want to be responsible for you suffering a setback."

While I knew it must have galled my father not to stand and make his obeisance to such a handsome lady, he relented at her words, choosing to bow his head over her hand instead.

"You are very welcome in my home, Lady Penelope," he replied. "I owe you a debt of gratitude for seeing to the safe return of my daughter."

"It is I who owes the debt, Sir Charles," Lady Penelope surprised me by rejoining. "I have had a delightful time getting to know Isabella, and I've been given an excellent excuse to traverse the countryside to pay an impromptu visit to my two sons, whom I miss quite dreadfully."

I hoped we didn't seem rude, but the furtive glances Papa and I couldn't help sending each other's way clearly broadcast our desire for privacy. After a few moments spent in polite discourse and some much appreciated refreshments served by Chef Luis himself, Lady Penelope excused herself, citing the need for a rest before dinner to recover from the rigours of our journey. With the household staff having finally returned to their duties, Papa and I found ourselves alone at last.

"Bella," he whispered my name, and to my chagrin, my tears returned in earnest.

"Oh, Papa," I breathed, moving to sit on the padded arm of his chair and wrap my arms around him...carefully, in deference to his recently healed wounds.

"How are you, really?" I asked, studying his face and seeing lines that had not been there before James' intrusion into our previously tranquil existence.

"Mending and well on the way to recovery," he assured me, reaching to pat my hand. "But let me look at you?" he asked, and I took a seat on a padded footstool that I drew close to his chair.

"Goodness, you're even more beautiful than I recall!" he declared, a look akin to awe upon his face, and I smiled indulgently at his fatherly bias. "I fear your adventures have hastened your journey towards becoming a young woman," he continued and my smile faded, his words cutting a little too close to the bone.

"You're a bit pale, of course," he continued. "But a week stuck inside a jostling carriage will accomplish that."

"I'm fine, Papa." I soothed his concern. "A little tired but very, *very* glad to be home."

"Yes, well...my heart almost gave out when Jacob informed me that Carlisle and Esme had left on their honeymoon a matter of days before you arrived. Of all the rotten luck," he mused, shaking his head. "I'd forgotten all about the wedding when I sent you off halfway across the country..."

"Papa," I interjected, curious to receive an answer to the question that had plagued me since my arrival at Worthington Hall. "Why weren't we invited to Uncle Carlisle's and Lady Esme's wedding?"

"We were." He appeared surprised by my question. "In fact I think there was a good chance Carlisle would have asked me to stand up with him if we'd been able to attend."

Frowning, I puzzled over his words. "Why *couldn't* we attend?" If we'd been away when Lord Hunter had arrived for his impromptu visit, it certainly could have saved us a great deal of anguish.

Papa looked uncomfortable, his words when he finally answered unforeseen.

"I've never spoken to you in any detail about my experiences during the war... my imprisonment and the battles my men and I engaged in."

Startled, I felt my eyes widen, not having anticipated the direction his speech would take.

"Despite the noble tales that are told of heroic battles and acts of chivalry, the reality of war is quite *different*. It can leave a man with scars both hidden as well as visible."

"Go on, Papa," I urged when he faltered, intrigued but also saddened to realise that my war hero father may have such scars from the things he'd seen and experienced.

"It wasn't an issue when your mother was alive." He nodded thoughtfully, a faraway look in his eyes. "She helped me stay focused, but after she died, the memories returned, and I found it more and more difficult to keep them at bay. Here, at home in Forkston and especially at Swan Manor, her *presence* assists me—as does your company, of course—but when I travel further afield..."

"It's all right," I consoled when his words dried up. Patting his arm, a vague memory of the nightmares he'd suffered when we'd journeyed to the seaside for our one and only trip away from home surfaced in my mind. "I understand...at least a

little. I may never have experienced the horrors of war, but I can honestly say that I have no desire to leave Forkston, Swan Manor or *you* again for as long as I live."

In that moment I didn't believe that I was overstating things, but Papa smiled at my words, reaching to gently stroke my brow in the way he used to when I was a little girl.

"We'll see, as I have a feeling you'll change your mind in due course. But tell me, what is this preposterous tale of you masquerading as a servant?"

Attempting to keep things light and as far from the truth of my experience as I could without finding myself in the unprecedented position of having to lie outright to my father, I regaled him with stories of my experiences and adventures.

"But what of Carlisle's son, Edward, the marquess, and the other members of his household? Did you not meet any of them in your time at Worthington?" Papa asked, and my heart caught in my throat. Disguising my distress behind a feigned bout of coughing, I sipped at the water that Mrs. Waters rushed to my hand, confirming that she, and no doubt as many of the household staff as could squeeze behind the door, had been listening in to our conversation.

"I...I encountered them in my role as a servant," I allowed, hoping he would let the matter drop.

"And you conversed? They heard you speak?" he persisted.

"Of course." I shrugged and then recalled that it was considered ill-mannered for a young lady to gesture in such a way, a habit I would have to break, I supposed.

"Idiot," Papa harrumphed, surprising me with the pejorative description. "Didn't expect Carlisle's boy would turn out to be such a dunderhead."

"Edward isn't a...a...*dunderhead*," I defended, uncertain whether I should have repeated the word, not being certain of its degree of offensiveness.

"Rubbish!" Papa surprised me further by insisting. "Your speech...your demeanour...your gracious manner. Five seconds in your presence and anyone with a modicum of intelligence should have recognized you as a lady of exceptional breeding, not to mention extraordinary intelligence."

Smiling behind my hand, I was touched by my father's defence.

"It's just that people tend to see what they expect...or *want*...to see." I offered quietly, and he harrumphed.

"Be that as it may, I still don't understand how they could have missed the startlingly obvious?"

"Obvious?"

"Your appearance," he stated, my bewildered expression my only response.

"You are the spitting image of your mother, Bella, when she was just a few years older than you are now. You have the same beautiful brown tresses, those eyes, and of course the fine features and delicate bone structure. She was a member of the French aristocracy, for heaven's sake...a *princess*. How anyone could mistake her daughter for a servant for a moment, let alone two months, is completely and utterly beyond me!"

Time slowed, and I felt my jaw drop open, even as I noted dust motes dancing prettily on a ray of afternoon sunshine that had broken through the clouds to splash golden light across my father's face. My mind turned sluggishly while I attempted to make sense of his blatantly incomprehensible declaration.

"My mother was a *what*?" I eventually managed to utter.

"A princess...or she would have been if the royal family and the rest of the French Court weren't destroyed by the revolutionists."

"Why was I never told?" I breathed, my words more a plea of understanding than a demand. "I thought she was the daughter of a court official, that her parents were caught up in the chaos but that they arranged for her to escape with some loyal servants. Didn't she live in the French countryside hidden amongst peasants?"

"That's the part of the story we told you, but there was more to it than that...much more." Papa's words settled like a cold, damp fog around my shoulders. Shivering, I felt goosebumps breaking out all over my skin.

"The king was your mother's uncle, your grandmother his youngest sister. She did not approve of the indulgences that went on at court. Her husband, your grandfather, was a sensible man—an officer, like me—and they protected their daughter as much as they could. But their awareness of the rising discontent that was sweeping the country and their stance against the worst of the excesses of the ruling party could not protect them from the inevitable uprising of the masses. Your

grandparents were killed along with the rest of the royal household, but not before they provided for your mother's escape."

"And the rest of the tale I've always been told, how some years later Mama helped you when you broke out from the French prison with Uncle Carlisle and the others...?"

"All true," Papa confirmed, as I suspected. I'd heard it too often and from too many sources to seriously doubt the veracity of this part of the story.

"After we'd made it safely back to England, your mother and I were married and retired to live a quiet life in the country, shunning society and the social whirl on the pretext of preference when..."

"In actual fact," I interrupted, accurately surmising. "You feared for Mama's safety from the anti-royalist factions that were rife after the revolution and who sometimes ventured onto English soil to hunt down escaped aristocrats and nobles."

"Precisely." My father nodded, and I sat back, my mind barely able to take it all in.

"Why didn't you tell me the truth when I was old enough to understand?" This time my words *were* a demand, the consequences of my ignorance settling like a stone in my belly.

"It didn't seem relevant." Papa shrugged, and I resisted the urge to scream. "The danger is past, but otherwise, what difference would it have made?"

"What difference?" I whimpered. "Papa, my place in society is surely influenced by this heritage I had no knowledge of. I thought that I—that *we*—were ranked at the very lower end of the *ton*, but instead, if I understand correctly, you're telling me..."

"That you outrank the lot of them, all except for the royal family, of course," he chuckled, but then his smile faded. "Or you would have if not for the Terror."

"Does Uncle Carlisle know?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"He may suspect that your mother's place in the aristocracy was higher than she alluded to, but it wasn't something we discussed in detail. We didn't talk much about the war...the terror we'd all experienced and were lucky to escape from with our lives. After your mother passed, I couldn't bear to even allude to that time, I'm afraid."

"The French court doesn't exist anymore, so Mama's heritage probably doesn't make any difference to my standing in society, not really," I murmured in a vain attempt to convince myself that I hadn't just made a colossal mistake because I'd been kept in the dark...again.

"Her heritage is still relevant." Papa dashed my hopes with his words. "Your mother was related to most of the royal houses of Europe, including our own monarch—as are you, of course—not that I have pursued the connection. I preferred to keep the relationship quiet, initially out of fear for your safety and later so that you would be allowed to grow up in the freedom and security of the countryside without undue pressure or expectation. But now that you're about to embark on your entrée into society, that secrecy will no longer be possible. The news will cause quite a stir, no doubt, but I'm sure you will be welcomed with open arms by your royal relatives."

"A stir?" I whispered, aghast. "When were you going to tell me any of this?"

"I didn't want you to worry, as I know you're not keen on being the centre of attention, so I thought I would leave the reveal until closer to the time that you were due to leave for London. If James hadn't shown up, it would have all been out in the open by now."

"Do you think he knew? Was that why he wanted to marry me? Though what difference does it make if I *am* related to royalty? I don't have a title, and my dowry is not substantial."

"About that." My father shifted in his seat, and I found myself hoping his hesitation was because he was tired and needed to rest...not that he had any more shocking news to disclose.

"Papa?" I urged him to continue.

"I'm not sure if that scoundrel Hunter got wind of your true identity, but he knew about the pearls, so it is a possibility."

"Mama's pearls are valuable, aren't they?" I asked.

"*Your* pearls now, and yes, they're incredibly valuable having been a gift from the Emperor of Prussia to one of your great-great-grandmothers and then passed down from mother to daughter. They're not a part of the Swan estate, and I didn't want Hunter getting his hands on them. The rest of your mother's jewels were well hidden. Billy let Hunter think he was getting the best of what the estate had to

offer...which he did, I suppose...when in actual fact, the real treasure was in a chest hiding beneath a sack of rotting potatoes in the vegetable cellar."

"Mama's *jewels*?" I repeated, numbly. As far as I'd known, my mother didn't have any jewels other than her pearls, a lovely cameo locket my father gave her for their anniversary one year and a handful of trinkets.

"She didn't like to wear them as they would have advertised who she was, I'm afraid. But we kept them for your inheritance since the entail, blasted thing, disallowed me from leaving you my estate," he grumbled. "But I digress. My plan was to keep the jewels and gold that I helped your mother to smuggle out of France—a treasure given to her by your grandparents to secure her safety—a secret.

"I know it's not the way things are done, but I didn't want it known that you are a very wealthy young woman when you *début*. You'd have every gold-digging ne'er-do-well and down-on-his-luck noble from here to the Mediterranean after your hand. Not that they won't be beating down my door with a stick in response to your beauty alone, I'm afraid. That's why I only arranged for you to have a relatively modest dowry. It's not that I couldn't afford more, but..." Sighing, Papa's words trailed away. He ran his hand through his still luxuriant brown hair, the gesture causing my heart to catch in my throat, reminding me as it did of Edward.

"But what, Papa?" I murmured, his stunning revelations weighing heavily on my mind and heart but leaving me determined to hear the rest of it.

"I've not spoken of such things with you before, Bella. And I do realise that what I am about to say would be considered highly inappropriate by most members of society, but I want you to have what your mother and I did...love." His shrug was accompanied by a sheepish smile.

"Love," I whispered, the hole in my chest expanding until the ache threatened to overwhelm me. "You and Mama were in love," I murmured, his words confirming what I had always known.

"Very much so. I know that is not something one would normally admit to—not in our sphere—but we cared for each other a great deal. Another reason we chose to withdraw to the countryside away from the discerning and critical eye of the *ton*."

"And you want the same for me...to marry for love and not because my dowry could save some penniless lord's estate," I stated flatly.

He nodded, the tears that sparkled in the corners of his eyes speaking volumes to

me of his sincerity and going a long way towards ensuring that I would forgive him, in due course, for keeping the secret that may well have destroyed my one chance of having the very love he spoke of.

My only hope to undo the damage I had done with my noble but apparently unnecessary sacrifice was to get back to Edward and convince him to trust me despite all the lies I'd told.

If it wasn't already too late.

~AFL~

Hmmm...the plot thickens. I was so pleased that I managed to surprise many of you with Carlisle's unexpected return, though I have a feeling most of you will have seen this particular development coming. But it's just so delicious...

Thanks to all the lovely reviewers who've gone back and reviewed from the beginning (Anita, annncarol, PeaceLoveEmpathy and others). You guys are awesome.

xxx TLSue

PS: Next up we'll be hearing from Edward.

PPS: I've got a great story rec by windchymes. Hotwardfangirl recommended her to me, and I finally got around to reading one of her stories (Distractions) when I was too sick with the gastro to write myself. Wonderful story and fantastic writer.

Flagellation

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have a lovely hubby who spoilt me for Valentine's Day (forgot to mention that), a sling-free, almost recovered arm and a stomach that is finally behaving. Yay!

Thanks to all the lovely ladies (and occasional gentleman - the mind boggles) who took the time to go back and review the chapters they'd already read these last few days. 350 reviews. Wow! And special thanks to Petra-eyes for the great line from one of her reviews that I stole and used in this chapter...because it was perfect.

Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar...thanks for betaing and everything else.

Updated: Thursday, 23rd February 2012

Words: 3490

Chapter 50

Flagellation

EPOV

She was lying.

She had to be.

Please, God, let her be lying, I silently begged, the pain in my chest robbing me of breath.

My only hope was that the Almighty could hear my silent prayer...that's if he was inclined to listen to me at all, considering the multitude and gravity of my sins.

"There is no 'us'," she'd said, now that she knew her father was alive and that she had a choice to become something other than my mistress.

She'd refused my offer of matrimony, though I could hardly blame her. I'd told her repeatedly that I had no intention of being faithful to my wedding vows and exactly what I expected in a wife.

She didn't think she was suitable...and she wasn't...she was far too good for me, and I was nowhere near good enough to be her husband.

Spurring Sabre to a gallop, I sped across the fields towards the forest behind Worthington Hall. But no matter how fast I rode, I couldn't outrun the memories intent on torturing my thoughts...

...her face—that of an angel—looking down at me from the first story window...

...my hand covering hers, steadying the handle of the coffee pot while she blushed and stammered, apologising for her inexperience with a voice both sweet and articulate, her perfectly enunciated vowels telling me everything I needed to know about her...had I been listening. But I'd ignored the incongruous and accepted her implausible tale, mesmerised as I was by her beauty and utterly entranced by the gentle innocence that shone from her face.

I recalled watching her in the hallway the day she'd made such a dismal show of arranging flowers.

"Bellissima ragazza," I'd murmured, "A beautiful name for a very beautiful girl."

Holding her in my arms, I'd been terrified that she'd been badly injured the day of the hunt.

Ignoring the wariness and confusion on her face, I'd commanded her to sit with me in my study the day she'd brought the delicious croissants she'd baked. To my bemusement, I'd discovered that rather than being just a mildly incompetent maid, she was actually the very talented new pastry chef...with many other hidden talents.

I snorted at the memory, the surprise of that revelation paling into insignificance in comparison to the shock of learning that the young lady I knew as Belinda Brown was neither maid nor pastry chef, but Miss Isabella Swan, the genteel daughter of one of my father's closest friends.

"It appears that some rules are destined to be broken," I'd informed her dryly. "So we may as well begin with the innocuous ones."

But, of course, I'd broken many more rules than that to which I was referring...the impropriety of a master socialising with a servant.

More memories assailed me as I rode on, pushing Sabre faster and further...

...the panic I'd felt the day she'd been hunted in the markets, which now seemed tame in comparison to the fear I felt at the thought of losing her. Riding away with her safely ensconced in the saddle before me after rescuing her from her attackers, I'd felt profound relief along with a newfound determination to keep her safe no matter what it took. I wanted to do the exact same thing upon hearing my father's devastating revelations, to protect her from the condemnation inherent in his words and take her...*anywhere*, as long as we could remain together.

But that wasn't what Bella wanted, or so she'd said.

While I'd stood there, virtually dumbstruck by my father's righteous indignation, she'd been stoic in the face of utter ruin, self-sacrificing in the extreme and remarkably clever in her plan...though, of course, that shouldn't have surprised me.

I'd wanted to debate her logic, to command her obedience, to beg her for mercy...whatever it took to keep her from leaving me.

Until I saw her hands shaking and heard the tremble in her voice, and I knew that it was taking every ounce of her resources—the courage she'd shown repeatedly and in ways I had yet to fully comprehend—to stand firm and hold to the decision she had made. Regardless of the final outcome, she deserved to have her deepest desire met and be returned without delay to the father she'd thought lost to her forever.

So I had denied the almost overwhelming urge to pick her up and run with her as fast and as far as I could—a primitive, futile urge at best—but that didn't mean that acquiescing to her request and walking away wasn't the most difficult thing I'd ever done.

"Hell and damnation!" I cursed bitterly, slowing Sabre to a trot as I approached the tree line.

I'd offered her my protection at a time when she was vulnerable and afraid, knowing that she felt the same attraction that I did and was susceptible to seduction.

She'd accepted, believing that she could trust me and that I had her best wishes at heart, while having no idea what was involved.

"Will we be able to spend...*time* together?" she'd asked, her beautiful brown eyes staring up at me with such endearing innocence...innocence that, despite its appeal, I'd recklessly exploited for my own pleasure.

And then there was her bewilderment the morning she'd come to me in my study after accepting my offer...an offer she'd completely misconstrued.

"But what about my reputation?" she'd murmured with concern, after I'd lifted her onto my lap and kissed her for the very first time.

"Ah...but that's the beauty of being a servant," I'd informed her in all my arrogant complacency. "One doesn't have to worry about such things as reputation."

"Well...you'll damn well worry about it now," I muttered to myself, as the memory of what I'd done the first night we spent together lashed me like a cat-o-nine-tails on bare flesh.

Initially annoyed that she hadn't followed my instructions, I'd quickly relented when I'd sensed her fear. But it hadn't stopped me from laying her bare before me, both emotionally and physically.

"I can't...be with you...like this," she'd whispered, fear and uncertainty written clearly on her face.

"You're refusing me?" I'd retorted, astounded.

"It's not right," she'd murmured even as I'd held her close, revelling in the feel of her supple, curvaceous body pressed tightly to mine.

"Not right?" I'd thought she was joking, my tone amused. But then she'd uttered words that I'd considered most outrageous for a servant.

"We're not...*married*." Her lovely cheeks had flamed with embarrassment, and I'd had the unmitigated gall to ridicule her, rebuking her for her lack of sense.

"I'm not your typical servant, m'lord. I was raised...differently," she'd defended herself...or attempted to.

But I'd been an insensitive fool, an idiot of the lowest order, a selfish, conceited imbecile ignoring the blatantly obvious in my determination to see what I had *wanted* to see, regardless of the abundance of evidence to the contrary.

Pointing out her lack of options and the dangers of her situation, I'd cruelly reminded her of the risks she faced at the hands of ruthless men. Then I'd encircled her wrists with my fingers and *shaken* them.

I deserved to be horsewhipped for that alone.

"They will *force* you, Bella...hurt you," I'd warned.

"And you won't?" she'd asked, her sweet voice trembling.

"No, I won't hurt you...but I can't resist you either," I'd retorted, the memory of my empty promises burning like acid in my veins.

She'd flinched at my words—*flinched*—and I'd sighed indulgently, pulling her into my embrace to comfort and reassure her...the most beautiful, beloved girl I had ever encountered...as if I *deserved* to have her in my arms and life.

Holding to the morals and standards to which she'd been raised, she'd tried to refuse my protection, and I'd all but threatened her.

"I'm not a saint," I'd told her. Oh...how prophetic were my words.

"I'm tired of trying to stay away from you," I'd complained, as if the inconvenience of my self-denial in any way justified my actions.

"You need to understand that if you remain at Worthington Hall, you *will* end up beneath me in my bed. So your options, as I see them," I'd continued, battering her with my words and ignoring her stunned expression, "are to leave, facing certain ruin, or to accept my offer of protection."

Dismounting from Sabre at the edge of the meadow where Bella and I had spent the afternoon the day before, I secured the horse's reins to a tree branch and strode across the flower-strewn grass.

"Aaaarrggghhh!" I bellowed to the overcast skies that were as dark as my heart.

I'd not only broken my promise to protect the girl I loved, I was, in fact, responsible for hurting her in more ways than I could count.

Falling to my knees with my hands fisted on my thighs, the barrage of memories persisted in tormenting me.

...covering her naked body with my own and taking her virginity after telling her that being mine was a better option for her than marriage...

...making love to her on my desk with her skirts hiked up around her waist like she

was a common...

Groaning, I tore at my hair. I could not even *think* the word in connection with Bella. When I recalled the crude and despicable things that Jasper and Emmett had said in her presence, I felt sick to my stomach. But their words were nothing to the things I had expected of her, the things that I had *done* to her.

I'd known she was innocent, but I'd greedily accepted her barely plausible tale, too busy indulging every damned fantasy I'd ever had with the girl of my dreams to consider that things might not be what they seemed...what I wanted them to be.

Remembering the ill-mannered and heartless things I'd said and how I'd ruthlessly manipulated and disrespected her, I groaned and hung my head in despair.

"So, are you tearing your heart out or venting your spleen?" Jasper's query startled me out of my painful reverie. His tone was typically indolent, though he couldn't hide the concern in his eyes as he came to crouch down beside me.

It was not like me to be so unaware of my surroundings, but I'd not even heard his approach.

Shaking my head, I shrugged despondently. "What difference does it make?"

"Well, the first would indicate that you are currently engaged in a monumental episode of self-castigation. The second implies that your anger is directed towards the young lady in question."

"Bella?" I stared at him perplexed. "Why would I be angry with Bella?"

Raising one brow and with a decided smirk curving his lips, he took a moment to answer.

"She did *lie* to you regarding her identity and position in society...repeatedly and over a considerable length of time," he mused sardonically.

"But she had no choice!" I defended her. "She'd witnessed her own father's murder—or so she thought—and been driven from her home in fear for her life. What the hell else should she have done?"

Leaping to my feet, I strode toward my best friend who rapidly backed away, his hands raised defensively in front of him.

"She could have told you the truth," he persisted with what I considered was an extreme lack of caution. "You would have protected her—in a more acceptable manner than the one you chose, I might add—acting in your father's stead."

"She didn't know that!" I shouted. "Don't you remember that first day she served us at breakfast? We were discussing Hunter's good fortune and the foolish chit who'd run away from his offer of marriage. It was *Bella* we were talking about! He'd just shot her father and threatened her with God knows what, and we were applauding his good fortune while she was *standing right there!*"

"Exactly," Jasper surprised me by rejoining, halting so that I could come close enough to strike him if I'd still been so inclined. But the sorrow on his face, while a pale reflection of the pain in my heart, arrested my attention, and my anger slowly drained away.

"She was just an innocent young girl pretending to be something she was not in a desperate attempt to find safety," I rasped, fighting to withhold the tears that threatened to fall.

"I know," Jasper agreed, reaching to grip my shoulder.

"How the hell did we not see...did *I* not see?" I demanded. "I took her to my *bed* and offered to make her my mistress as if I was conveying upon her some great privilege."

Dropping my head in shame, I pulled away from the comfort he was offering and which I did not deserve.

"You fell in love with her, Edward. Love makes fools of us all...or so the poets inform us, though I think they may have the right of it this time."

"You're right about my being a fool, but not because I fell in love with her," I contradicted, looking up to meet his empathetic gaze. "She's astonishing in every way; brave, beautiful, resourceful, courageous. How could I *not* fall in love with her?"

"How, indeed." Jasper nodded, a faint smile returning to his lips.

"But that doesn't justify what I did." I shook my head, my feelings for Bella in no way absolving me of my guilt.

"You thought she was a servant," he offered with a slight shrug.

Sighing, I felt my shoulders slump even lower. "Even if it had been true, that defence doesn't seem enough anymore. You know from my altercation with the earl that I was already reassessing my options. Bella made me look at things...*differently*."

"She does have quite a way with words, doesn't she?" Jasper murmured, and I cocked my head, frowning at his comment.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I visited her in her room and...*spoke* with her the other day," he replied, and I felt the tension return to my muscles. With my hands forming fists of their own accord and my heart pounding in my ears, I took a menacing step toward him.

"Explain yourself," I demanded, and he raised his hands defensively once more.

"Nothing untoward happened, I assure you. I'd been watching the two of you together, and her story didn't add up. I was...*suspicious*." He grimaced, while my eyebrows shot up.

"You knew who she was?"

"No...I never thought for a moment that she might be Hunter's 'runaway bride'. I just didn't believe that she was a servant. I thought she might be a courtesan sent to seduce you, not that I could find a plausible reason for such a move, unless one of your father's political opponents was attempting to discredit you in some way. But I couldn't see an experienced courtesan disguising herself as a scullery maid," he added dryly. "If we were still at war, I would have suspected she was a French spy, but..." He shrugged, spreading his hands wide.

"So what were your conclusions after speaking with her?" I asked, my wariness replaced with curiosity.

"That she is an extraordinary young lady who seemed determined to sacrifice herself rather than see you harmed in any way."

Swallowing hard against the lump in my throat, I nodded for him to continue.

"She gave me quite the tongue lashing," he admitted, his expression chagrined. "Dressed me down in no uncertain terms for assuming that a girl of common heritage has no reputation to protect...and that she would automatically welcome the attentions of a so-called *gentleman*."

Despite the utter misery in my heart, I felt a small smile tug the corner of my lips.

"That sounds like Bella," I mused.

"She also gave me the distinct impression that she had no intention of remaining as your mistress once you were obliged to marry. Didn't seem to think it was *honourable*, even for one such as herself with precious few options available to her...or none that we were aware of."

I felt the blood drain from my face. "So, I was going to lose her either way," I murmured, and it was Jasper's turn to frown.

"You have asked her to marry you...haven't you?" he puzzled.

"She refused me," I muttered, and his jaw dropped.

"She *what*? Well, talk some sense into the girl. It's not like either of you have any choice in the matter. I'm not saying it will be easy, and the price you'll have to pay is exorbitant if you can't gain the King's approval. But you must be married immediately if there is any hope of saving her reputation and preventing her banishment from society."

Grimacing, I told him of Bella's rather ingenious plan to protect my inheritance, placate the earl, secure the votes needed to see the anti-slavery and child labour bills passed, save her reputation and avoid marrying me in the process.

"She informed me that she would rather 'remain single—a spinster—than be wed to a man who has no intention of honouring his vows of love or fidelity'," I quoted bitterly and then sighed. "And put like that, I can't say that I blame her."

"Good Lord." Jasper blinked rapidly, taking it all in. "We really did underestimate her, didn't we?"

"I think we've been underestimating the female of the species in general...regardless of their class or station," I responded dryly, and Jasper nodded, still obviously taken aback.

"Quite," he muttered, looking shaken. "Do you think Miss Swan will be given the opportunity to speak with Alice before her departure, or will your father be inclined to prevent any interaction between the two considering..."

"What are you insinuating?" I hissed. "That Bella's not good enough to associate

with my sister? She's an innocent party in all of this, Jasper. I thought I'd made that clearly understood."

"Yes, indeed," he placated. "That's not my concern at all, I was just wondering if her rather revolutionary ideas about love, marriage and, er...*fidelity* might be contagious."

Snorting, I recognized the root of his concern.

"*Highly* contagious," I retorted. "I've already begun reconsidering the sort of marriage I want for Alice. So if my father doesn't lay down the law in terms of the way my sister is to be treated in the future, you'll have me to answer to."

It was Jasper's turn to pale, but then he straightened his shoulders and assumed the military stance for which he was held in high regard.

"And so you should," he said with a decided nod. "Miss Swan's scolding had already been working on my conscience. I'll own to the fact that I'd never considered there could be another way...conditioning I suppose, not that it makes for a particularly defensible excuse. But I do *care* for your sister, and I agree that she deserves a great deal more in a husband than I had intended providing...fidelity, for a start...and love, no matter how unfashionable that sentiment may be."

"I suspect we're going to start something of a new trend," I mused, and Jasper joined me in exchanging a rueful smile.

"It's odd, isn't it, how abhorrent behaviour can be so readily overlooked simply because it is the established norm," I continued. "But it seems obvious to me, now, that vows made before God, and to the person one is promising to love for a lifetime, should be...*kept*."

"Like I said...revolutionary," Jasper murmured drolly. "You mentioned Bella's mother was a French refugee who fled the Terror. Are you sure she wasn't one of the instigators?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," I shrugged, a vague thought tickling my memory.

"So, does this mean you're not going to meekly adhere to Miss Swan's plan and marry Lady Tanya?" he queried, distracting me.

"Of course not," I growled. "Though you have to admit it's a hell of a predicament. I've got to find a way to placate the earl, engendering his support while at the same

time refusing to marry his daughter—no easy task. Then I have to convince Bella to marry me, despite everything I've said to convince her that agreeing to be my wife would be an appalling idea and hardly in her best interests. At the same time, I need to find a way to protect her reputation, preferably without sacrificing my titles and inheritance in the process...though I doubt the last will be possible.

"You're the strategist, Jasper. Do you have any suggestions?" I all but pleaded, the separation from Bella that loomed before me too painful to contemplate.

For a long time he remained silent, his brow furrowed, and then he nodded slowly.

"There might be something," he offered, eyeing me soberly. "But first, I need to know...are you willing to surrender your position in society to win back Miss Swan?"

"In a heartbeat," I declared. "Bella is my life now."

~AFL~

Hmmm...more self flagellation needed - or is it time for Edward to show the same persistence and determination he used in seducing Bella to sort out this mess and try and win her back? If she'll have him, of course. ;)

xxx TLSue

Travesty

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have a full house, a ridiculously busy calendar and a crazy determination to keep writing regardless.

Thanks so much for all the wonderful reviews. Not the longest of chapters, I'm afraid, but I'm writing in between dealing with a multitude of family, work and health dramas at the moment...so it's better than nothing. ;)

Thanks to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro.

Updated: Sunday, 26th February 2012

Words: 3040

Chapter 51

Travesty

BPOV

"Papa, would you mind if I excused myself for a little while?" I asked later in the afternoon. Having essentially abandoned Angela and Ben on my arrival, I wanted to check on their welfare...amongst other things.

"Of course, my dear, you've had a long journey. Maybe a rest before dinner would be in order?" he suggested, and I exhaled with relief. I had savoured every moment of our reunion, intent on hearing all about my father's experiences during the weeks while I had been away. But I could certainly do with a few moments to myself, as my thoughts were jumping about like a spring lamb frolicking on a sunny day.

It appeared that I was a suitable candidate to be Edward's wife after all...assuming that he actually wanted to marry me and hadn't merely offered out of duty. Before I could consider accepting the position, I would need to discover if he was willing to modify his expectations concerning the required deportment and role of a wife. I might be completely and irrevocably in love with him, but I had no intention of subjecting myself to a lifetime of misery and deceit, regardless of how much I wanted us to be together.

Of course, all my musings were irrelevant if his offer of marriage was no longer

valid. I had rejected it rather soundly.

While Edward's engagement to Lady Tanya had been an informal agreement reached between their two mothers, once he petitioned the King and was granted permission for them to wed, the betrothal would be both binding and public...almost as impossible to break as an actual marriage. A week had passed since I had departed Worthington Hall, and Lord Eleazar had only given Edward a few days to reconsider his decision if the gossip that Angela had heard was correct.

It may well be too late already, but I held to a tiny fragment of hope, unwilling to relinquish the faint possibility that we could have a future together now that I knew it was theoretically possible.

"Papa?" I queried, turning back to face him having reached the drawing room door. "Has there been any news from Worthington Hall?"

It was possible that a letter may have arrived before me, as the post was transported by carriages that journeyed day and night with fresh horses and drivers waiting at each stop.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there has been." Papa nodded. "Two letters arrived the day before yesterday. One was addressed to me...a missive from Carlisle letting me know that you were safely on your way and that his sister would be accompanying you on the journey. The second was for you. I requested Mrs. Waters place it in your room for safekeeping." He eyed me curiously, and I stumbled to answer his unspoken question.

"Oh...it's probably from Lady Alice, Carlisle's daughter. We met briefly before my departure and she expressed an interest in corresponding," I rushed to explain, butterflies doing somersaults in my stomach at the thought of the news she may have to impart.

"Good...good." Papa smiled and waved me off. "I'm glad to hear you're interested in pursuing a friendship with Carlisle's daughter."

"Yes, of course," I murmured, trying to appear nonchalant even though I was in hurry to take my leave. My intention to race straight to my room and read Alice's letter was thwarted, however, by the veritable receiving line of staff awaiting me, all intent on declaring their gratitude for my safe return and personally welcoming me home to Swan Manor. Taking a deep breath and subduing my impatience, I spent time asking after each person and thanking them for the care they'd taken of my father during my absence.

"It was our pleasure, Miss Bella," Mrs. Waters stated emphatically, speaking for the rest of the staff. "Though we're awful sorry we couldn't stop that horrid Lord Hunter from ransacking the place."

"You're alive and well, as is my father—thanks to you all—and that's all that matters," I reassured her with heartfelt gratitude. "Furniture and possessions can be replaced...people can't," I declared sincerely, and she pulled me into another of her wonderfully warm embraces.

I would have to wait to see Jacob and Leah, as neither were in residence at Swan Manor. On returning from Worthington Hall, it had been decided that it was safest if the two young people stayed away from their former home...Leah, to avoid falling prey to Lord Hunter's lecherous ways and Jake for fear that he would be unable to resist assaulting the nobleman if provoked, thereby risking his own safety and freedom in the process. Consequently, Jake had moved into the village and was living with the smith to whom he was apprenticed while Leah had taken a position with one of the neighbouring families.

"Jacob and Leah seem to have reached an understanding, and I wouldn't be surprised if a betrothal isn't announced in the near future," Papa had cautiously informed me when I'd queried their whereabouts, watching my reaction intently. Knowing how close Jake and I had been as children growing up together, and clearly not oblivious to the feelings my friend had harboured for me in recent times, he'd appeared relieved by the joy I'd expressed at the wonderful news.

My hope for my friends was that they would find the love and happiness that they both deserved...though I couldn't help feeling saddened when I wondered if Edward and I would be equally blessed.

With that thought in mind, I made my way to my room to find Angela busy rearranging my expanded wardrobe of dresses.

"Oh...Miss Bella," she cried, and rushed to greet me. "Thank ye so much for inviting us to work in yer lovely home. Everyone is so friendly, and I've been given a room of me own, and Ben has 'is own room above the stables, and Mr. Black has already said that if Ben and me wed at a later date, we'll have our own little place above the new carriage house that's bein' built, and we can even keep workin' 'ere if we have bairns, and yer pa, Sir Charles, is the best employer I've ever 'eard of!"

Laughing at her enthusiastic recital, I drew the excited girl into my arms, relieved that having her accompanying me appeared to have been in her best interests. She pulled back in surprise and then tentatively hugged me in return.

"Thank you, Angela, for agreeing to come with me and for being such a good friend," I assured her, smiling through my tears and holding her close for another moment. When I released her, she flapped her hands in front of her face to ward off the happy tears that were threatening to flow.

"Ooh...we're a right pair, ain't we, miss?" she sniffed, and I nodded in agreement, dabbing at my eyes with the lace handkerchief I'd made sure to have on hand for my homecoming.

Once we'd composed ourselves, Angela excused herself to go and help in the kitchen, promising to return in time to assist me in dressing for dinner. Alone at last, I reacquainted myself with my old room. Bombarded by memories, I took a few moments to reminisce about the life I'd left behind. Glancing at my reflection in the mirror, I was surprised that the changes weren't more obvious, as I no longer felt like the girl I had been before Lord Hunter had come into our lives and tipped it upside down.

The letter from Worthington Hall sat propped up on my dresser, and I stared at it with trepidation. I'd told Papa that it was from Alice, which was most likely true, but my heart began to pound inside my chest with anticipation when I considered the alternative.

Had Edward written to me?

Shaking my head, I dismissed the fanciful idea even before I noted the feminine script adorning the thick, ivory-coloured paper.

Of course Edward hadn't written to me. I'd begged him to let me go, told him there was no future for us in any form and practically ordered him to marry another.

With a sob catching in my throat, I snatched up the letter, quickly breaking the seal and opening it to read.

Dear Bella,

I am very sorry to have to renege on my agreement not to speak of my brother in my correspondence, but it is impossible for me to tell you my news without mentioning him, at least obliquely.

Moving to sit on the edge of my bed, I recalled my last words to Alice, the promise I'd extracted from her in exchange for my agreeing to answer her questions.

What had I been thinking? Since when had ignorance brought me anything but grief?

I needed to be apprised of what was going on back at Worthington Hall...to know if there was any chance for me to alter the course that I had set myself and Edward upon, or if it was too late for the 'us' that I had denied existed.

Taking a deep breath in an attempt to still my trembling hands, I returned my attention to the letter that I suspected held information that would have a profound effect on my future...for good or ill.

As you're already aware from the conversation we had prior to my promising not to mention Edward in my letters to you, he was very upset that you refused his offer of marriage, and he rode out on that huge black stallion of his when you were still visiting with Father in the drawing room. What I didn't know was that Jasper rode after him, even though Father expressly ordered him to stay close by, as Father was intent on reprimanding him—for what, exactly, I don't know—though I am determined to get to the bottom of the matter with your assistance. To my distress and Father's vexation, Edward and Jasper didn't come home until the next day!

When Edward found out that you'd left Worthington Hall, he appeared quite stunned, but then he said it was probably for the best that you had returned to your father, as it was going to take time to sort out the mess that he'd created. Then Father asked him what he was talking about and where he and Jasper had been, at which point, to my complete and utter frustration, I was ushered from the room! There was much shouting, but I was unable to discern what was being said, despite listening diligently at the door.

The next thing I knew, Edward was packing to leave, all grim-faced and tight-lipped...leaving me none the wiser. He departed immediately, having only just returned, and now I have no idea what is going on, and no one will enlighten me.

Father tells me not to worry, and Esme, though very kind towards me, refuses to answer any of my questions, saying that she does not want to usurp my father's authority. I had hoped to speak to Jasper, but he left Worthington Hall not long after Edward, and he never even came to say goodbye!

If I was less of a lady, I would have chased after him and demanded an explanation. But not wanting to risk appearing indecorous, I limited myself to watching his departure through the lace curtain of my room...and my tears. I thought he cared for me, but now I don't know what to think. To add to my confusion, he sat upon his horse and stared up at my window for the longest time

before turning and riding away, though I am certain he did not see me. His valet followed some time later with his belongings in the carriage that he'd arrived in, leading me to believe that he is not planning on returning, so I have no idea when, or if, I shall ever see him again.

Adding to the mystery, Father travelled to visit the Denalis the next day, returning with a foul disposition. When I asked him what was wrong, he once again told me not to worry—an impossibility, I assure you—merely saying that the Earl had a lot to answer for, but that he had faith in Edward to set things right. Then I overheard him telling Esme that it looked like there would be a wedding after all...hopefully more than one. When I requested to know—remarkably politely, considering the circumstances—to whom he was referring, he said that Lady Tanya was to be wed forthwith, but that it was to be a quiet affair.

A quiet affair! I tell you, that does not sound like something Lady Tanya would agree to at all. Of course, as I cannot get a straight answer out of anyone, and it would be impolite of me to ask directly, I can only assume that Edward has insisted on it being so as he is heartbroken over being separated from his true love and having to marry a lady he does not care for. The other possibility I have considered is that Lord Eleazar has made his support of Father's political cause contingent on Edward and Tanya being wed without delay for fear that Edward will change his mind. This seems quite unnecessary as Father says that Edward is finally behaving with honour, so I do not see that he would renege on such an important agreement.

Oh, Bella, I do so wish it was you that Edward was marrying and not Lady Tanya. I realise that one must do one's duty, and it does not appear that Edward has any choice in the matter, but I fear he is making a terrible mistake. I know that this is what you desired, but I can't help feeling that you and Edward were supposed to be together. I am all woe and gloom at the travesty that I see unfolding before me. But the outcome appears inevitable.

After persistent questioning, Father finally admitted that Edward has gone to the King to request permission to wed, confirming my dreadful conclusion. Then Lady Carmen asked for me to visit so that I may assist Tanya to prepare for her imminent matrimony. I was more than a little surprised by the request, as Tanya and I have never been close. But Rosalie, who is Tanya's best friend and would normally have done the honours, has left with Emmett for Scotland, though I heard a rumour that she and Tanya had recently had a falling out, so I'm not sure if she would have helped her after all. I would dearly like to decline, but I feel that I must do what I can to support my brother, though I am seriously considering feigning an illness to avoid such an unpleasant duty.

Please forgive me, Bella, and I do hope we can still be friends. I realise that it is too much to ask that you would still honour our agreement considering that I have so thoroughly broken my end of the bargain and mentioned Edward repeatedly—though honestly, what else could I do?—but if you could find it in your heart to enlighten me as to the actions that have precipitated these events, I would be eternally grateful.

Your friend,

Alice

P.S. If I do not hear from you, I will assume that you no longer desire a friendship or for us to correspond, and though I would be greatly saddened by such a decision, I promise to honour your wishes.

I read through the letter twice in an attempt to make sense of Alice's somewhat garbled rendition of events. Only then did I allow the tears that had been threatening from the first mention of Edward's name to fall.

Edward had taken my advice and gone straight to the Earl of Denali to repair the breach and arrange to marry Lady Tanya. I did not blame him. It was the logical thing for him to do, and I had made my wishes clear.

But oh...how my heart ached at the thought of him in the arms of another.

When I no longer ran the risk of soaking the paper with my tears, I read through it a third time and found myself puzzling as to why the wedding was required to occur 'forthwith'.

Not that it mattered when the ceremony occurred. The revelation of my unexpected heritage had come too late. Edward had gone to the King to request permission to wed, and once it was granted and the betrothal became official...there would be no turning back.

Disconsolate, I crossed to the window and stared out into the gloomy, rain-soaked afternoon. Following a dripping trail of water down the window-pane with my finger, I thought of Edward...the way his silky bronze locks would not be tamed despite the best intentions of his valet. I pictured him brushing the hair back from his high, wide forehead and gazing at me with eyes that were dark and intense...hot and sensual...soft and loving...dependant on his mood.

Unable to stifle the sobs that wracked my chest, I recalled his smile...the one that

mesmerised me, warmed me from within and inevitably drew an answering smile from my lips...and my heart.

Sighing, I knew that I could not blame Edward for the way he'd responded to my declaration. I'd given him no choice. Even if I'd managed to get word to him of my unexpectedly altered station, we still would have had the earl's threats to deal with and their potentially devastating repercussions. Added to that, I could not be sure that the Denalis wouldn't recognise me in future. Without their cooperation, I ran the risk of the events of the last two months becoming public and my father learning of my disgrace...something I wished to avoid at all costs.

But if Edward had known that marriage to me would not have robbed him of his heritage, we might have been able to find a way to be together...before it was too late.

"Oh, Edward," I whispered, leaning my head against the cool pane, my breath fogging the glass. "If only you had waited...if only you had not believed me so easily and had fought for me...for us."

~AFL~

If only indeed...

xxx TLSue

Purpose

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have an imagination that does tend to take me off on tangents!

Thanks for all the wonderful, encouraging reviews. Sorry I don't reply more often, but I read every one and enjoy them (well...most of them) immensely!

I've lost a couple of readers lately for 'letting the story drag', but one of the things I love about fanfic is being able to take a bit of extra time to develop the characters, explore their backgrounds, build the tension and enjoy some mini HEAs along the way. Plus—let's face it—there's space to include lots of extra lemons. But just a warning that this is one of those 'tying up the loose ends' sort of chapters.

Thanks, as ever, to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro.

Updated: Thursday, 1st March 2012

Words: 3141

Chapter 52

Purpose

BPOV

By all appearances, dinner with my father and Lady Penelope was turning out to be a success, and as the evening progressed, my confidence grew. I listened politely to their tales—mostly pleasant and amusing, though occasionally harrowing when Lady Penelope questioned my father about recent events. Contributing when required to the conversation, I smiled where it seemed appropriate and did my utmost to hide the fact that my heart was not merely broken but...missing.

I thought I was doing quite well at keeping up a good front and hiding my true feelings. But after one too many lapses, when my mind wandered and I was tardy in my responses, Lady Penelope eyed me considerably.

"So, Isabella, what did you make of my nephew, Edward?" she asked, and I

startled so badly that I dropped my fork, sending it clattering to the ground. Tyler, our one and only footman, rushed to pick it up and fetch me a clean utensil.

"The marquess?" I replied when I'd regained my composure, doing my best to affect a nonchalant expression while hiding my trembling hands in my lap.

"Yes...he's a very handsome young man, wouldn't you say?" Her tone was not unkind, but there was no missing the speculative slant to her brow. Swallowing hard, I knew I would have to do better if I were to be successful in allaying her suspicions.

"Oh, yes...very handsome," I agreed. Denying the obvious seemed unwise. "There was much discussion amongst the serving girls as to who was the most attractive: Lord Jasper, Lord Emmett or Lord Edward." I attempted a smile to cover the pain I felt at saying his name, though I feared my lips quivered.

"Pity the boy's a darn fool," Papa muttered and then blushed. "Forgive my language, Lady Penelope, but I'm afraid your nephew can't be very bright if he mistook Bella for a servant for two whole months."

"That does seem remarkable." Lady Penelope appeared to agree with my father's assessment. "Are you sure he didn't guess that you were a lady of quality, Isabella?" She addressed her question my way, and I shook my head.

"No, never," I answered truthfully, but then followed it up with a lie. "Not that I spent much time in his presence, as I worked in the kitchen mostly," I finished wanly.

"It's just a hobby, of course, but Bella was trained by one of the best pastry chefs to ever come out of France." Papa beamed, enjoying the opportunity to boast to one of our peers about my unusual talent. He'd informed Lady Penelope of my heritage and more than I expected about my stay at Worthington Hall.

"How extraordinary." Lady Penelope continued to eye me curiously, no doubt still amazed by the revelation of the double life I'd led while awaiting her brother's return. Carlisle's letter, introducing me and requesting her chaperonage for my journey home, had been purposefully vague regarding the nature of my stay in his home. But Papa didn't seem concerned about her knowing of my misadventure...not that he was aware of the full story, of course.

"I admit to having harboured a vague hope that Bella and Edward might come to an agreement if given the opportunity to get to know one another," my father

commented, and it took all my recently developed skill at subterfuge not to give away the extent of my shock.

"Papa?" I queried hoarsely, quite unable to refrain from making some small comment at his words. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Just that I thought you two might make a good match." He eyed me purposefully, signalling for me to be careful what I said in front of Lady Penelope. I stared at him blankly, wondering what exactly I was supposed to be being discreet about. But then I recalled his words from earlier in the afternoon...how he wanted me to marry for love, like he and my mother had done...and I realised he had been hoping that Edward and I would meet and fall in love. Of course, he would not want me to mention such an unconventional notion in front of our guest.

Gasping at the pain of his revelation, I covered my response with a coughing fit, taking a moment to regain my composure.

"Oh, what a splendid idea, Sir Charles," Lady Penelope exclaimed, politely ignoring the silent message Papa had sent my way. "You and Carlisle are such good friends. How fortuitous would it be if your children were to marry? You could be grandparents together!"

Papa blushed a little at that notion, harrumphing before he spoke. "Yes...well...I hadn't thought quite that far," he mumbled, though it was his turn for a speculative gleam to appear in his eye.

"I hardly think that someone of the marquess's position in society would be interested in someone like me," I replied automatically, wanting to put a stop to this most painful of conversations as quickly as possible.

"Nonsense," Papa contradicted. "You're beautiful, intelligent *and* related to royalty. The boy's going to kick himself when he realises what an opportunity he let pass by just because he couldn't see beyond a servant's uniform to recognise the lady of exceptional quality beneath."

Oh...Edward had well and truly seen beneath the uniform, I mused, the scandalous thought causing my cheeks to flush. Ducking my head, I busied myself with my dessert, applying myself to each bite of the strawberry tart as if I had never tasted anything finer. In actual fact, it was like dirt in my mouth. I chewed mechanically, swallowing each suddenly dry morsel with a sip of the wine Papa had served me in honour of my homecoming.

"Well, it's not too late," Lady Penelope insisted. "I'll make the introduction myself when Bella comes up to London for the season. She is most welcome to stay with me at my townhouse. In fact, I'd be happy to act as chaperone and introduce her to society."

Papa seemed taken with the idea while I did my best to stifle the splutter of dismay that had caught in my throat at her suggestion.

"What a jolly surprise it will be when Edward discovers the young lass he'd seen working as a maid in his father's home is actually your daughter and a cousin to our very own King! I wouldn't be surprised if there isn't a betrothal announced before the season is over." Lady Penelope's smile was quite genuine, but I stared at her in horror.

"That's impossible," I blurted. "Edward is betrothed already...I mean *Lord* Edward... to Lady Tanya Denali. They're to be married forthwith."

My declaration was met with stunned silence and the raising of both my father's and Lady Penelope's eyebrows.

"Really?" She sounded disbelieving. "I haven't been informed of such a development. Are you sure?"

"Quite," I murmured softly, deliberately modifying my tone. "It came up in conversation when Uncle Carlisle formally introduced me to everyone just before my return home. And Lady Alice mentioned it again in a letter she wrote after I had left but which arrived at Swan Manor before me."

"I'm surprised Carlisle didn't speak of it in the letter he wrote to me," Papa mused thoughtfully. To my relief, he shrugged, seeming to dismiss the matter. "I'm sure it's for the best," he continued. "I can't see my Bella enjoying the life of a marchioness...all that formality and public scrutiny. Though I suppose you'll have to get used to increased attention when your heritage and connections are revealed," he addressed me directly. "Regardless, I would never agree to your marrying a simpleton."

I forced myself to laugh at his words, but Lady Penelope did not join in.

"Well I, for one, am thoroughly disappointed," she stated soberly. "I care for Edward a great deal and have always thought of him as a highly intelligent, sensitive individual. His mother may have orchestrated the match virtually before they were born, but it has always been obvious to me that Edward and Tanya were not well

suited. I'm surprised Carlisle has agreed to the union. I do hope he hasn't sacrificed his son's happiness to his political ambitions, no matter how noble they may be."

Papa eyed Lady Penelope curiously and then cautiously sounded out her opinion on the potential merits of affection and sentiment in family life. Her spirited defence of the keeping of one's marital vows—a cause now close to my heart—and the joy she expressed over her brother's recent good fortune at finding love in his later years clearly impressed my father. While I was pleased to see the colour and animation returning to his face, wiping years off his appearance in the process, I excused myself at the earliest opportunity, citing residual fatigue from the journey as my excuse.

After kissing papa's cheek once again, I bid him and Lady Penelope goodnight. I left them ensconced in a heated discussion regarding the potential merits and ramifications along with the sweeping changes to society that would ensue if the laws that Carlisle supported were passed.

"Isabella," Lady Penelope called when I reached the door. "I'd like you to know that I think you would have made Edward a far more suitable bride than Lady Tanya, and I'm sorry the two of you didn't get to meet under more congenial circumstances."

Flustered and fighting tears, I was unable to compose a proper reply. Making do with a curtsy, I turned and fled.

~AFL~

Lady Penelope stayed for three more days, the mutual admiration and bond of friendship growing between her and my father a bittersweet development. While I would never deny Papa the opportunity to find happiness after the many years he had spent grieving the loss of my mother, the thought of a union between him and Lady Penelope was not one that filled me with joy. It wasn't that I disliked or disapproved of her in any way—far from it. The more time I spent with her, the more I found to both respect and admire—but a permanent connection with Edward's family could only cause me great sorrow. The mere thought of hearing news of him on a regular basis, or the possibility of encountering him—and his wife—at combined family gatherings caused the pain in my chest to flare like a torch sparked from a fire.

I worked hard to keep my feelings hidden, determined not to distress my father or discourage him from pursuing this path if he so desired. But when he and Lady Penelope made arrangements for me to stay with her for the latter end of the

season, I panicked. Fortunately, inspiration struck—born of terror, no doubt—and I declared that I could not bear to be parted from my father after our recent harrowing separation.

"Then I'll just have to come up to London with you," he stated, surprising us both.

"How lovely." Lady Penelope beamed her happiness at his suggestion while I stared, aghast. "I'd offer to have you both stay with me, but that would appear unseemly," she continued in a musing tone. "I'm sure Carlisle would be most pleased to have you visit with him. Could Isabella still reside with me, Charles? She could help me entertain my boys, who will be visiting during their school break, and I should enjoy the company of such a lovely young lady. The arrangement would also give you ample excuse to visit me as often as you wished."

My father blushed and stammered at her comment and then to my horror...agreed.

"But...but Papa," I eyed him pointedly, while shooting Lady Penelope a placating smile. "That would mean travelling...away from Forkston...a *long* way away from Forkston."

"I know, my dear," he responded. "I've explained to Penelope about my...limitations, but it's time I overcame them, don't you think?"

Unable to conceive of a plausible argument, I smiled wanly and began to mentally prepare myself for the ordeal ahead. I would be introduced to the King...my *cousin*... and be presented to society in general. At least with my father and Lady Penelope by my side, I could hopefully dispel the dreadful lies that Lord Hunter had spread to disparage my reputation, though if the truth of my recent behaviour was ever to become public knowledge, I feared the new round of rumours would make the old ones pale into insignificance.

My best chance of surviving the coming trial was dependant on not having to face Edward, and though my heart pained me at the thought, I hoped he was planning on taking his new bride on a honeymoon abroad. Coming face to face with the man that I loved and had lost was simply more than I could endure.

After Lady Penelope's departure, I struggled to keep the melancholy at bay. Angela, being aware of the cause of my sorrow, was a great comfort, and she attempted to distract me when my courage began to falter. Her suggestion that I might like to busy myself with a return to my painting backfired, however, when I thought of all the times Edward had posed for me. Remembering the portrait I had

intended to paint of him and the pictures hidden away in the bottom drawer of my bureau—pictures I'd not been able to face—I could contain my grief no longer and began to weep.

With the evidence of my tears clear upon my face—swollen eyes and red cheeks—I was forced to plead a headache as an excuse not to come down for dinner. Papa would have been determined to get to the bottom of their cause, and I was equally determined to avoid lying to him any more than was absolutely necessary.

Writing to Alice was...difficult. I put it off for a few days, and would have left it indefinitely, but I didn't want her to think that I was angry with her or rejecting her offer of friendship. When I finally sat down to write, I did not know what to say at first. But I eventually told her—with marked circumspection—how I had come to care for her brother dearly and wished him only the very best of happiness. I almost didn't inform her of the unexpected news of my heritage, but Lady Penelope had received Papa's permission to tell Carlisle and Lady Esme when she next encountered them, so there didn't seem to be any point hiding the news.

I found myself wondering how Edward would react when he heard.

Would he be upset...angry...hurt? Or would he have moved on already, caught up in his upcoming nuptials or newlywed status if they had already occurred? How long he would wait before beginning his search to find a suitable woman to replace me as his mistress?

Wincing, I rebuked myself for the unkind thought.

Edward had loved me, of that I was in no doubt. At the end he'd even said that his views on marriage had changed...that *I* had helped to change them. But what such a change in his beliefs and values augured for his future, I did not know. I'd written the truth to Alice, and found myself praying for his happiness even though it meant I expected him to find it without me.

My acting abilities, as I preferred to think of them—the knowledge that I was becoming more and more expert at practising deceit did not sit well with me—were thankfully sufficient to fool my father, the household staff and the neighbours that came to visit. If I occasionally appeared a little pale or listless, they were quick to put it down to my needing time to recover from my ordeal.

I asked Papa not to boast to anyone else of my escapades, reminding him that most members of society would be scandalised at the thought of one of their own masquerading as a servant and not impressed by my ingenuity as he and fortunately

Lady Penelope had been. He understood immediately, and we created a fiction that I had gone to stay with Miss Brewer, my previous governess, only returning when Carlisle came to fetch me.

Jacob and Leah, unsurprisingly, were the most difficult to fool, and I almost broke down and told them the truth of what had occurred during my time at Worthington Hall. But I knew it would serve no purpose other than to distress them, as what was done was done. I could imagine Jacob blaming himself for not having stayed to protect me, and I didn't want to dampen their joy.

"I'm so happy for you both," I gushed at the news of their betrothal. Leah beamed and hugged me close while Jacob took my hand in his, eyeing me solemnly.

"Some things are meant to be and some aren't," he murmured when Leah went to visit her mother in the kitchen.

I nodded in understanding, tears pricking at my eyes as I thought of how his words were also applicable to my situation with Edward.

Gasping, I caught myself around the middle—just *thinking* his name was painful—placating Jake with another smoothly told lie and blaming my indisposition on an errant stomach cramp. He seemed suspicious, but I distracted him with the news that I'd been granted permission to impart. My father was gifting the young couple with a cottage of their own, a small parcel of land and an endowment to help see to their futures in gratitude for their helping me escape from Lord Hunter.

Jake was flummoxed, though Leah's squeals of delight more than made up for his speechlessness when I told her the news. Their happiness dulled the edges on my sorrow, planting the seeds of an idea for how I could make my own future more bearable.

I might not be able to attain my own happily ever after, but I could make a difference in the lives of others, in particular the myriad of young girls who I knew at this very moment were suffering as Angela had...as I could have been made to if Edward had not determined to protect me.

Suddenly, my impending trip to London did not seem quite so intolerable or pointless an undertaking. Edward had mentioned that he thought Lady Esme was involved in supporting charities that assisted young girls to escape from abusive situations. After hearing Lady Penelope's impassioned views on protecting the defenceless, my hope was that she would also be aware of such institutions. With her assistance, I wanted to contact the individuals engaged in the fight against the

evil practices that our so-called civilised society allowed.

With the influence that my father predicted would come with my new station, and the wealth that he assured me was mine to do with as I wished, I was determined to make a difference in the world.

The future stretched before me—lonely...without Edward—but not without purpose.

~AFL~

As much as I love Bella in Twilight, I found her supposedly 'supernatural' grief response to losing Edward in New Moon both distressing and downright frustrating. While A Forbidden Love's Bella is equally heartbroken, I prefer not to see her turn into a complete zombie. Helping others is not a magic wand to make grief and depression disappear, but it certainly helps. IMHO...

xxx TLSue

PS...There's a change of pace next chapter...I promise!

Visitors

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have a contrary computer, a dodgy internet connection and a very short fuse where FFn is concerned after the last couple of weeks. Grrr...But my arm is heaps better and I'm off to the beach this afternoon, so life's not all bad. :D

Thank you so much to all my wonderful reviewers for all their continued encouragement and support. Sorry I'm not able to reply very often (not at all these last few days due to aforementioned computer/internet/FFn issues), but I read every review, and they not only make me smile...they inspire me to keep writing. ;)

Welcome to all the new readers, and thanks to those taking the time to review on their read through. That's very sweet of you!

Thanks to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for all their support.

Updated: Sunday, 4th March 2012

Words: 4612

Chapter 53

Visitors

BPOV

"Miss Bella...Miss Bella..." Angela's call reached my ears, snapping me from the sleepy daydream into which I'd unwisely allowed myself to fall. My recalcitrant sub-conscious seemed determined to recreate every moment of my last night with Edward, a memory I was trying to avoid but appeared destined to revisit.

Shaded from the afternoon sun by the branches of a willow that hung out over the water, I'd allowed myself to be lulled into somnolence. The creek that ran behind our house was a favourite visiting place of mine, and I would often sit on the grassy bank and watch the light play on the water. On this occasion, almost a week after Lady Penelope's departure and a few weeks shy of when Papa and I were to embark on our journey to London, I'd been determined to enjoy the late spring sunshine and

not give way to tears.

Weeping beneath the willow was such a cliché, but oh...how I missed Edward.

He was in my thoughts constantly; images of him...alone or the two of us together, conversations we'd shared, memories of the way he'd made me feel so loved indelibly printed on my mind. To add to my melancholy, wherever I looked, I was met with painful reminders, despite the fact that Edward had never even visited my home.

The verdant greens of the fields, bushes and trees became the colour of his eyes; a light jade when he was happy; a leafy shade when he was debating some point of poetry or history or law; and a pure emerald when he gazed upon me with passion and desire. I avoided the forest, the deep, dark greens a reminder of the pain I'd seen in his eyes when I'd told him I didn't want to be married to someone like him...that I didn't want us to be together despite the sacrifices he had offered to make.

Knowing what I knew now, along with my memories, I was burdened with regret.

Gathering my sketchbook and pastels into a bundle, my eyes caught on the picture I'd been drawing before my fickle imagination had overcome me. I'd not set out to create another image of Edward—my original plan being to try my hand at landscape and to see if I could capture the colours of the spring flowers and foliage reflected in the water—but my fingers had deviated from the plan, intent on bringing the images that tormented my mind to life in living colour. The warm reds and browns of the tree trunks lining the far bank of the river had reminded me of the bronze of Edward's hair, and before I knew it, the landscape had become a portrait of my lost love...a dangerous one that if I was wise I would destroy.

But, of course, I wouldn't.

I'd hide it away with the other pictures I'd drawn of Edward.

This particular image was the memory I'd been futilely attempting to avoid brought to life...the expression on Edward's face the night I'd done my best to show him the depth and intensity of my love, knowing as I did that our days together were numbered. I'd not expected things to come to an end so quickly, but it had only been another day and a half before we had seen each other for the very last time.

At least that was what I hoped.

Seeing Edward again, knowing that we could never be together, was not an encounter I could imagine ending well for my bruised and battered heart.

"Miss Bella, ye must come quickly...there be visitors on their way...a fancy carriage driving up to the manor," Angela panted breathlessly as she came running down the sloping bank, reaching my location just as I finished packing away the evidence of my afternoon's folly. An unladylike groan and a decided slump of my shoulders was my response to her announcement.

"Not *more* visitors," I grumbled while retying my bonnet. Picking up my skirts with one hand, my basket in the other, I made my reluctant way up the hill towards home.

We'd had barely a moment's peace since Lady Penelope's departure. Once word of my return and my father's improving health had spread through the village, we'd been graced by a seemingly endless stream of visitors. To a person, they'd been intent on offering their commiserations for our time of suffering while at the same time equally fixed on satisfying their curiosity regarding our present circumstance.

Determined to present a picture of the ladylike and dutiful daughter, perfectly recovered from her ordeal, I'd done my best to appear coolly composed. But my patience was wearing thin.

We'd been visited by every member of society in the district, some more than once, along with a senior member of the London constabulary soon after my return. I'd been surprised to discover that my statement was required, my version of events poked and prodded from every angle. To my relief, how I had comported myself during my time away from Swan Manor had not been of interest to the detective, but he'd seemed determined to ensure that there were no inconsistencies in the stories told by my father, his employees and me.

Bringing such serious an accusation as attempted murder against the heir to a barony was not done lightly, though it appeared that Carlisle, the Duke of Worthington's unconditional support gave gravitas to our cause.

All in all, the experience had not been as trying as I'd expected, though I'd been relieved when it was over and the detective had left us with assurances that Lord Hunter would be imprisoned and facing prosecution without delay. This revelation had been a shock to us all, as we'd not unreasonably assumed that he was already incarcerated. It appeared that Lord Hunter was a slippery fellow, and we awaited confirmation of his capture with great anticipation.

It was not to be, and it was with considerable alarm that we received the news, via the London papers, that he had somehow managed to evade capture.

"Now, miss, there's nothing to worry about," the detective had insisted, having returned to personally offer his apologies and assurances. "You'll not be bothered by the likes of Lord Hunter again. His father, the Baron of Penn, has disinherited him...perfectly understandable considering the circumstances. Hunter's cleared out his bank accounts and is long gone, mark my words. Off to the Americas or Antipodes, that one. He won't be showing his face in polite society again, I guarantee it."

Papa thanked the detective for his efforts, but he'd not been able to completely hide the worry I saw lurking in his eyes. It was done subtly, but I was not unaware of the increased security that had been in place since my return home or the fact that I was rarely left alone. When I'd informed my father of my plans to sit and draw by the creek, I'd been unsurprised to note that he'd diverted some of the farm workers to a field nearby...a surreptitious sentry of sorts.

Since the detective's second visit a few days earlier, our bucolic idyll had gone uninterrupted...until now. Cresting the hill, I wondered who else there was left to come calling.

A strangled cry was drawn from my throat when I sighted the carriage drawing to a halt before our front portico.

"Ooh...Miss Bella. That don't look like a carriage belonging to any of the local gentry," Angela accurately surmised. "In fact...it kind of reminds me of one of the Duke's fancy rigs."

Observing the enormous carriage pulled by six black horses, with not one but *two* drivers perched high at the front and a groomsman at the rear, I could do little but nod dumbly in agreement.

It looked like the carriage Edward had sent for to return us to Worthington Hall after we'd dined together in the Inn at Worthy.

Rushing as quickly as I was able without breaking into an unladylike and consequently unforgiveable run, I made my way across the field to the road below. My heart beat loudly in my chest, but the pain I expected to feel at the possibility of seeing him again was replaced by burgeoning hope.

Had he come for me?

Was it not too late after all?

But then my keen eyes discerned the heraldry on the door of the carriage, and my hopes faded as quickly as they'd formed.

The carriage belonged to Uncle Carlisle, the Worthington crest similar but distinct from that of the Marquess of Masen.

Handing Angela my basket, I took a moment to compose my features and a few deep breaths to ward off the tears that suddenly threatened to fall. Of course Edward had not come for me...he was married to another, or at the very least, betrothed. It had been foolish of me to think such a thing even for a moment, but my heart was not yet ready to surrender to the cruel logic of reality.

With a gracious smile fixed firmly in place, I nodded to the driver and grooms being greeted enthusiastically by Ben. He'd come rushing from his work on the nearly completed new carriage house, with Billy Black not far behind him. It was only when I recognised their faces and noted their puzzled expressions that I realised my dilemma.

They knew me as Belinda Brown...not Miss Isabella Swan, and my smile faltered as I wondered how on earth I was going to prevent a disaster from occurring. It seemed incomprehensible that Carlisle had not thought the matter through.

"We'll just settle the horses and I'll take the lads for a tour of the new carriage house and stables, Miss Bella," Ben called, eyeing me deliberately and signalling that he was aware of my predicament.

"Thank you, Ben. That would be appreciated," I returned, my voice tremulous for a variety of reasons.

Stepping close enough to whisper, he added in an aside, "I'll spin 'em a yarn, miss, so they don't accidentally give the game away to yer father or the other servants."

I nodded my thanks, wondering what story he could possibly tell to explain the incongruous events of the previous months. With no little trepidation, I turned to face the house, my curiosity at the purpose of Carlisle's visit competing with my concern. Opening the front door, I took a deep breath in preparation. But to my consternation, it was not Carlisle or even Lady Esme that I encountered when I entered the foyer to my home, but Lady Alice, her squeals all but rendering me deaf.

"Oh....thank goodness, you're alive, you're alive," she cried, hugging and shaking

me in turns.

We were alone except for Mrs Waters, who had welcomed Alice into the house. Papa, I recalled, had gone fishing with Harry and would not be home until later in the day.

"Why ever would I *not* be alive?" I queried, disentangling myself from Alice's effusive embrace and leading her through to the drawing room where I smiled my reassurance at Mrs Waters before waving her off.

"Where are your father and Lady Esme?" I queried when we were alone.

"In London. I came without them, but I'll tell you about that later," Alice offered as we took our seats together on the settee.

I stared at her in astonishment. "You travelled here unchaperoned?"

"What? No...of course not. I brought Great Aunt Mildred. She doesn't do anything but sleep anyway...which is where she is now, sleeping in the carriage with my maid watching over her, so there's no need to worry. Now, as to why I thought you were dead...I had a dream, Bella, a horribly vivid dream!"

"You came all the way to Forkston—*dragging along your poor, elderly aunt and without your parents*—because you dreamed that I had died?" I asked incredulously.

"No, of course not, silly," Alice giggled. "I only just dreamed that in the carriage when I was dozing a little while ago, but it was so very real that I worried it was true. I dreamed that you were so heartbroken over losing Edward that you jumped off a cliff! Can you imagine such a thing?"

I stared at her nonplussed, at a loss as to how to reply.

"Please tell me it's not true, that you're not planning on throwing yourself into the sea from a dreadful height because you cannot bear to live another day without your one true love...though it would be terribly romantic, don't you think?"

"Foolhardy and tragic, I would have said," I answered drolly. "You need not worry on my account, Alice," I assured her.

"Really...you're sure there aren't any cliffs nearby that have been calling to you, promising you one last hallucinatory glimpse of Edward before you plunge to your death?"

"None that I know of." I shook my head, Alice appearing crestfallen rather than pleased with my answer. "I can't deny that I am quite heartbroken, but I have no intention of killing myself," I denied...though I had to admit, Alice's melodramatic alternative to the lonely life that stretched before me was just a tad tempting. "It would be a terribly unkind thing to do to my father and friends," I informed her with deliberation, reminding myself in the process. "Besides, it was my choice to refuse Edward's offer, and I am determined to make something of my life...alone."

Alice's face lit up at my final words. "But that's why I'm here," she declared. "So that you don't have to be alone!"

"You've come to keep me company?" I stared at her blankly.

"No, I've come to take you to Edward, to rescue him from doing something even more imprudent than throwing oneself off a cliff."

Closing my eyes in the face of Alice's melodramatic declaration, I wrapped my arms around my middle to try and ward off the pain of her words.

"Edward has made his choice," I whispered. "It is too late for me to intervene. It would only cause a scandal and add more suffering to our sorrow."

"But that's where you're wrong," Alice insisted determinedly, and my eyes popped open. "Well actually, I'm the one that was wrong, and I promise, you'll have my humble and most sincere apology in due course...but we don't have time right now."

Frowning, I puzzled over her words. "How were you wrong?"

"Tanya didn't have to marry in a hurry because Edward was impatient or because the earl was worried that Edward would change his mind. It's because she is with child!" she declared triumphantly.

Her words were like a blow to my chest, and the breath literally rushed from my lungs.

"Lady Tanya is going to have a baby?" I whimpered, and Alice nodded excitedly.

"Yes! The whole 'ice maiden' persona was a ruse. She's not like Rosalie at all, which makes me wonder if Rosalie is pretending also, but there's no way of discovering the truth at present since she's gone with Emmett to the north of Scotland...though I'm sure she is *feeling* the cold because of the dreadful location, which is quite different to her *being* cold because she lacks feeling, if you

understand my meaning," Alice mused.

It took me a moment to make sense of her words—her speech even more convoluted than her writing.

"But I didn't think that Edward was fond of Lady Tanya," I managed to utter, forcing the words past the gaping hole in my chest.

"He's not." Alice grimaced with distaste but then her pretty features lit with a smile. "He loves you...any fool can see that. Which is why this is such wonderful news."

"Edward loves me, but he must marry Lady Tanya because she is with child. And you think that is wonderful news?"

"Well...that's what the earl *wanted* to happen and why he was pushing for the wedding to occur quickly to avoid the disgrace. My goodness, Father was *not* impressed with his friend over that, I can tell you!"

"I would have thought he'd be more displeased with Edward?" I murmured faintly.

Alice's smile faded and her shoulders slumped. "Well...he's not too happy with him either because he wasn't willing to wait, though at least he acknowledged that Edward is trying to do the honourable thing."

"By going to the King to ask permission to marry?" I asked.

"Yes." Alice beamed. "But Father received a letter from him saying that the King was sick with some ailment, and by the time he was up to receiving visitors and accepting petitions, Parliament was in session—which is where Father has gone, of course—so Edward's meeting with the sovereign has been delayed, though that could change at any time. We must hurry if we are to get to Edward before he sees the King and prevent him from making a terrible mistake!"

I stared at Alice in dismay.

"Alice, it's not a mistake. If Lady Tanya is with child, then the honourable thing for Edward to do is to *marry* her," I stated sombrely, trying not to picture the two of them together...and failing.

By my calculations, she must be fairly advanced in her confinement, as I was fairly certain Edward had not left Worthington Hall while I was in residence...unless the

tryst had occurred at the time of the hunt. Not having served the guests—other than my illfated excursion into the courtyard—I wasn't sure if Lady Tanya had been in attendance. Though I couldn't imagine she would have missed an opportunity to further her claim on the man that she already considered her own. Her actions may well have been intentional...a way of forcing Edward's hand.

My anger roused towards her at the bitter thought, but then I reminded myself—*painfully*—that Edward must have played his part. His precautions clearly hadn't worked in that instance...or instances.

Looking up, I saw that Alice was staring at me, perplexed.

"Bella, Edward can't marry Lady Tanya...not that he'd want to...as she wed Mr. Hornsby, the younger son of Viscount Winters, last week."

"What?" I startled, bewildered. "Why would she do that?"

"Because he's the father of her baby, of course. It wasn't as if the earl could pass it off as anyone else's once the deception had been uncovered."

"Mr. Hornsby is the father of Lady Tanya's baby," I repeated, a faint hope impinging on my beleaguered senses. Like a flickering light, it penetrated the mantle of betrayal and despair that had cloaked me at her words.

"Yes...He's very handsome, by all accounts, but not at all suitable to be wed to the daughter of an earl. He's not a lord, has only a very modest living and was destined for the church...though I'm not sure if they'll have him now," she pondered, a frown marring her brow.

"Lady Tanya fell in love with a curate?" My voice ended on a squeak.

"Well...I don't know that I'd put it quite like that." Alice smirked, the expression reminding me so much of Edward that I blinked in surprise. "I don't think Tanya had any intention of ending up the wife of a prospective vicar—not that Mr. Hornsby seems particularly suitable for the role—or with child for that matter," she continued.

"Apparently, he wasn't the first young man with whom she has chosen to dally. Jasper was suspicious about the earl's sudden insistence that the betrothal be ratified and the wedding occur straight away—though how he knew about her penchant for seduction, I can't bear to think—and he and Edward went to confront Lady Tanya. She initially tried to deny that there'd been any impropriety but

eventually bowed to pressure and confessed all. Edward was furious that she and the earl were intending to pass the babe off as his, and the earl had no choice but to release Edward from his obligation. At the same time, he agreed to support Father's political cause in exchange for Edward's and Jasper's discretion regarding his daughter's *indiscretion*."

My mouth opened and closed several times, but no sound came out.

"Edward doesn't have to marry Lady Tanya," I eventually murmured, stunned.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," Alice chirped cheerily, though I wasn't quite ready to accept her words as gospel. In hindsight, it appeared that the conclusions she'd drawn in her letter from the snippets of information she'd been told or overheard were vastly incorrect. Consequently, I couldn't be sure the information she was currently imparting was any more accurate.

"How do you know all this?" I demanded, suspicion and hope warring within me.

"Well..." She leaned in conspiratorially. "After you left, I began to ponder. Even though I was basically in the dark as to what had gone on between you and my brother, one thing was apparent. Gentlemen treat servant girls altogether differently than ladies of our class, so I asked my maid, Sally, what she knew. At first, she was reluctant to discuss such matters with me, but I can be very persistent when I want something, and she told me everything she knew...which wasn't much. So I had the brilliant idea to ask one of the maids at Worthington Hall what she knew of such things, and she told me everything I wanted to know...and a few things I didn't!

"Oh, Bella." Alice reached to pat my arm, her eyes suddenly shiny with tears. "I am so sorry about the way my brother treated you, though—in his defence—he did dive in amongst the stampeding horses when you were at risk of being trampled the day of the hunt, and then he rescued you from those awful ruffians in the market, riding away with you upon his black stallion. I can't say that I blame you for succumbing to his charms after he behaved so gallantly. If I'd found myself at risk of violent death and Lord Jasper had rescued me in such a heroic manner, I'm not at all sure I would have been able to resist him either...though I might be able to now that I know what's involved."

She pulled a face, and I felt a blush heating my cheeks. It appeared that whoever had been called upon to relieve Alice of her ignorance and enlighten her as to my romantic ruin in the process—my money was on Jessica—had spared little in the telling.

"Yes...well..." I stammered, needing a moment to compose my, by now, highly scattered thoughts. "What I need to know is how you came by your knowledge of Lady Tanya's, er...news, and how you can be sure that Edward is free of both her and his obligations to the Earl of Denali?"

"I was at the wedding," she retorted.

"Your father agreed to this?" I queried, highly doubtful that Carlisle would risk his daughter being tainted by association to such a scandal.

"It was a condition of the Earl's continued support for father's political aspirations." She shrugged. "He's probably hoping that having the Duke and Duchess of Worthington present at the nuptials, and allowing their daughter to stand up with the bride, will go some way towards buffering his reputation once news of the scandal becomes common knowledge."

Alice's explanation was plausible, I supposed, nodding my head as she spoke. Carlisle's elevated standing in society should more than protect him—and Alice—from any public disrepute...and I was aware how much the earl's support meant to his cause.

"But how did you learn of Edward's and Jasper's visit with Lady Tanya?" I persisted, not yet willing to allow hope to blossom within me, despite the rays of sunshine that had begun to flood my soul.

"Well..." Alice smiled smugly. "Having discovered what a veritable treasure trove of knowledge and information was lurking right beneath my nose, I asked my maid to talk to Tanya's maid, and I can tell you...Lauren was a wealth of information."

I was tempted to ask her if she didn't rightly mean gossip, but I refrained as I was currently the grateful recipient of the most impossibly wonderful news...even if it came to me via a somewhat disreputable process.

"So it's true," I breathed, the smile that I'd been suppressing breaking free and spreading across my face.

Alice nodded eagerly. "Yes...yes...that's what I've been trying to tell you. Edward has been released from all obligations, and there is no impediment to Father getting that bill he's so excited about passed through Parliament and the House of Lords...well, other than all the other lords and landowners and politicians who are afraid it will be to their detriment if they can't keep exploiting slaves and child labour. But that's to be expected, I suppose..."

"But Edward is free to marry whomever he pleases," I cried, interrupting her ramblings in my eagerness.

"As long as the King approves, of course," Alice added, a gleeful smile lighting her face. "Which is why, as soon as I received your letter containing the astonishing news that your mother was a princess—rendering your ineligibility irrelevant, I am sure—I rushed here straight away so that, together, we could go to London and stop Edward from going before the King and making a truly terrible mistake."

My smile faded as realisation dawned.

"Edward has gone to the King to renounce his title and heritage so that we can be married," I breathed, both exhilarated and terrified by the possibilities.

Startled by the noise of a throat being cleared, I looked up to see my father standing in the doorway to the drawing room.

"Papa," I cried, quickly standing to my feet. "I didn't see you there. You're back early."

"And a good thing. too," he mused, one eyebrow rising ominously. "Lady Alice, I presume." He bowed in her direction and she rose to offer her curtsy.

"Sir Charles," she enthused. "I've heard many wonderful things about you from my father. It is so lovely to finally meet you."

"Likewise, my lady," Papa replied politely, but I could tell he wasn't to be diverted.

"Alice has come to visit me," I blurted, stating the obvious and ignoring the outrageous fact that she had done so without her father's permission and with only her elderly aunt as chaperone.

"Indeed," Papa harrumphed. "Before we address that little matter, there's a question I'd like answered," he continued, his tone brooking no nonsense and causing my knees to quake.

"Why would Edward, the Marquess of Masen, I presume, deem it necessary to relinquish his titles in order to marry *my* daughter—a young lady with whom I'd been led to believe he had not even passed the time of day?"

~AFL~

Hmmm...someone's got some explaining to do, though I'm thinking it's time to hear from Edward next...

xxx TLSue

Stipulations

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight and deserves a great big thank you for her part in bringing our lovely Robsten together. Loved those Paris pics and tweets. Swoon...

Sorry for missing an update on Thursday, but real life dramas got in the way this week, (lots of love CC...hope the pressure's easing up). On a positive note...this is a nice, long chapter.

Thanks to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for all the help, inspiration and encouragement.

Updated: Saturday, 10th March 2012

Words: 4744

Chapter 54

Stipulations

EPOV

Missing Bella had become a permanent part of me, the ache in my heart a constant reminder of what I'd lost and was determined to regain. I had hoped for us to be reunited by now, permanently, though I imagined her father would want some say in the matter—that's if he didn't shoot me on sight.

"This waiting is killing me," I muttered while pacing back and forward in the anteroom to which the palace officials had escorted Jasper and me. It was the same room we'd been shown every day for the last week and a half since the King had recovered from his ailment and was once again receiving. Ignoring the opulent surroundings and views of the palace gardens, my mind was consumed with frustration over the seemingly endless delays.

"You'd think they could at least leave us to languish in a different room each time," Jasper grumbled dryly. "I'm sick to death of the artwork in here, and I do think I've memorised every last golden curlicue in the scrollwork."

I snorted, the smile that curled my lips feeling somewhat alien to my features.

There'd been precious little to smile about since my father and Esme had arrived home early from their honeymoon abroad...before that, actually. The sense of impending doom had begun in the meadow, of all places, when Bella had revealed her opinion of the life I'd expected us to lead together. Then the Denalis had arrived, complicating things no end, and before I'd had a chance to make things right between us, my father had enlightened me to the truth of her identity.

Bella wasn't a commoner—the daughter of a well-to-do merchant with a dream of bettering herself socially who'd fallen prey to unfortunate circumstances—she was one of us, and I could barely begin to catalogue the list of my sins where she was concerned.

I'd already begun to feel an uncomfortable degree of guilt regarding my treatment of her, even while believing she was of a lower class. Bella's views on marriage and the way the fairer sex should be treated, regardless of their station, coupled with my father's teaching from recent years, had begun to prick my conscience, not that I'd had any idea how to rectify the situation. Well...other than giving up my inheritance, disregarding the opinion of the *ton* and being shunned in return, and choosing to marry a commoner for love.

Despite the drastic nature of such a step, these few weeks without her had confirmed to me that I'd have been more than willing to go that far to keep from losing Bella. Relocating abroad would have been essential, as I could only imagine such a decision would have resulted in my being certified a madman and threatened with incarceration rather than society running the risk of such insanity spreading.

Highly ranked heirs to powerful dukedoms did not surrender their wealth and position for love...and yet that was exactly what I was intended to do. Of course, the scandal would not be quite so horrendous as all that, considering that Bella was, in fact, a member of the *ton* and not a commoner after all...at least, that was my hope.

Alternatively, the King could decide to show an unaccustomed degree of mercy. If I was extraordinarily lucky, he would grant me permission to marry someone not of his choosing and who did not meet the rigorous social standing he required for those in direct line to his throne.

Sighing, I knew that the chances of that happening were ephemeral at best.

If I could just convince him to agree to meet with Bella, I was sure he would be as equally taken by her grace, charm, intelligence and beauty as I had been. Five minutes in her company and he would see for himself what a rare and precious gem she was, regardless of her heritage, and why I was willing to give everything I had

to call her my own.

That is if she would even see me, with or without the coveted blessing from the King, which it was highly unlikely I would receive. The most probable outcome was that I would end up going to her, cap in hand, with precious little to offer other than my heart, and she would spurn my proposal...*again*.

Not that I deserved any better. It's what she ought to do, considering the way I had treated her, but I hoped she would give me a second chance to prove that she could trust me.

I would not—*could not*—give up without a fight.

I *knew* that she loved me. Not for one minute did I believe that she would have given herself so passionately...so ingenuously...if her heart had not been engaged. My biggest fear...well, other than of the reaction I expected to receive from her father, was that I had destroyed her love with my boorish behaviour.

After tugging my hands through my hair—a habit over which my valet was threatening to resign—I checked the time. It was five minutes later than the last time I'd looked and almost time for us to leave for the next session in the House of Lords.

Honouring my commitment to take my place in support of Wilberforce's motion—the debate over which had raged day and night since the King had declared this sitting open—ate into the time I had to make myself available for a coveted interview. If only the sovereign had set an actual time for the meeting and then honoured it, I could have had this matter sorted by now, though I would still have to wait until the vote was cast before I could make my way to Forkston...and Bella.

"I still say you should have written to her," Jasper mused, interrupting my frustrated pacing with an irritatingly familiar refrain. I'd told him the same thing in regards to Alice, but he was intent on honouring my father's wishes and keeping his distance until he could prove that he had changed his ways. I admired him for his resolve and determination—it augured well for his eventually coming up to scratch where Alice was concerned—but I worried at how upset and distressed she must be by his continued silence.

Was Bella missing me...waiting for a letter that never came?

"And say what?" I sighed. "That despite the fact that I've behaved like an utter buffoon and made marriage to me sound like a curse rather than a blessing, please

accept my proposal. Oh...and by the way, we shall no doubt be shunned by society and end up little better off than those engaged in trade!"

Jasper guffawed and came over to slap me on the shoulder.

"Stop being so melodramatic, Edward," he rebuked, though light-heartedly. "From what you've told me about your little hobby, you've done very well for yourself 'dabbling in trade,' as you say. With the estate your grandmother left you and your investments, you'll be far from impoverished if worse comes to worst and you're stripped of your titles and what-have-you."

Scowling, I could not fault his argument but was not ready to be mollified. He wasn't the one facing the loss of *almost* everything, though it was my choice and the sacrifice more than worth it if it meant winning Bella's forgiveness, her hand and hopefully the continuation of her love.

"I don't want to do anything to alert Bella's father to the, er...*extent* of our relationship...not until I am present to take the brunt of his ire," I reminded my friend. "The last thing she needs is for me to make life more difficult for her on top of everything else that I've done."

"Yes, you're right, I suppose," Jasper conceded. "Explaining why she is receiving correspondence from a gentleman she's not related to and has barely met would certainly raise some eyebrows. It's a pity your father won't intervene, but he seems content to leave you floundering at present."

"Stewing in my own juices you mean," I muttered darkly. My father might not be a member of the King's inner circle, but the relationship was not insubstantial, and I was reasonably confident he could have hastened the meeting I sought...if he'd so desired. With the way things were going, I was beginning to suspect that to the contrary, he may have been deliberately sabotaging my efforts to present my plea before the King in some misguided hope that I would change my mind about relinquishing my inheritance.

For someone who professed an almost evangelistic belief in the virtuous power of love, he appeared remarkably nonchalant about my securing my opportunity to experience what he now enjoyed...marriage to a wonderful woman whom he loved and who clearly and courageously loved him in return. I might not have welcomed my father's laissez-faire approach to my predicament, but I could not deny how very pleased I was to witness, first-hand, his profound joy and contentment. I'd never seen him so happy, and I found myself gratified and envious in equal measure.

My grave concern was not that I had missed my chance—surely a few weeks either way would make no marked difference to the outcome of events—but that I had squandered it already with my exposition and espousal of conventional but clearly offensive marital practises.

No wonder Bella had declared she'd rather remain unwed than subject herself to such a cold, circumscribed and loveless existence. While I hadn't exactly been looking forward to it myself, I'd had the expectation of finding, if not love, at least some degree of warmth and affection outside the marriage bed, an option unavailable to a wife of our class...or so I'd somewhat naively supposed.

Tanya was a lady of impeccable breeding, and yet she'd clearly had no more intention of honouring her wedding vows than I had. Which brought my thoughts to the unanticipated but highly gratifying turn of events I'd encountered on my visit to her father's home. I thanked God for Jasper's wit and perception, though I was still a little cross that he'd not thought to mention his suspicions to me earlier.

My anger at the deception she and her father had attempted to perpetrate had quickly changed to profound and heartfelt relief at the unexpected reprieve I'd been handed. How quickly the tables had turned, and I'd gone from being backed into a corner, with no tenable way of escape, to garnering both my freedom and the earl's almost unqualified support in one fell swoop.

Tanya's "what's good for the goose is good for the gander" approach to dalliance—though how she discovered what was considered commonplace behaviour for the average gander, I wasn't sure—had backfired on her rather spectacularly. Marrying so far beneath her standing was, no doubt, not an integral part of her plan. But surprisingly, I found myself wishing the couple well in my thoughts. Or, more accurately, I wished the young and unexpectedly newlywed Mr. Hornsby luck...I had a feeling he was going to need it.

One way or another, the scales had been stripped from my eyes these past weeks, and I was no longer blind to the hypocrisy of the situation. The dual standards of behaviour society held its members to so assiduously was clearly not founded in truth. The notion I'd so readily accepted—that the females of my class were intrinsically incapable of experiencing or expressing physical passion, and if they did, were somehow morally corrupt and inferior—was a lie of such magnitude and blatant falsity, I marvelled at its continued and extensive perpetration...and the misery that it must cause.

The combination of Bella's innocence, the relative lack of indoctrination she'd received regarding the acceptable behaviour and expectations placed on a virginal

young bride and, more significantly, the far from ordinary circumstances into which she'd been propelled by forces outside of her control, had created the opportunity for her to explore a side to her personality that would have otherwise been suppressed and denied for her entire life.

Not that I was applauding the part I'd had to play in her physical and emotional awakening. But neither would I *ever* perceive of her actions—her honest, genuine and passionate responses—as anything other than a reflection of the warm and loving woman residing behind whichever facade she presented...hardworking servant, talented chef, creative artisan, beloved mistress or society miss.

My Bella.

I loved her, and I would do whatever it took to convince her that I was worthy of her love...and *trust*...in return.

My oft repeated musings were interrupted by the unexpected arrival of a liveried footman, and I immediately ceased my pacing, Jasper coming to stand at my side.

"Yes?" I queried, struggling to maintain a polite tone when I was sorely tempted to grab the man by his velvet lapels, lift him up until his feet were dangling in the air, and demand he take me to the throne room immediately.

Fortunately, violence was not required.

"His Royal Highness will see you now, m'lords," the man intoned, and I breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief.

Finally, I was to be granted my wish to place my petition before the King, bringing me one step closer to the only future I could imagine...the one I hoped to share with Bella.

~AFL~

BPOV

"Bella?" my father repeated when the silence continued.

I stared at him with my mouth hanging open and my mind blank...well, not exactly *blank* as it swirled with a myriad of fragmented thoughts and images, though none that offered a remotely appropriate explanation for whatever he'd just overheard.

"Well...it's like this," Alice answered for me, and I shot her a grateful yet admonishing look, silently praying she would not say anything to complicate matters further while I took a moment to gather my thoroughly scattered wits.

"Edward couldn't help but notice Bella, and he subconsciously discerned that she was a lady of true quality despite her servant's guise. Being a true gentleman, his protective urges were triggered, and he sought to keep her safe, though from a discreet distance while maintaining perfect propriety...of course."

"Of course." Papa's dry response did little to boost my confidence, and my stomach lurched.

"It's true, Papa," I avowed, defending Edward's original intentions toward me while ignoring their eventual outcome...something I had hoped to avoid informing him of if it were at all possible.

"I did not want to worry you with such distressing revelations," I continued. "But I'm afraid I encountered many, er...*dangers* in my role as a maid and pastry chef. Edward came to my rescue, saving my life on more than one occasion. He endeavoured to keep things on a perfectly respectable level...well, respectable for a lord dealing with a servant, I suppose, but..."

"But, of course, he fell madly in love with Bella. And as soon as he heard that she was not a commoner but one of our class, he went straight to the King to renounce his title so that they could marry," Alice declared triumphantly.

Papa frowned and addressed Alice. "I thought you wrote to Bella that your brother was to marry Lady Tanya Denali?"

"Oh...well...about that," she murmured, looking uncomfortable. "I may have jumped to a conclusion or two, but I can assure you that Edward does *not* have to marry Lady Tanya—she was married to another a week ago, but that's another story—and he has most definitely gone to London to see the King about relinquishing his inheritance."

"So that he can marry *my* daughter?" Papa cocked his head to the side, seeking clarification.

Smiling broadly, Alice nodded her affirmation.

"You've said nothing of this since your return, Bella. Has Edward even proposed?" Papa queried.

"Just before I left Worthington Hall...but I refused," I admitted.

"You don't want to marry him?"

"No...I do!" I insisted.

"But she didn't want Edward to have to give up his titles and inheritance on account of her not thinking she was suitable," Alice interjected. "And she thought he had to marry Lady Tanya to ensure the Earl of Denali's support for the important bill my father is trying to get passed through the House of Lords...but he didn't...and now we know that Bella is more than suitable to marry Edward on account of her mother having been a French princess—though the French court doesn't exist anymore, so I imagine that might make things a tad complicated, but nothing that can't be sorted—so we really must hurry to London to stop him from making a terrible mistake."

I could only imagine what my father must think of Alice's convoluted accounting, as I'd lived half of it and heard the rest already, and I was *still* having a difficult time making sense of her words.

Papa eyed her for a long moment, clearly nonplussed, but then he spoke, his tone making it clear that his suggestions were not open for discussion. "Lady Alice, thank you so much for your elucidating comments, but now I think it's time for me to speak with my daughter in private. Mrs. Waters will show you to your room, as I'm sure you'd like a chance to freshen up after your long journey. We can discuss this further over dinner."

"Of course, Sir Charles," she responded demurely. "But I think I'd best go check on Great Aunt Mildred first. It's probably time for her to wake from her afternoon nap, and she can be a little troublesome when she doesn't know where she is."

With that, Alice curtsied and departed, leaving me to explain her comments and the outrageous behaviour that precipitated them. Groaning, Papa shook his head when I finished my explanation.

"I think I'll leave Carlisle to deal with his daughter," he sighed and slumped down in his favourite chair. "But you and I clearly need to have a talk."

Taking a seat opposite him, I straightened my shoulders and prepared to answer the questions I saw lurking in his far too perceptive gaze. I might not have revealed the full extent of my experiences to him on my return home—with good reason—but that didn't mean I was comfortable about telling my father outright lies.

Leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees, Papa reached to take hold of my hand, his expression surprisingly gentle.

"Bella," he murmured, his voice sounding a little gruff. "I might not say the words very often, but you know that I love you dearly...don't you?"

"Yes, Papa." I nodded. "And I love you, too."

"Then I hope you know that you can trust me. Whatever happened while you were away...*whatever*...I will not blame you or be angry, I promise. You've not been yourself since your return. Oh, I know you're trying to appear as if things are the same as they were before, but we both know too much has occurred for that to be so. I'd like to hear the truth if you're willing to tell me."

The lump that appeared in my throat at his words made speech impossible for a moment. Tears stung my eyes, and I dabbed at them with the lace handkerchief that all young ladies carried upon their person as I summoned the courage to tell my father about my far from proper behaviour.

"I fell in love with Edward," I admitted, my voice little more than a whisper. "I was so afraid, Papa. I hoped that you were still alive, but then I overheard the news that Lord Hunter had taken possession of Swan Manor, and I thought that meant...that you were..." Gulping back a sob, it took a few seconds before I could continue.

Papa patted my hand and murmured reassuringly, "It's all right, Bella. Take your time."

I smiled wanly and took courage from his words. "Edward tried to protect me," I continued, my voice a little hoarse. "But things kept going wrong, and he kept having to come to my rescue." I half-sobbed, half-laughed at the memory. I'd been like a magnet for disaster. "He warned me to stay away from him...that it wasn't *safe*...but I didn't understand. After he rescued me in the markets, he said he couldn't stay away from me any longer, and I didn't want him to," I acknowledged, struggling to meet my father's eyes, though I saw only concern and curiosity, not condemnation...yet. Taking a deep breath, I uttered the words that would change my father's good opinion of me forever.

"He offered me his protection...and I accepted."

As I expected, my father sat back at my words, the colour draining from his complexion. I waited for him to rant or rail against me, but he merely nodded for me to continue.

"Of course, I did not understand the, er...*complexities* of the arrangement," I sighed and dropped my eyes. "I just wanted to be with him, and since I wasn't managing to stay safe on my own I thought...I thought..."

"You thought it was a sensible idea to accept his offer while you awaited Carlisle's return, but then the young rogue tricked you into placing yourself in a compromising position and forced himself upon you..."

"What? No!" I interrupted Papa's angry tirade. "It wasn't like that...well, maybe a little. Edward didn't use *force*, but by the time I understood what was involved and how few choices were left to me with my reputation ruined and all hope lost, I... I... gave in," I finished on a whisper.

My father let out the breath he was holding and closed his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, father, but please don't be angry with Edward," I pleaded, staring at my hands. "He believed I was a servant...orphaned and without protection...and he fell in love with me, too. He thought it was the only way for us to be together."

I hesitated for a moment and then decided that if I was going to be honest, I might as well say all of it. There were questions I wanted answered also.

"He wanted to set me up as his mistress, the woman he loved but kept on the side, while he was forced to marry some poor, ignorant lady of quality who—if she was anything like me—would have been instructed to deny all feeling and affection and submit to her husband out of duty," I concluded bitterly.

"Who told you that?" Papa asked, and I looked up to see the anger in his eyes had faded.

I gave a little shrug and then reminded myself for the umpteenth time since my return that such a gesture was not acceptable for a young lady of my station.

"The ladies who were helping me prepare for my debut," I explained. "I wouldn't have remained as Edward's mistress, Papa, not once he was married. I knew it would break both our hearts for me to leave him, but I couldn't have done that to his...his...*wife*. Besides, I didn't want to bring any further disrepute to the family name—though Lord Hunter had done a pretty thorough job in that regard with the lies he told about me—so I knew I had to get away before my true identity was revealed. I was planning to try and sell Mama's pearls and disappear, but then..."

"But then Carlisle returned home in search of you, thank God!" Papa exclaimed.

"As soon as Edward discovered who I was, he insisted that we marry, but I refused."

"Because of the reasons Alice mentioned?" My father's astute expression revealed that he had discerned there was more to my refusal than what had already been revealed.

"Yes...and because I have no desire to marry Edward, or any gentleman for that matter, if my marriage is to be based on lies, deceit and a rigid standard that I cannot possibly attain," I admitted, summoning my courage and speaking the truth, no matter how unpalatable it might be.

"I'm sorry, Papa, but I am not cold or unfeeling, and I would rather remain unwed than spend the rest of my days trying to live a lie while knowing that my husband is spending time in the arms of another...a woman who he does not expect to be made of ice or stone."

Papa blinked, no doubt taken aback by my impassioned declaration. I was aware that the sentiment I espoused was controversial, to say the least. My intention was not to hurt my father nor deliberately shock him, but I was long past being willing or able to meekly submit to such a life.

It helped that I knew how much my father loved me and that I could not imagine him forcing me to do anything that would cause me such sorrow.

"Not all marriages are as you described, Bella," he contradicted gently. "As you're aware, I loved your mother very much, and you can be sure that I did not demand that she behave in any way other than that which she was comfortable and want to do."

He seemed embarrassed by the admission, but I listened avidly, grateful that he was willing to speak with me of such personal matters.

"You didn't keep a mistress, did you, Papa?" I asked, wondering if he would answer my highly shocking question.

"Never!" he declared immediately. "And I do not condone such behaviour, even if it is considered the norm by many in our sphere."

I sighed with relief, and we shared a rueful smile.

"I'm so very sorry that you have had to learn of such things this way," he

continued, his cheeks blazing, as were mine. "If your mother were alive, I'm sure she would have educated you in a sensitive manner, but without her, I was at a bit of a loss. I can assure you that I had no intention of seeing you married to a man who would disrespect you or expect you to conform to society's unreasonable expectations. I just wasn't sure how to broach the subject...in fact, I'd hoped it wouldn't be necessary."

"You didn't expect me to marry?" I puzzled.

"Of course I did...a delightful young lady such as yourself? I was merely content to wait for some suitable young man to fall head over heels in love with you—as I did with your mother—and then I would have informed *him*, in no uncertain terms, of the conduct I expected in a future son-in-law."

"Oh!" I didn't know whether to laugh or cry at my father's words, considering how badly things had turned out due to my ignorance. But it was nice to know that he'd considered my future in such terms and had wanted the same happiness for me that he and my mother had enjoyed.

"So..." he continued, leaning forward once again. "What I need to know is whether or not you still love Edward and would like to marry him if he can guarantee that he will treat you with the loving respect you deserve? Keeping in mind that he does appear to be willing to make considerable sacrifices for the opportunity to win your hand."

"Yes, Papa...I still love him. I always will," I admitted, a soft smile curving my lips as I felt my heart returning—albeit tentatively—to its rightful place.

"You'd be willing to marry a disgraced and disinherited lord?" he persisted, his eyebrows raised in query.

"I'd marry Edward under any circumstances if he would love me the way you loved Mama," I avowed, so very grateful that Sir Charles Swan was my father. "But I wouldn't mind foregoing the disgrace, and I dread to think what disinheritance would do to Edward. I would much prefer it if he did not have to give up his inheritance on my account...especially if it is not necessary."

"Well, then...it appears that the impetuous Lady Alice is on the right track, and we must hightail it to London to stop your young man from making an even bigger fool of himself than he already has," Papa mused.

"So you'll agree to Edward and me being wed...if he meets your stipulations?" I

breathed, hope coming to life in my heart like a spring garden in full bloom.

"Of course I will." Papa smiled indulgently and reached to pull me into his embrace. "But I'd rather you didn't let him know that straight away. I'm of a mind to give him a good thrashing. But since I'm not yet up to full strength—and I imagine you'd be a tad upset if I shot the blighter—making him grovel on his knees before his prospective father-in-law will have to suffice."

~AFL~

Thanks for all your amazing reviews and support even though my promise to 'keep the separation short' is turning out to be much harder to fulfil than I expected.

See you Saturday!

xxx TLSue

PS...Who's ready for a reunion?

Liberties

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have a little chapter to post midweek after all, plus lots of recs for AFL on facebook, apparently!

I'm glad you appreciated Sir Charles' sensitive handling of Bella's shocking revelations. I wrote him the way I would like parents to be.

Thanks ChloeCougar for rushing this through for me.

Updated: Wednesday, 14th March 2012

Words: 2643

Chapter 55

Liberties

BPOV

On the one hand, the three-day journey to London seemed to take forever, but on the other, I needed every moment to prepare for the coming momentous events.

I could barely contain my emotions, my intense longing to see Edward competing with my excitement at the news I had to share with him, anxiety that we would be too late to prevent him from making a dreadful mistake, and fear that my hopes would prove to be unfounded.

I did not doubt that he still cared for me...enough to give up everything so that we could be together. But I worried that once he encountered me as a legitimate member of society, in an altogether different role and setting than he'd seen me before, he might have a change of heart. My demeanour when we'd been together in no way resembled that of a proper young lady. I'd loved him with abandon, sharing my body with him as freely as I had my heart and soul.

Edward said that the behaviour a gentleman might appreciate in his mistress was entirely different to what he expected from his wife. I couldn't bear it if he came to despise the very things that he had once purported to love and desire about me, and I would need to be very sure that he wanted me for who I was...as I was...before I agreed to his proposal.

That was if Alice was correct in her assumptions and her brother truly wanted me for his wife.

My question would be answered soon enough. In the meantime, my moods swung from the heights of elation at the potential for a joyous reunion with the man I loved to the depths of despair as I feared that we would be too late to prevent him making an enormous and ultimately unnecessary sacrifice. I did my best to keep my discomposure hidden from my travelling companions, though from their sympathetic glances, usually given when my tears were just beneath the surface, I was fairly certain they suspected and understood my fears.

Papa, Alice, Angela and I shared the large Worthington carriage—ours had been stolen by Lord Hunter, and the replacement vehicle and horses that my father had ordered had not yet arrived—making the opportunity for anything other than superficial conversation limited. At least we weren't crowded, having left Alice's maid behind to care for her Great Aunt Mildred. Mrs Waters had tut-tutted over the old woman's befuddled mental state, the poor dear being in dire need of a rest from the ardours of travelling, and promised to take excellent care of her until such time as she could be safely escorted back to her home at Worthington Hall.

I received the impression that Carlisle must coddle Alice a great deal as she did not seem at all worried about his reaction to her escapade. I'd have been terrified to admit to such foolhardy actions, but then again, my father had surprised me no end by his understanding and compassionate response to my own, far more outrageous disclosures.

Papa had coped surprisingly well with the journey so far, his sleep blessedly free from nightmares and his nerves steady. His upcoming reunion with Lady Penelope appeared to have bolstered his reserve, and I sensed a certain measure of anticipation in his demeanour. I was happy for him and grateful for the distraction as his mind was not as focused on Edward's and my indiscretions as it might otherwise have been, or so I hoped. His occasional dark moods and the way he would glower out of the window had me worried about what he might be planning to say to Edward...or do.

At least he had promised not to shoot him.

Alice, I soon discovered, was thoroughly irrepressible and not in the least perturbed by what lay ahead or my father's presence, brooding or otherwise. She was determined to have her questions answered...questions of an *intimate* nature. But, to my relief, she had the good sense to wait until we were alone in our large shared bed, at whichever respectable inn we were staying for the night, to begin her

bombardment.

"But the entire business sounds so awkward and uncomfortable and messy and, well...mortifying!" she cried, when I tentatively agreed to tell her what I had learned and experienced first-hand.

I was correct in my assumption that it was Jessica who had enlightened Alice to the mysterious relationship that existed between the sexes. Unfortunately, the young maid had been going through a particularly difficult time in her confinement, with morning sickness plaguing her at all hours of the day and night. Consequently, the rather detailed and somewhat crude description she'd given of the act that had precipitated her current distress was not particularly flattering.

"I imagine that it could be all those things if the couple did not share tender feelings," I admitted tentatively.

"It wasn't like that for you and Edward?" Alice whispered, her eyes, illuminated by the candle we'd left burning beside the bed, huge in her pretty, heart-shaped face.

My face blazed, but I fought the urge to pull the covers over my head. Taking a deep breath, I rolled on my side to face my new friend, my mind scrambling as I wondered how much—or how little—I should say.

While I was in no doubt that ignorance was not at all bliss-inducing, I worried that if I was too detailed or graphic in my descriptions, I might shock or frighten her even more than she already appeared to be.

Then there was my fear that if I let Alice know how truly wonderful lovemaking could be, I might be responsible for contributing to her moral downfall.

As I considered what level of censorship I should use, it dawned on me that I was behaving no differently than all the other individuals, well-meaning and otherwise, who conspired to keep young women ignorant and afraid. Alice deserved to know the truth so that she could make informed, reasoned choices about matters that would affect her life and future profoundly, rather than have those choices made for her without her say or understanding.

"No, it wasn't like that with Edward," I admitted, pausing to bite my lower lip as I gauged her response to my words.

"What was it like?" She urged me to continue.

"It was wonderful." I smiled, the memories I finally allowed to surface freely causing my heart to overflow.

"At first, I just wanted to be with him as often as possible. We became *friends*, I guess you could say. Because Edward believed that we were not of the same class, we were able to simply be ourselves when we were together, without all the constrictions that accompany obeying the social niceties...though I must admit to being taken aback on occasion by his colourful language."

"Edward used colourful language?" Alice stared, disbelieving, but then her brow furrowed with thought. "Oh, you mean like the words that he, Emmett and Jasper used the day Papa introduced you as Sir Charles' daughter?"

"Yes. It's quite shocking the way gentlemen behave when they believe there are no ladies present. All their talk about 'protecting the fairer sex from life's unpleasantness' doesn't seem to apply to females of the lower classes, I'm afraid. Though I do imagine the men would be more cautious in their manner around some of the senior staff members, such as Mrs Cope."

"Or their nannies, I'm sure. Ours would have boxed Edward's ears if he'd used bad language in her presence when he was a boy, and I doubt anything has changed despite her advancing years." Alice giggled. "But tell me more...what happened next?"

Sighing, I let my mind wander back to some of my earlier encounters with Edward, a soft smile curling my lips as the precious memories, which I was no longer afraid of revisiting, resurfaced in my mind.

"My feelings for Edward grew very quickly. I'm afraid that I was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. At first, I didn't think he could possibly be interested in me, but gradually, I came to realise that it was true. There was something in the way he looked at me, his eyes intense and heated. And he would take...*liberties*."

"Liberties?" Alice gasped.

"He would stand close—far closer than propriety allows—and brush his fingers softly across my cheek or gently stroke my hair. The breath would catch in my throat and my heart would pound so loudly I'd blush for fear that he could hear it. It was quite astonishing how he affected me with just a simple caress. My entire body would freeze in anticipation of his touch and then melt at the reality as I was flooded with warmth and the most delicious tingles."

"Oh my..." Alice breathed, and I nodded my head against the pillow in agreement.

"The first time he kissed me, I didn't want it to end," I sighed, remembering the feel of Edward's lips, soft yet sure as he moved them gently over mine.

"Jasper kissed the back of my hand once," Alice offered shyly, a dreamy look in her eyes. "I swear I felt his lips right through the fabric of my gloves."

I smiled at her admission, touched by the innocence it revealed. But then my smile faded as I tried to find the words to describe what had come next.

Edward's and my kisses had not remained chaste for long, soon involving lips and tongues and the wondrous taste of desire. The feel of his smooth skin sliding like warm silk over my naked flesh had been a revelation. The weight of his muscular body pressing mine into the mattress; the brush of his hands and caress of his fingers; the kiss of his lips and swirl of his tongue had aroused me to such incredible heights of passion, taking me places I'd not known existed.

The memories were more precious to me than the jewels my father had insisted we bring with us to London, but I wasn't sure how to put them into words.

Alice and I had already discussed the confusing and repressive instructions given to young ladies in preparation for marriage and how young gentlemen were clearly not held to the same standard. Her conversation with Jessica had increased her understanding of what the vague and contradictory phrases were referring to, but there was so much more to lovemaking than either a crude accounting or ambiguous moral directives could reveal.

"I knew it was wrong not to protest, since we were not married, but Edward's kisses and caresses...they felt so wonderful, Alice, like nothing you can imagine. I tried to resist, but it seemed that all hope for my future was lost. He said he cared for me and offered to protect me in exchange for my surrender." I dropped my gaze, and Alice reached to gently pat my shoulder.

"Please, Bella, don't be ashamed," she pleaded. "You had no choice."

I lifted my eyes to meet hers again. "But I did," I whispered. "Edward relented and promised to help me to find another place of employment, but I didn't want to leave him and, in truth, I didn't want him to stop."

"Even when he did what Jessica says that men do to women to make them with child and for the man's pleasure?" Alice asked, clearly disbelieving.

"Especially then," I breathed, the memory of the first time that Edward joined his body with mine causing my pulse to race.

"I still can't believe that people do such bizarre things. It sounds so unseemly...and *painful*." Alice's brow furrowed with what looked like both worry and fear.

"It was a little uncomfortable at first," I admitted. "But when there is love and gentleness and desire, it is truly amazing and not *only* for the man's pleasure." I smiled, hoping to reassure her.

"It feels...nice?" she asked, her gaze flittering away then returning to meet mine, her curiosity greater than her embarrassment.

"Oh, much, much better than nice," I whispered, a warm flush caressing my already heated skin at the memory of Edward's passionate lovemaking.

"Do you think it would still be nice if you had to pretend that you didn't feel anything, lying still and silent like they say a young bride is supposed to?"

"Maybe...a little," I offered with a shrug. "But having to hide one's feelings and suppress one's natural responses and desire...I think it would be very difficult and lead to terrible heartache and despondency."

"Resentment, too," Alice murmured, and I nodded sadly.

"Edward took great care when we made love. He was patient and determined for me to reach the pinnacle of my pleasure before he took his own."

"Pinnacle of pleasure?" she queried, puzzled.

"It's the most amazing feeling," I whispered shyly, an undeniable tinge of awe in my voice. "A type of *ecstasy* that transports you to a special place of rapture inside your own body...an intimate place you somehow share with your beloved."

"Do you think anyone can feel it?" Alice asked, her eyes shining.

"I imagine so," I offered uncertainly. "Though I think many ladies must not know about it or ever experience it, their senses having been stifled by the dreadful stories and repressive instructions they received before going to their marriage beds. If they knew, they would not be so disdainful or afraid, and surely they would not perpetuate such an awful state of affairs as currently exists."

Alice nodded doubtfully then urged me to continue.

"Edward was very gentle and tender in the beginning until my fears and shyness abated, passionate and even forceful when I was experienced enough to appreciate his actions. But always, he was loving."

"And you don't think a husband of our class would be like that with his bride?" Alice whispered tremulously. "Passionate and taking the time to bring her to that special place?"

"Not if he was following the same instructions that we were given," I returned on a sigh. "Edward said that a married couple don't remove their night gowns so as to conserve their dignity, and the act is performed as quickly and perfunctorily as possible to cause the least distress to the dutiful but reluctant wife."

"Oh, that sounds so cold and quite awful in comparison to what you described."

Nodding soberly, I couldn't help but agree.

"Could you imagine having to...to...*lie* with someone you didn't love or even know very well?" Alice asked, no doubt imagining the marriages that many young ladies of our class and acquaintance would have arranged for them.

Shuddering, I swallowed hard, unable to think of appropriate words with which to reply. Not that I needed them, as I could see from the bleakness in Alice's eyes that my reaction had been response enough.

"I care for Jasper a great deal," she whispered. "And I wouldn't want to marry anyone else."

"But?" I queried softly, sensing her hesitation.

"But I can't bear the thought of him being unfaithful or of having to hide my feelings from him."

I felt exactly the same way about her brother, and I smiled ruefully, reaching to clasp her hands in mine.

"Then we shall just have to persuade our foolish lords that we know what's best. We must convince them to ignore society's ridiculous expectations and live happily ever after with the women of their dreams...us."

"Somehow, I don't think Edward is going to take a great deal of convincing," Alice giggled.

"Oh, I hope so, Alice, I truly hope so." I smiled shyly in response, a shiver of delight at the thought of being reunited with him in every way, tingling down my spine.

~AFL~

I hope you enjoyed this little chapter. I think we're all looking forward to Bella receiving her heart's desire. ;)

xxx TLSue

Audience

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I FINALLY own a Breaking Dawn Part 1 DVD, and I'm going to watch it as soon as I've posted this chapter. Yay!

I'm glad you enjoyed Bella's and Alice's little girl talk. As Rory Cullen pointed out in her lovely review, it's kind of fun for Bella to have more experience and knowledge than the 'all knowing' Alice for a change. ;)

I've deviated from my Regency time setting in this chapter. You may notice that the King (no name...LOL!) bears a striking resemblance to Aro of the Volturi. Not accurate, but I love the mental image of Edward standing before the maniacal ruler. He's such a deliciously sinister character.

Thanks to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for all their amazing work and support.

Happy Birthday twilightadik!

Updated: Saturday, 17th March 2012

Words: 4026

Chapter 56

Audience

BPOV

London was every bit as crowded and polluted as I'd been warned, but enthralling nonetheless. By the time we reached the highly exclusive area of the city where Cullen House was located, the closely packed buildings and teeming streets had given way to wide, tree-lined roads and impressive homes overlooking manicured parks. Even so, Carlisle's London home stood head and shoulders above its neighbours. Like Worthington Hall, it could have easily passed for a royal residence, and I couldn't help but cringe, suddenly plagued with feelings of unworthiness and dread.

Edward loved me, and he wanted us to be together. I just hoped I could live up to the standard required of a Marchioness while retaining my essential character and

self-belief...that was if Edward was still the Marquess of Masen.

Guiltily, I realised that a small part of me would be relieved if it was too late to stop him from relinquishing his titles, as a quiet life in the country spent far from the ton's rigorous expectations sounded awfully tempting. But I feared the sacrifice would be an onerous burden for Edward to bear, the loss of his position and place in society ultimately detrimental to his well-being...and our relationship.

Straightening my shoulders, I determined to support and stand by the man I loved, regardless of the circumstances we might face. I would do my best not to disappoint or give him cause to regret choosing me when he could have had any number of ladies of far superior rank and sophistication. Not that I was all that sure what my rank was after Papa's astonishing disclosure.

Just please, please, please...let him still want me.

Ben had accompanied us on the journey, taking the place of one of the carriage drivers. When he assisted me to alight from the carriage, I recalled that I had yet to discover what tale he'd told the other servants. Fortunately, they'd shown respect for my situation and not said anything untoward to my father, so whatever story he'd concocted seemed to have had the desired effect.

Brushing the creases from my skirt, I tried to focus on how much I was looking forward to seeing Edward and the exciting news I had to tell him. But it was difficult not to feel like a simple country miss...one who was altogether out of her depth.

"Lady Alice, please wait," Papa called, stepping down from the vehicle, but she ignored his directive and rushed up to the front door of the imposing mansion.

I gave him a rueful smile, and he shrugged. It was her family home, after all, and she did seem rather used to getting her own way.

We reached the entrance located beneath a massive portico just as the door was opened by a butler who could have passed as Henson's sibling from Worthington Hall.

"Lady Alice!" he exclaimed, clearly surprised. "Aren't you supposed to be at Worthington Hall awaiting your new governess's arrival? I thought the two of you would be travelling down together in another week's time?"

"Yes...yes," she demurred with a bright smile. "But something of an urgent nature came up, and I simply couldn't wait for Miss Tompkins' arrival. I made the journey

with Father's very dear friend, Sir Charles Swan, and his daughter, the heroic Miss Isabella Swan...I'm sure you've read about them in the papers," she offered the half-truth by way of explanation and introduction. Most of Alice's journey had been taken up with her detour to Forkston, effectively unchaperoned, as poor Great Aunt Mildred had been barely aware of her surroundings.

The butler's momentary discomposure was immediately replaced with the impeccable reserve expected of one of his position in the household. With a bow in my father's direction, he calmly ushered us into the grand entrance before leading us through to a large drawing room overlooking the rose gardens that adorned the front of the mansion.

"Are my father and Lady Esme at home?" Alice asked once Papa and I had taken our seats and refreshments had been called for.

"I'm afraid not, m'lady," the butler replied. "The Duke and Duchess left some time ago. His Grace was meeting some colleagues at his club before going on to Parliament for the afternoon sitting, and the Duchess had an invitation to luncheon with Lady Bunton and has not yet returned."

"What of Lord Edward?" she asked, and I sat forward, eager to discover his whereabouts.

With the air of one imparting news of considerable importance, the butler intoned, "The Marquess is at the palace...a summons from the King, I believe."

I gasped, and Alice patted my arm reassuringly. "Don't panic. The King is notorious for keeping people waiting," she murmured before addressing the butler. "Is this the first time my brother has gone to the palace for a meeting?"

"No, m'lady. I believe he has visited on a number of occasions. However, your father was heard saying to the duchess just this morning that he thought today was the day the King would make his wishes known."

"Then we're too late," I breathed.

"Not necessarily," Papa disagreed, rising to his feet. "But we've no time to lose."

"We're going to the palace...now?" I queried, and my father's determined nod gave me the answer I was hoping for.

"The King is also notorious for sleeping late...very late...so if we hurry, we might

get there before he begins receiving visitors."

"Are you acquainted with the King?" Alice asked as we rushed for the door, a footman having been sent running to tell Ben to bring the carriage back around immediately.

"Yes. When I received my knighthood towards the end of the war, but that was many years ago," Papa explained, and I struggled to imagine my country-dwelling father, with his love of bucolic pastimes, being honoured at court. It was almost as difficult to conceive that I was related to royalty.

"Exactly what sort of cousin am I to the King?" I asked once we were all settled back in the carriage and had begun the race across town to the palace.

"Hmmm..." Papa mused, his expression thoughtful. "Your grandmother and the King were cousins on her mother's side, so I think that makes you his first cousin, twice removed."

The relationship was closer than I'd expected, and I was forced to clasp my hands together to stop them from trembling.

"Did Mama ever meet the King?" I wondered, even more nervous at the prospect of being introduced to my illustrious relative.

"Her parents intended for her to visit the English Court, but the Terror began before she was old enough to do so," Papa explained. "She remained behind in Forkston when I received my knighthood, as we feared the revolutionists might discover her whereabouts. I had a quiet word with the King at the time, and he understood the need to keep her survival a secret and our decision to retire quietly to the country."

"And all these years, he never tried to contact her?" I puzzled.

Papa surprised me by chuckling. "I'm sure the sovereign is a very busy man, but to be honest, I think it was a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'."

I didn't find his answer very reassuring. I'd been worried that the King might be upset that my father had kept my existence a secret from him all these years, but now I wondered if he would even acknowledge me.

My fingers rose to the pearl necklace left to me by my mother that I'd donned for the very first time this morning, seeking reassurance.

Papa had raised his eyebrows upon seeing it when Alice and I'd come down from our room at the inn.

"For luck," I admitted, knowing that this was the day that I would most likely see Edward again, and my future would be settled one way or another.

"You won't need it," Papa murmured, gently tucking a loose curl behind my ear. "You look every bit as beautiful as your mother did the last time she wore those pearls."

Smiling shyly, I ducked my head, touched by the compliment. Alice had been thrilled when I'd asked her help with choosing an ensemble for the day, and I had to admit that the pale blue gown and darker blue pelisse she'd picked out were very flattering. Angela had worked wonders with my hair, and I felt as ready for whatever awaited me as I ever would be.

Except for meeting the King, of course. I doubted anything could prepare me for such an event, though having Edward by my side—as was my hope—would make all the difference.

Ben had taken our instructions to make all haste seriously, and I grabbed for a hanging strap as the carriage careened around a corner.

"Nearly there," Papa noted, recognizing the rapidly passing scenery.

I leaned close to the window and stared in awe as the majestic palace that seemed to tower above us and stretch for miles behind the huge, wrought-iron fence came into view.

"Do you think they'll let us in?" Alice asked with sudden alarm as we came to a halt next to the massive and heavily guarded entrance.

"We'll soon see," Papa replied and then addressed the guard that approached the carriage window.

"Sir Charles Swan, Miss Isabella Swan and Lady Alice Cullen. We've urgent business with a lord visiting the palace."

The guard studied us all closely, and I swallowed hard. We'd come too far to be turned away now.

"Of course, Sir. You're expected." The fierce-looking soldier surprised us with his

revelation before signalling for the huge gates to be opened.

"We are?" Alice and I both murmured in unison as we drove inside the royal compound.

"Papa?" I turned to see my father stroking his moustache, his brow furrowed.

"I believe we are about to discover exactly what sort of game your father is playing, Alice."

"You think Uncle Carlisle is behind this?" I asked.

"I certainly hope so," Papa replied. "I can think of no other reason for the palace to be aware of our imminent presence.

"I knew Father wouldn't be willing to sacrifice your future happiness, Bella," Alice chimed, smiling happily. "Not even for his political cause."

"Then there's nothing to worry about?" I asked, staring from one to the other, hope warring with confusion.

Alice's shoulders slumped, my premature relief following suit.

"I don't know if I'd go that far," she murmured. "Father was terribly angry with Edward, and he seemed determined to teach him a lesson."

"Here's hoping that lesson doesn't involve his son's disinheritance, though the blighter deserves far worse, if you ask me," Papa harrumphed.

"Papa! You promised you wouldn't hurt him," I cried.

"I promised I wouldn't *shoot* him. As for the rest, we'll just have to wait and see," he replied.

The carriage once again came to a halt, and as soon as we alighted, we were ushered inside the palace into an enormous foyer.

My father spoke quietly with the head steward, explaining that we needed to speak with the Marquess of Masen who, we'd been told on good authority, was awaiting an audience with the sovereign.

"This way, Sir, m'ladies." The steward directed us, and I cast a nervous glance in

Alice's direction.

Could it be this simple? Were we really just moments away from preventing Edward from making a dreadful mistake and the reunion that caused my heart to skip about like a spring fawn in joyful anticipation?

"I believe the Marquess is with His Royal Highness at present," the steward continued speaking as we walked, and my heart stuttered, my father steadying me when my step faltered...along with my hopes.

"We're too late," I whimpered, and the steward eyed me oddly.

"You may wait for him in here," he offered, guiding us into a drawing room more opulent than anything I had ever seen before. Even Alice's eyes widened as she took in the rich furnishings, enormous paintings and statues, and sheer size of the gaudily gilded room.

"Would it be possible for you to alert the King to our presence and request an audience?" Papa asked, and the steward's eyebrows rose. "I believe we are expected," Papa continued, the authoritative tone in his voice one I had rarely heard him employ.

"Certainly, Sir." The steward bowed and promised to return shortly, leaving us to wait and wonder and worry.

~AFL~

EPOV

When I finally came before the King and his audience of courtiers, I was forced to speak with such extreme circumspection to protect Bella's identity and reputation that I was seriously concerned the sovereign would have me thrown out for wasting his time. To my relief, he chose instead to have the chamber cleared of all but his two closest advisors before demanding that I speak plainly.

I considered lying, or at least tempering my words, but there was something about the sovereign that made complete and full disclosure impossible to deny.

The truth, however, was not well received.

The King was far from pleased that I wished to marry a young lady of whom he knew little and who had not yet been presented to him. Neither was he impressed by

my subsequent, stuttering explanation regarding the reasons behind my request.

"Am I to take it that we are we speaking of the same young lady who was recently a victim of that rogue Hunter's deplorable actions against her father—one of *my* champions—and the slanderous lies that he spread via the press in an attempt to defame her good name?

"One and the same," I acknowledged. "Miss Isabella Swan, daughter of Sir Charles Swan, a knighted war hero and friend of my father."

"Friend?" the King spluttered. "He saved your father's life in that awful French prison and rescued countless of my spies and soldiers. I'd say that's worth more than mere friendship."

I nodded, wary of saying more and increasing the man's ire, though I soon discovered that it was a little late for that.

"So, am I to understand that Miss Swan, who, it appears, had led a particularly sheltered life up until Hunter's unfortunate arrival, fled halfway across the country to seek succour and safety with *your* father after believing that *her* father had been slain? But instead she found a young man who should have known better but acted with predatory behaviour almost equal to her nemesis?"

Gulping, I nodded tentatively. "I sought to protect her, but I thought she was a servant, your highness." I offered the excuse that no longer seemed particularly acceptable but was better than nothing.

"Is she as plain as mud...ankles like a draft horse...barely able to string two words together?" he demanded.

"No! Not at all," I contradicted, not that I hadn't met plain-looking ladies and seen attractive commoners, but I wasn't about to instruct the sovereign in the error of his ways. "Bella is beautiful, intelligent, talented, gracious...everything one could imagine in a diamond of the first order," I declared.

The King sat back and templed his fingers before his face, his velvet and lace-clad elbows resting on the padded arms of his throne. His long silver-streaked black hair swept from a high forehead to brush his shoulders like a sinister mantle, and his dark eyes pierced right through to my soul.

"And you mistook this paragon of genteel femininity for a common maid?" he noted drily.

"I fell in love with her, your highness. It was easier to justify my belief—and my actions—than face that I had made a horrendous mistake."

"Well, you're facing it now!" the King retorted with a humourless laugh.

"You speak very highly of this girl," he continued soberly. "And she does appear to possess a modicum of bravery and resourcefulness to have outwitted Hunter. But who is she really? You are set to inherit one of my most powerful dukedoms, not to mention being in line to my throne, however distantly. What if I don't grant my approval?" he queried, raising one eyebrow, a smile that I could only describe as malicious curling his lip. "How deep does this affection you purport to feel for the girl actually run?"

Straightening my shoulders, I spoke with considered resolve. "I will do whatever it takes—give *anything*—to win Miss Swan's hand in marriage."

"Oh, ho!" the King laughed delightedly. "Are you saying that it is not a fait accompli? That you are willing to give up your inheritance if I do not give my approval, and yet you don't even know if the lady will accept your proposal?"

I nodded jerkily and stared straight ahead, averting my eyes slightly from his damning gaze. It was a mortifying acknowledgement but nothing less than the truth. The reality was that all my sacrifices might yet be in vain, not that I planned on surrendering without first mounting a formidable and sustained campaign to win Bella's hand...and heart.

"I should like to meet this young lady," the King mused, and my hopes soared. "But I do believe that if she lives up to even a fraction of your effusive praise, I may decide to offer her something better than marriage to the man who took advantage of her when she was vulnerable...a far more *powerful* alliance."

My heart lodged itself in my throat as I attempted to grasp the import of his words. It made no sense, as the King had already acknowledged that Bella was, essentially, a nobody despite her father's heroic actions during the war. But the only single gentleman in the empire I knew of more highly positioned than myself—unless, of course, I was to be stripped of my titles—was the King's much younger brother...an oily, petulant fellow, too used to getting his own way and nowhere near good enough for Bella.

"I will abide by Miss Swan's decision, as her happiness is paramount to me," I stated, earning a studied and decidedly calculating look from my sovereign.

"We shall see," he mused. "My steward will issue you a summons when I have given consideration to your request," he offered with a flowing wave of his hand. "You may well be granted your wish to give up *everything*, as you say, though it will be interesting to see if the lady in question is keen to marry a disinherited lord. From my experience, most society misses would run a mile from such an offer."

~AFL~

I spent the next few days while I waited to hear from the palace doing what I could to support my father in his campaign, though I had already decided that, one way or another, I would be leaving for Forkston as soon as the King handed down his verdict. It was looking highly unlikely that the anti-slavery and child labour bill would be passed during this sitting of Parliament—though some concessions would hopefully be granted and definite inroads had been made—but I simply could not bear any more time apart from Bella than was absolutely necessary.

My father's attitude to my predicament puzzled me. He was sympathetic but inordinately calm about the prospect of his only son and heir being set aside so comprehensively. There would be a scandal, but when I broached the issue, he merely shrugged and said it would be interesting to see if I meant what I said and how far I was willing to go for love. My conclusion was that he believed I would renege on my decision, and it saddened me to think that my father thought so little of my resolve. My inadvertent lapse in honour had clearly damaged my standing in his eyes irreparably.

As I was once again escorted down the wide corridor that led to the throne room, I wondered how he would take the news of my demotion. As much as I was willing to pay whatever price was necessary to have the future with Bella that I so desired, I hoped my decision would not permanently tarnish the good name of Cullen.

We reached the great, carved doors that led in to the throne room, and the steward accompanying me gestured that I should wait. A similarly clad steward, with an equally pompous air, approached at a brisk walk from a side corridor and whispered urgently into the ear of my escort. After much nodding and gesticulating, the man returned from whence he came and opened a door into the same drawing room where Jasper and I had cooled our heels on numerous occasions this past fortnight.

Curious, I watched as he directed the occupants to exit the room and follow him, and I wondered if I would be made to wait...*again*...while some other illustrious or more deserving supplicants were presented to the King.

A movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I turned back to see the great doors being swung open from inside. Thankfully, the enormous room had been cleared of all but the King and the same two advisers who'd been present at our last meeting. They appeared to be in deep discussion, and I hesitated, waiting for the steward to indicate that I should proceed.

The King was an inveterate game player, and I could only imagine I'd given him considerable sport with both my dilemma and the admission of my indiscretion. He could be engaged in a discussion of vital importance with no relevance to my request, or be making me wait on purpose to draw out my suffering.

Stifling my agitation, I prepared for a delay, fully expecting to be kept cooling my heels in sight of my destination for some time. But then a miracle happened, and I heard the sweetest voice of all calling my name, distracting me from my purpose and awareness of my location.

"Edward?"

I spun to face her the source of the feminine cry, my mind barely able to believe my eyes.

"Bella," I breathed, my voice barely a whisper.

The world slowed, and she began to run towards me while I stood frozen in place, too stunned to react. The blood pounded slow and heavy in my veins, and I stared at the vision of beauty approaching, and I wondered if I was dreaming. But then I felt her soft, lithe form wrapping warmly around me as she threw herself into my arms.

"Edward!" she exclaimed, and I held her close, breathing deep of her wonderfully familiar scent.

"Bella," I repeated reverently, her name a prayer of thanksgiving on my lips.

She was real, and I was in heaven.

"Of course I'm real, you silly man," she murmured, reaching to cup my face, and I realised that I must have spoken the words aloud.

"You don't have to do this," she insisted. "You don't have to give up everything for me. It's not necessary."

Before I could protest her words, her lips found mine in a kiss of such pent-up

longing that I staggered a little under the onslaught of sudden emotion. My heart had been frozen without Bella, an icicle residing in my chest, and it thawed at her touch, flooding me with heat.

The world faded away, and everything was Bella...her warmth...her touch...her taste...her scent. The feel of her body pressed tightly against mine, her arms encircling me, her fingers tangled in my hair...it *was* heaven. There could be no greater bliss than this. I kissed her passionately and with abandon, my heart almost bursting from my chest with the sheer joy that bubbled from within.

"My Bella...my love...my life."

A firm grasp on my shoulder caught my attention, and I reluctantly broke away from Bella's lips.

"My *daughter*." A voice gruff with emotion broke through the haze, and I jerked my head up to see a distinguished-looking gentleman—in appearance so much like Bella that he could only be her father—eyeing me grimly.

The King's delighted laugh drew my attention, and with a groan I turned to face him, tucking Bella protectively beneath my arm as I belatedly recalled our royal audience.

"My *cousin*...Isabella," he announced with undisguised glee, and my knees buckled.

~AFL~

Squeee...finally!

I do acknowledge that it is highly unlikely Bella would have acted quite so outrageously—rushing up to Edward and holding his hand would have been shocking enough—but since I've been attempting to tie in the significant Twilight and New Moon scenes in this story, we just had to have the slow motion run and the kiss. Swoon... Hope you'll forgive me.

xxx TLSue

PS...Shall I just go ahead and call the King Aro and his oily younger brother, Caius? Or shall we keep pretending this is King George the IV...or V? I admit to being a little muddled. :D

Alliance

*Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight, which is much more to my liking than The Hunger Games. What a disturbing move, *shudder* though I thought the acting was amazing, including the young guy playing Peeta.*

Well...that'll teach me to ask questions relating to the plot. The reviews for last chapter showed a roughly 50/50 split over whether I should call the King Aro or George, with many of you being quite vehement in your choices and reasoning. With limited writing time this week, and as I didn't want to get bogged down on a side-issue, I took the coward's way out, and from henceforth and forevermore he shall be known as "The King without a name!" On a positive note, you can all imagine him as whomever you wish. I hope you don't mind, but I'm more interested in the reunion proper between Lordward and Adorabella than getting stuck on incidentals.

An extra special thank you, to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for going above and beyond this chapter helping me out of the mire.

Updated: Saturday, 24th March 2012

Words: 5109

Chapter 57

Alliance

BPOV

Edward's knees buckled, and he sagged against my side. He was too heavy for me to hold, and for a horrible moment, I thought he was going to fall to the ground, taking me with him. Alice squealed and flapped her arms ineffectually, but to my relief, Papa stepped forward and grabbed Edward's other arm, and between us we kept him upright. It only took a moment for him to regain his composure, or at least the strength in his legs, but his face was terribly pale.

"Are you all right?" I whispered, leaning in close.

Nodding jerkily, he shot me a wan smile and laced his fingers with mine. The

feeling was sublime, and a part of me was intensely happy. The rest of me was quite mortified by what I'd done, and my face blazed crimson.

It would have been dreadfully unseemly if I'd approached Edward ahead of my father, quite shocking if I'd taken one of his hands in mine. But running to him? Throwing myself in his arms and kissing him with unrestrained passion in front of not only my father—as if that wasn't bad enough—but the sovereign ruler of the Empire?

A whimper escaped my throat, and Papa moved to stand on my other side, linking my arm with his. I gratefully accepted his support.

The King cleared his throat, demanding our undivided attention, and I reluctantly lifted my eyes to meet his commanding gaze.

"Your Majesty." Both men made their obeisance, addressing the king in unison. Alice curtsied gracefully, and I followed suit...not *quite* as gracefully considering I was still holding Papa's arm and Edward's hand. I was sure it was improper, but after my outrageous display, linking hands with Edward seemed fairly minor in comparison.

"Lord Edward." The King nodded slightly in his direction, one brow raised questioningly before he turned to Alice, his expression transformed by a delighted smile.

"Lady Alice, it is a pleasure to see you, as always. Why don't you run along to the Queen's quarters, as I'm sure she would enjoy a visit?"

"Thank you, your Majesty." Alice positively glowed with pleasure and turned to follow the steward the King had signalled to escort her.

"Sir Charles! How lovely to see you again after so many years." The King greeted my father warmly before turning to me.

"And sweet, lovely Isabella. How wonderful to finally meet my young cousin." His smile was gentle, and I nodded tremulously in reply.

"You, my dear, dear girl, are the very likeness of your mother and every bit as beautiful as she was at almost the same age, if my memory serves me. I am terribly sorry that she is not alive for me to compliment her on her delightful daughter."

Curious, I wondered if I would be committing another faux pas by responding to

his words, though it couldn't possibly be as outrageous a lapse in propriety as throwing myself at Edward.

"I didn't think you'd ever met my mother, your Majesty," I murmured cautiously.

"Only when she was a child," he acknowledged. "I took a tour of Europe to visit my illustrious relatives and stopped in at the French court...long before all the troubles began, of course." His expression sobered momentarily before a slight smile curved his mouth. "I recall that she was a delightful if somewhat *precocious* child. A trait she might have passed on to her daughter...hmmm?"

Inwardly squirming, I could do naught but nod in agreement.

"As for how I was able to recognise the likeness, do come with me, and I shall show you." The King presented his arm for me to take, eyeing Edward archly until he reluctantly released my hand. Papa patted my arm reassuringly and then escorted me to where the King was waiting.

"Shall I accompany you?" my father asked boldly, causing the King to raise a brow.

"No, I don't think that will be necessary," the Sovereign replied to my dismay, and I looked to Papa in alarm.

"You have nothing to fear, Isabella," the King assured me, accurately interpreting my expression. "I would just appreciate a few moments to acquaint myself with my lovely young cousin, and I'm sure your father would like a few moments to acquaint himself with the impetuous Lord Edward. We shall all meet again very soon." He directed over his shoulder to my father and Edward who were both looking decidedly grim.

Widening my eyes, I silently implored Papa not to be too harsh on Edward, who bowed slightly in my direction. Then straightening his shoulders, he turned to face my father with the look of one condemned.

Grateful beyond measure for Papa's earlier promise...and the fact that he could not have brought a weapon into the palace if he'd wanted to...I was a little concerned by his greying pallor. His endurance was improving day by day, but I worried that the rigours of the journey had taken their toll.

"Don't worry. I'm sure Lord Edward will take good care of your father," the King assured me, apparently having discerned the source of my anxiety...or one of them.

They were almost too numerous to number.

Smiling tentatively, I allowed him to escort me across the cavernous throne room, trying my best not to stare like a girl in short dresses at my extravagant surroundings. We made our way towards another set of enormous carved doors that led to a series of opulently appointed drawing rooms, each more luxurious than the last, finally coming to a halt in a long, wide room lined with portraits in gilded frames.

"The rogues' gallery, I like to call it," the King explained with a rueful smile. "Ancestors and relatives for as far as the eye can see, going all the way back to William the Conqueror."

"It's very *impressive*, your Majesty," I offered tentatively, not at all sure of the protocol required for conversing with one's sovereign. It wasn't a topic Miss Brewer had covered in great detail.

All I'd have to do at my presentation, she'd said, was to curtsy correctly and then move on when signalled. I had expected to be a part of a group of young girls of minimal rank presented en masse, not engaging in private discussions with the King about our mutual ancestry.

Stifling a sigh, I concluded that while I may have made a right mess of things in my handling of our recent, tumultuous affairs, Papa's penchant for leaving me and my instructors completely in the dark had certainly not helped matters.

"You asked how I was able to recognise you so easily, Isabella, and to make note of the astonishing similarity between you and your dearly departed mother," the King commented as we slowly progressed down the length of the room. "Well, here is the reason," he concluded with a sweeping gesture to a painting that I soon recognised as being of my mother and a very handsome couple whom I assumed must be her parents.

The woman, my grandmother, I assumed, was wearing the same, triple-stranded pearl necklace that currently adorned my neck, and my hand rose to touch it reverently. My mother was much younger in the picture than my memories of her, but the likeness was undeniable, as was the quite remarkable similarity to my own visage.

"Proof positive, if any was needed, wouldn't you say?" the King mused, and I nodded, momentarily speechless.

The King released my arm and gestured for me to approach the large painting. Running my eyes eagerly over the canvas, I mentally recorded every detail. If I were allowed to study it for a while, I could make a reproduction for both my father and myself to cherish. The small portrait of my mother he'd had commissioned by a visiting artist held pride of place in our drawing room. I'd been very relieved to see that Lord Hunter had not taken it with him when he'd stripped the rooms of almost everything of value.

"Thank you for showing me this." I told the King sincerely. "Do you have any idea how old my mother was when this was painted?"

"Fifteen, or thereabouts. Just before the Terror," he replied, his expression sombre. "It wasn't finished, and the artist had taken it with him away from the palace to complete...which is how it came to be in my possession and not destroyed in the uprising or in the hands of the revolutionists."

"My father would dearly appreciate seeing this, if that were possible," I asked politely.

"Of course. That was my intention all along," he agreed. "But I thought he might like some privacy when he views it. I remember your father as a very serious and single-minded young man, and I received the impression that he loved your mother quite *recklessly*...a trait I suspect he may have passed on to his daughter. It wouldn't surprise me if his feelings have not faded overly, despite the passing of time."

"Your Highness is very astute in his observations...and considerate," I acknowledged with a smile.

"A sovereign must put the welfare of his subjects ahead of his own, or so your benefactor, Lord Carlisle, has informed me on numerous occasions. He likes to badger me with his social justice rhetoric whenever I'm in the mood for a good debate...even when I'm not, come to think of it.

"But enough of that...it is time we discussed your young gentleman, Lord Edward, and our current predicament." The King escorted me to a grouping of chairs and directed me to take a seat.

"To be perfectly honest, I had all but forgotten about your father and his princess bride, so quietly had they chosen to conduct themselves," he admitted with a grimace. "But when Carlisle came to me requesting my assistance—in very guarded terms, I assure you, as protecting your reputation was clearly paramount— my memory was stimulated by recent events, and I made the connection, quickly

realising that Sir Charles Swan's heroic young daughter was, in fact, my very own cousin. I was more than happy to accommodate Carlisle in teaching his son a lesson that I doubt he will forget in a hurry. Mistaking a relative of *mine* for a common maid...really!"

I smiled hesitantly, and he continued.

"It is most regrettable, my dear, that I was not able to prevent your recent time of distress. I can only imagine the indignities you endured, forced to masquerade as a *servant*." He visibly shuddered, and I ducked my head for a second to hide my smile. "When Lord Edward came seeking permission to marry a young lady whom I gathered he had taken terrible advantage of and whom he was falsely informed was not of a suitably high enough station to be his marchioness—but whom I knew to be a member of *my* family—I was in half a mind to not only deny his request but strip him of his titles *and* have him thrown in the Tower!"

I gasped, my hand rising to my throat at the image of Edward disgraced and imprisoned...over *me*! I was about to beg for the King's mercy, but he forestalled me with a raised hand.

"*However...* I decided that would not be necessary, as his willingness to forsake all to make amends for his deplorable behaviour and attempt to win your hand was rather impressive. Not that I was about to grant his request without first discovering your thoughts and feelings on the matter, but the rather enthusiastic greeting between the two of you that I just witnessed leads me to believe that you would not be opposed to the match?"

His voice rose in question along with my hopes and the colour of my cheeks.

"No, I would not be opposed at all, your Majesty," I assured him, deciding not to mention that there were still certain matters I needed to discuss with Edward about the nature of any union between us. "But please, I pray that you will forgive me for my dreadful lapse in good manners. When I left Worthington Hall, I thought I would never see Edward again, and I believed that was for the best. Then I found out that I am probably not an unsuitable match, after all, and I was in a terrible hurry to stop him from relinquishing his titles unnecessarily. But when I saw him, I completely forgot myself and..."

"There...there..." The King halted my rambling account, surprising me by patting my hand. "Despite all evidence to the contrary, I do recall what it was like to be young and swept up in the moment."

Relieved beyond measure that he did not appear overly offended by my impetuous and highly inappropriate display, I smiled shyly. "You are too kind, your Majesty."

"Not at all, and by that, I mean most people would say *not at all*. But what is this about you *probably* being a suitable match for a Marquess? The burning question is whether a Marquess is of a high enough rank for *you*, my dear...and what exact rank I should bestow upon you."

"Rank?" I gaped.

"Yes...if the French Court were still in existence, you'd be a princess or duchesse at the very least. If Edward were the Duke of Worthington then there wouldn't be an issue...not that I'm wishing any harm to befall his father, of course, though the blasted man does seem intent on setting my empire on its head with his outrageous notions to free all slaves, pull the child labourers out of the mines, send them to school and give better rights to women or some such nonsense."

Shaking his head, he seemed to lose his train of thought.

"If Edward were the Duke of Worthington?" I prompted.

"Yes...exactly. Then the two of you could marry, you'd become a duchess of some standing, and all would be right with the world. But as it stands, he's merely a marquess—still a noble rank of course, but *not* as impressive as either duke or prince—and not set to inherit for decades, as I fear Lord Carlisle will outlive us all. To make up for my regrettable familial neglect, I'm considering bestowing a small duchy upon you, making you a duchess in your own right. But regardless, once word of our relationship is made public, we'll have the princes of Europe lining up outside the castle door for a chance to win your hand intent on forging an alliance or improving their existing one."

I stared at him, aghast.

"Becoming a marchioness is truly more than enough for me," I insisted, with more than a hint of pleading in my tone. Worried about the direction of the King's thoughts and plans, I quickly weighed my options. I hoped I would not offend the King by alluding to the truth, but I decided that now was not the time for prevarication.

"I'm not sure how much you've been told about the, er...nature of Edward's and my relationship when he thought I was a maid, and when I thought my father was gone, along with my place in society." I studied my wringing hands as I spoke.

"Don't be afraid to speak plainly, my dear." The King's tone was gentle, and I looked up to see him watching me closely, his expression kind. "I'm not easily shocked, nor am I as prudish as the dowagers who terrorise young *débutantes* such as yourself...and the rest of the *ton* for that matter," he grumbled and then indicated I should continue.

Taking a deep breath, I chose my words carefully. "There is a certain expectation placed on a young lady approaching matrimony, your Majesty. I wouldn't want to cause a *misunderstanding* between Great Britain and one of her allies if they thought I had married under false pretences."

"Hmmm...there is that," he mused, rubbing his chin while I held my breath. "No one would think anything of it if you were a man, but there is such a lot of credence placed on one's bride being virginal. Not that I'm criticising you for doing what you needed to survive under truly trying circumstances," he surprised me by saying. "You're of the aristocracy, Isabella, and as far as I'm concerned, we're the ones who *make* the rules, so we can break them if it suits us. Though you might not want to mention my saying that to the Archbishop, as he's a belligerent fellow at the best of times and gets rather testy when I challenge the authority of the church."

"No, of course not," I murmured, doing my best not to smile at the panicked look that had appeared in the King's eyes.

"Now, let me make sure I understand your wishes correctly." He frowned in concentration. "Despite the fact that Lord Edward appears to have behaved highly inappropriately, you'd still prefer marriage to him than having your pick of the princes of Europe?"

"Most definitely, your Majesty," I insisted. "I realise that it is not at all fashionable nor generally taken into consideration when choosing a partner for matrimony, but...but I love him, and I want to spend my life with him and no other."

The King studied me for a long moment, and I determinedly held his gaze.

"I *could* overrule yours and Edward's wishes as could your father." The King let the weight of his words sink in for a moment before continuing. "But I have a feeling that wouldn't stop the two of you from taking matters into your own hands." He raised his brows in enquiry, and though I swallowed hard, I did not contradict his statement.

"Well..." he harrumphed. "We can't have prominent if impetuous young lords eloping with recently discovered cousins to the British crown, now can we? But I do

own to being somewhat disappointed by the inflexibility of your decision, Isabella. I was having so much fun stringing young Edward along...*and* I thought I could catch Carlisle out at his own game, as I'm sure he had no desire for me to actually go through with the ruse to have his son disinherited."

"Oh no, I'm sure he didn't," I quickly agreed.

Sighing, the King sat disconsolately for a moment, but then a gleeful smile spread across his face.

"You do realise that I still may get my wish, as I'd be surprised if the man of your choosing is in any fit state for matrimony once your father has finished with him!"

EPOV

My thoughts were in turmoil as a myriad of emotions bombarded my senses. Joy was primary. It bubbled within me at my having been reunited, however briefly, with Bella. The look on her face when she'd run towards me, the way she'd thrown herself into my arms and that sweet, passionate kiss...

She still loved me!

Added to my joy was frustration at knowing I had been played by both the King and my own father—not that I didn't deserve the lambasting I'd received or having my resolve and the sincerity of my feelings put to the test.

Finally, I was more than a little discombobulated by the day's revelations. Bella was the daughter of a princess and cousin to the King?

I could only assume that she hadn't known, though how and why the knowledge was kept from her was still a mystery as was my father's involvement in this affair. I had no doubt that he was intent on seeing me held accountable for my actions, but I couldn't believe that he had knowingly withheld such important information, certainly not when he'd arrived to discover Bella at Worthington Hall and the state of affairs between us. It would have been entirely out of character for him to intentionally put a young lady through such unnecessary distress.

Overlaying all of these feelings was a determination to face Bella's father with humility and grace along with a tentative hope that his presence here today boded well, at least to some extent. If he had no intention of allowing me a place in his

daughter's life, then surely he would not have brought her to London to find me. Not that I expected him to make it easy on me, of course.

I would accept whatever consequences he chose to place upon me for my behaviour as long as they did not include separation from Bella's life for any length of time.

That particular punishment was simply unendurable.

As the King escorted Bella across the throne room, and with the look of entreaty she had sent her father's way warming my heart, I schooled my features and faced the man whom I hoped would soon be my father-in-law.

A distinguished-looking gentleman with typical military bearing, it was apparent that he was not fully recovered from the life-threatening injuries he had sustained at James' hands. Not for the first time, I wished I'd gotten *my* hands on Hunter before he'd slipped through the net and escaped the country. He would have thought twice about engaging in such treacherous behaviour again after I was done with him...that's if he'd been able to think at all.

"Sir Charles." I bowed and then signalled to a nearby steward. "Might I suggest we retire to a nearby drawing room for our discussion and to await the King and Isabella's return?"

"Very well, Lord Edward," he agreed with an equally formal bow, and together we made our way the short distance to the room I had come to know so well during these past weeks. It was a pity Jasper hadn't attended with me today, as I could have done with his wisdom and insight, though it was probably for the best. If Jasper had been present, I would not have been able to get Alice to leave us in peace.

There were some battles a man must face alone and preferably without a younger, female sibling in attendance.

Breathing heavily, Sir Charles took a seat while I asked the steward for two glasses of water.

"Unless you would prefer something stronger, Sir?" I turned to Bella's father.

He declined. "No, thank you. I shall need a clear head for our coming *discussion*, though you might like to take something fortifying," he added drolly.

Swallowing hard, I decided that I would be wise to maintain a clear head also, and

I took a seat across from him before signalling for the steward to leave us. Sir Charles sipped his water slowly, his colour gradually returning to normal.

Facing Bella's father, my heart beat loudly in my chest as I considered how to begin. But before I could open my mouth to form my apology, Sir Charles spoke, his words initially incomprehensible.

"Before we address the more delicate issues at hand, I would like to begin by saying that you have my heartfelt and eternal gratitude for keeping my daughter alive when I was unable to protect her." His sincerity was unmistakeable, and I stared, my mouth agape.

"She has informed me of some of the dangers that she faced while masquerading as a servant, along with your heroic and repeated interventions," he continued. "I cannot possibly put into words how grateful I am that she escaped grievous injury or express my profound relief at having her returned to me alive and well."

"You are very welcome, Sir," I eventually managed to utter. "It was my pleasure."

As soon as I had spoken, I regretted my ill-chosen wording.

"So I gather," he muttered, raising a decidedly sardonic brow.

I opened my mouth to attempt an explanation, but he silenced me with a sharp slice of his hand.

"When I first became aware of the impossible situation in which my daughter found herself—and don't think for a moment that I'm unaware that certain pressures were brought to bear on her during a time of great vulnerability—I was of a mind to see you punished severely.

"I debated between having you horse-whipped; seeing you hung, drawn and quartered and your body parts sent to the four corners of the empire as a warning to other, libidinous young gentlemen; or having you tarred and feathered, momentarily deciding that a combination of all three would have been too good for you..."

Gulping, I imagined that it was my turn to be exhibiting a greyish pallor as I felt my blood run cold...not that I blamed the man sitting before me for his violent threats. It was *his* sweet, innocent and virginal daughter I had violated, after all.

"...but it quickly became apparent to me that my daughter would be most upset if I carried out even one such punishment. That's when I realised that she was sincere

in her profession of affection and that I would have to find it within my heart to forgive you for ruining her in such a self-serving manner."

Sighing, Sir Charles reached forward and took another sip of his drink, while I decided that silence was quite the better part of valour...for the moment.

With a slightly trembling hand, I reached for my own glass of water, regretting my decision not to have poured myself a fortifying libation after all.

"Quite simply, Lord Edward, my daughter loves you," Bella's father continued, his words warming my heart though my hope remained tentative at best. "She might be young, but I do not believe her attachment is a fleeting infatuation. One thing I know about Bella is that she is a particularly single-minded young lady, and when her mind is made up it stays that way."

I waited, speaking only when he remained silent for a time.

"While I am aware that my treatment of her speaks volumes to the contrary, I love your daughter very much, Sir Charles, and I am willing to do whatever it takes to prove my worth and sincerity." Meeting his eyes squarely, I could see him measuring me, no doubt weighing the truth and integrity of my words and character against my actions. He appeared to reach some inner conclusion, nodding his head once...decisively.

"Relinquishing your titles and having yourself disinherited was certainly a grand gesture, but what I can't understand is why you didn't just come and talk to me before embarking on such a radical and foolhardy course of action? I suppose that this way there is no doubting your commitment, though your sanity and intelligence appear to be in question."

"It seemed the logical course of action at the time," I murmured, resisting the urge to squirm like a schoolboy being addressed by his headmaster.

"Yes...well," he harrumphed. "Before I so much as consider an alliance, I must be confident that you are worthy of Bella's love and my trust. Can I place my daughter's future happiness into your safekeeping? Will you cherish her as she deserves, irrespective of fashionable opinion regarding the treatment of and expectations placed on ones bride? Will you be faithful to her *always*? Will you treat her with respect, honouring her above all others?"

His rapid-fire demands did not set me on my heels but were in complete accord with my desires. Answering promptly and with determination, I vowed, "I will, every

moment of every day for the rest of our lives."

Sir Charles eyed me seriously for a long, fraught moment, his expression not softening a whit.

"There is one more thing," he intoned sombrely, and I moved forward to the edge of my seat. "Every couple, even those fortunate enough to share an abiding love and deep commitment to one another will have moments of discord."

Once again, I nodded, albeit a tad uncertain of the man's direction. Leaning forward, he eyed me intensely, and I caught a glimpse of the renowned officer lurking just beneath the polished, gentlemanly exterior. Recalcitrant subordinates must have surely shaken in their boots to be the recipient of such a look, and I was no exception.

"Under no circumstances do I *ever* want to hear that the choices my daughter was forced to make while she awaited your father's return have been thrown back in her face or used against her...choices that *you* played a significant part in her making. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Perfectly," I responded soberly. "I have yet to meet a braver, more admirable lady than your daughter, Sir Charles. And I promise, on my word of honour, that I will always treat her with the love, respect and consideration that she deserves."

He studied me for a moment longer, and then his moustache twitched with the beginnings of a smile.

"Then we are in agreement," he stated, and my shoulders sagged with relief.

"Though there is one final issue we need to discuss," he added, and I quickly straightened. "I wouldn't be at all surprised if the King doesn't have a plan cooked up to marry Bella off to a prince or duke with whom he wishes to improve ties or placate in some manner."

I nodded grimly. "I have entertained that possibility, also."

"Bella's happiness is paramount to me, and I will not have her used as a political pawn. "

"What do you propose?" I asked, intrigued.

"If the King attempts to force my daughter into a marriage of expedience, you

have my permission to abscond with her at the earliest opportunity and high-tail it to Gretna Green...and don't spare the horses. I'm sure a leisurely honeymoon spent exploring the Continent would be very much to Bella's liking, and I'm reasonably confident that any desire for retribution the King may feel at having his plans thwarted will have waned by the time of your return."

I stared him, nonplussed. "You're giving your approval for me to elope with your daughter?"

"Only if it proves absolutely necessary, as I must say, I'm quite looking forward to walking Bella down the aisle. I'm sure she will make a truly beautiful bride."

"I'm sure she will," I agreed, stunned, relieved and with the beginnings of a smile curving my lips as the weight of the world lifted off my shoulders.

~AFL~

Thanks so much for all your wonderful reviews and welcome to all the new readers. I'm so glad that my torrid little tale (the torrid stuff will return very soon, I promise) is bringing joy to so many people.

xxx TLSue

Meddling

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I've got 21 days holiday coming up starting next Thursday, so I'm hoping to get back to twice weekly posts...YAY!

Thanks to my wonderful betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for all their encouragement and help. You guys make me smile. :D

Welcome to all the new readers, and thank you so much to the lovely readers who take the time to review. I'm sorry I don't get to reply very often, but I read every one, smile like a loon and get back to my writing with renewed motivation.

I thought you might like to know that A Forbidden Love and my vamp story, Once Bitten, are being translated into French and Russian. Cool hey?

I'd like to credit Cockerspanmom for this chapter's title (and the somewhat Machiavellian twist at the end that it inspired).

Updated: Thursday, 29th March 2012

Words: 3871

Chapter 58

Meddling

BPOV

I was impatient to return to Edward and my father to discover the outcome of their having become acquainted...and just because I couldn't wait to see my beloved. Our reunion had been achingly sweet but altogether too short.

The King was in no hurry, saying he wanted to make up for his regrettable familial neglect by hearing all about my life. In particular, he was interested in the "extraordinary excitement and adventures" of the previous few months.

Personally, I wouldn't have described it in quite the same manner, but I did my best to regale the curious sovereign. He seemed intent on painting me as a heroine

for surviving the "unspeakable horror of a member of the aristocracy finding oneself in the role of a servant!"

Up until a few days earlier, I'd had no idea I was an aristocrat. Regardless, I imagined that the same reaction would be forthcoming from any member of the ruling or upper classes faced with having to perform menial tasks in return for their supper.

When we finally made the return journey to the throne room, I had to remind myself not to rush ahead of the King as it would have been highly improper. Repeating my earlier performance and throwing myself into Edward's arms the minute I saw him again was not an option either...no matter how much I was tempted, I mused, ducking my head to hide my smile.

Looking up eagerly when we passed through the large double doors once again, my face fell when I did not see Edward or my father waiting. Torn between hopeful anticipation regarding the outcome of their meeting and worry that it may not have gone well, I nervously bit my lower lip.

"They'll be along shortly, my dear," the King assured me, leading me across the room to a doorway hidden behind a wide pillar. It led into a surprisingly inviting salon. Several velvet-padded chairs were arranged congenially before a fireplace that was lit to ward off the chill that seemed to permeate the palace's stone walls. Deep burgundy and gold brocade curtains were drawn back from the windows to reveal a sunlit courtyard teeming with greenery and spring blossoms.

The setting was lovely, but I was too anxious to appreciate it or savour the tea that was served as soon as the King and I were seated. Nursing my cup, my eyes lighted gratefully upon Edward's handsome visage the moment he came into view.

He smiled at me, and I quickly placed my cup on an intricately carved side-table, resisting the urge to rise to my feet. Papa followed him into the room, and I was relieved to see that his colour was greatly improved. His expression revealed little—something I would not normally be perturbed by. But under the circumstances, I wished he was easier to read.

"Your Majesty," Edward addressed the King, bowing low before walking to stand before me and bowing once more. "My Lady," he greeted, his eyes sparkling as he took my hand in his, raising it to his lips.

"Lord Edward," I murmured, nodding my head.

"Hmmm...a slightly more socially acceptable greeting than earlier," the King commented, causing both Edward's and my cheeks to bloom with colour. "But nowhere near as entertaining to watch."

"Depends on the relationship of the observer, I believe," Papa contradicted, and the King chortled.

"Well...do take a seat. One gets a stiff neck having to stare up at people, which is why thrones are always placed on a dais," the King grumbled. "But this is a far more comfortable setting for what is, essentially, a family gathering, don't you think?"

Papa took a seat across from the King, leaving Edward to sit by my side. He was still holding my hand and appeared to have no intention of letting it go. Neither the King nor my father commented, so I linked my fingers with Edward's but refrained from nestling into his side the way I would have liked.

"I must say, Sir Charles, that I am quite disillusioned. You have failed to live up to your military reputation," the King grumbled, and my father raised a brow in enquiry.

"Lord Edward looks to be in remarkably pristine condition, considering that I left the two of you alone for the better part of an hour," the King offered by way of explanation. "I was expecting at least a blackened eye or bloodied nose."

"I have found that the threat of violence...if it is extreme enough...is usually sufficient, your Majesty," Papa responded drily.

Edward moved restlessly at my side, and I squeezed his hand.

"Very true...very true," the King acknowledged, appearing to be genuinely disappointed that Papa had not beaten Edward around the head with his cane. "Though I'm sure you'd agree that that utter rogue and scoundrel, James Hunter, deserves more than mere threats after his despicable behaviour. Such a pity the man's as slippery as an eel, or I'd let you at him and thoroughly enjoy the spectacle!"

"As would I, your Majesty," my father replied with relish, and Edward growled his agreement.

"But enough of such distressing conversation in front of a lady," the King declared, gesturing my way. "Isabella and I have come to an understanding, one I admit to being a tad disappointed by. Despite my offering her the very real possibility of marriage to a crown prince, it appears her heart is set on a future with

the House of Cullen."

This time Edward squeezed *my* hand, and I looked up to see him smiling softly, his gaze warm with relief. Leaning closer, he murmured, "That is very good news, indeed."

"Yes...well..." the King harrumphed. "That's assuming Isabella's father gives his approval, of course."

"Of course." Edward straightened and faced my father, but he could not completely stifle his smile. I sighed with relief, concluding that he and Papa must have come to an agreement.

"Before we start making plans, I believe my daughter and Edward need a few moments in private," Papa stated, and I realised he was giving me the opportunity I needed to discuss my concerns with Edward before matters went any further.

"Are you sure that's wise?" the King drawled in response to my father's request, and my cheeks blazed.

"There are matters that Edward and I must discuss before we can make any decisions regarding our future, your Majesty," I explained, relieved that the King did not take my words as an opportunity to press his desire that I consider marriage to someone more politically advantageous to the crown than Edward.

"Yes, I'm sure that there are," he murmured, his tone wry. Studying us for a moment, he eventually gestured to the French doors that opened onto the courtyard.

"Sir Charles, if you approve, I think the garden would be a suitable location for Lord Edward and your daughter to conduct their discussion while the two of us sit and enjoy our tea...observing from a discreet distance."

The last was directed Edward's way, and I glanced up to see colour staining his high, sculptured cheekbones.

"Thank you, your Majesty," Papa acknowledged. "Edward, Bella." He gestured toward the garden and we both stood and made our obeisance to the King. With my hand resting carefully on Edward's arm, we walked through the doors to the flower-strewn courtyard where we could speak privately.

"Shall we take a seat?" Edward asked, and I nodded, gladly sitting beside him on a carved garden bench, our knees angled towards each other.

Suddenly the air was filled with tension. Despite our intimidating audience, we were almost alone.

"I thought I'd never see you again," I murmured, and he groaned, his long dark lashes fluttering against his cheeks as his eyes closed.

"Oh, Bella, I've missed you," he breathed, opening his eyes to pierce my heart with the love shining from his emerald eyes.

I felt tears well in my own eyes, and I quickly blinked them back.

"Don't cry, my darling." He reached to brush an errant tear from my cheek, and I allowed myself the indulgence of briefly leaning into his hand. "We're together now, and nothing will ever separate us again...I promise. That's if you *do* want to marry me?" he asked uncertainly. He dropped his hand, and I reached to clasp it with my own.

"Of course I do." I smiled at him through my tears. "But there *are* things that we need to talk about."

"Of course," he murmured huskily. "Beginning with me apologizing profusely, repeatedly and from the bottom of my heart for ignoring the startlingly obvious fact that you were not and never could be a commoner."

"Why couldn't I be?" I asked, and Edward's beautiful wide brow furrowed with confusion.

"Why *couldn't* I be a commoner?" I repeated, surprising myself with the direction of my thoughts. I had not intended to discuss this particular topic with Edward at this point. But his words triggered an outpouring of the indignation that had been brewing within me for some time.

"Is the blood that flows through my veins really so superior to that of Angela, with her compassion and kindness, or Mrs. Cope, with her organisational skills and vast knowledge of housekeeping? Or what about Henson's leadership ability or Chef Peters' creative talent? They're but a few of the commoners that we both know...good, fine and clearly intelligent people...whose only difference to us, that I can see, are the opportunities and education that we have received and they have not. Are we of the ruling class, with our superficiality, entitlement and disdain for hard work, really so superior to those who must rely on their wits, abilities and personal endeavour to survive?"

Smiling ruefully, Edward bowed his head in my direction. "I stand, or rather *sit*, corrected by a very valid opinion from one of the few members of our society who has experienced life on either side of the divide," he murmured. "While I see the point you are making, you may not want to declare your rather revolutionary ideas too loudly considering your current location and company," he added, gesturing with his eyes towards the King who sat not twenty yards away.

Sheepishly, I shrugged, acknowledging his admonition. "Yes, of course...you're right. I didn't mean to get carried away. It's just that my experiences have caused me to question the status quo. While I would never dismiss the dangers or hardships, there were aspects to living as a commoner that I found somewhat appealing, and there was much to admire in the people who welcomed me as one of their own. I can't tell you how many times I found myself wishing that *you* were of a lower station, so that we could have married and made a life together away from the strictures of the *ton*."

"You almost received your wish." Edward smiled, but then his expression sobered. "I would have found a way to be with you, regardless of either of our stations, Bella. Losing you..." He closed his eyes, and I could see the pain the memory caused him. It took a moment before he could continue speaking. "Losing you," he repeated huskily, "confirmed to me how much you truly mean to me. I was deadly serious in my intention to give it all away if that's what it would have taken to have you in my life."

"I know," I murmured, my vision blurring as tears once more filled my eyes. "I felt the same. I even seriously considered taking you up on your offer to make me your mistress...at least until you were married," I admitted. "That's why I asked you if we could go abroad, as that was the only way I could think of to arrange matters between us without dishonouring my father's name. But then I heard that you had angered the Earl of Denali with your refusal to wed Lady Tanya, endangering your father's political cause. I was on my way to speak with you when Uncle Carlisle arrived home, and I discovered my father was still alive...and you discovered the truth about me."

"A day for shocks all round," Edward mused. "Ending with me practically demanding that you marry me and you rejecting me out of hand. But even when I realised my mistake and resorted to begging, you still refused me." He frowned, the pain my rejection had caused him evident in his tone.

"I was worried about my father finding out about us, of hurting and disappointing him after all he'd been through. But he's been remarkably understanding." Edward paled a little at my assessment, and I could only imagine what my father had

threatened to do to him if he hurt me in any way. Sighing, I stared down at our linked hands, and contemplated my words.

"I was trying not to be selfish," I murmured softly, "though it broke my heart to leave you on a lie. I *did* want to marry you...very much...but the cost appeared too great. I believe your father's political cause is very important, and I didn't want to jeopardise the passing of laws that could make a difference to the lives of so very many people. Nor did I want to be responsible for you giving up your heritage and place in society."

"My brave, beautiful, self-sacrificing girl." Edward smiled and reached to stroke my cheek in that way of his that warmed me to my very soul. "Not that I blame you after the dreadful picture I'd painted of married life, but I think there may have been a little more to your refusal than that...and I think those same fears might be at the heart of your current reservations."

Stifling a sob, the words poured from my heart. "I didn't think I could be the lady you wanted," I cried, responding to Edward's perceptiveness. "Even now, I would rather our time together remain a precious memory than for you to come to despise me for my lack. I'm not cold or unfeeling, and I don't think I can pretend to be. I don't *want* to pretend, and I simply could not bear being married to you and have you prefer to be with another woman."

"Oh, Bella," Edward groaned and hung his head before peering up at me with anguished eyes. "I deserve the horse-whipping your father threatened for making you feel inadequate. You are not and could never be lacking in *any* way," he declared with great feeling. "Bella, you are perfect to me, do you understand? Perfect! I love everything about you: your heart, your soul, your mind, your beauty, and interwoven through all of it is your incredible passion, a passion that I was privileged to have you share with me. I wouldn't change a single thing about you, Bella, not one...single...thing!"

"Do you really mean that?" I breathed, hopeful but wary.

"With all of my heart. I want nothing more than to have you as my wife *exactly* as you are. That's if you could find it within your heart to forgive me—and to trust me—though heaven knows, I've done little to earn it."

"But you told me what you expected in a wife, and it was so very different to what you wanted from me as your...your *lover*," I whispered.

Groaning, Edward lifted his free hand to run it raggedly through his hair, tousling

the bronze locks quite chaotically.

"Bella, please believe me when I tell you that I have been an utter fool. The only thing I did right in this entire situation was to recognise what a precious gem you are and to fall completely and irrevocably in love with you."

Relief at his response washed over me, cooling my heated cheeks and causing my lips to curve in a shy smile. The hope that I'd allowed to blossom over the last few days rose in my heart at the impassioned tone of Edward's plea.

"I would give you my word as a gentleman—but after the things I've told you about so-called gentlemanly behaviour, and the way I've behaved, I doubt that would stand for very much—so what I shall do is promise you that, from this day forth, earning your trust is my highest priority."

"You will honour your wedding vows?" I asked, unsurprised when Edward winced. I didn't want to hurt him, but I was determined there would be no ambiguity between us.

"Until death do us part. You are the only woman for me, Bella. Only you...ever," he declared, his gaze mesmerising in its intensity.

"And you won't want me to change in my demeanour towards you when we are alone together as man and wife?" I dropped my eyes, my heart pounding against the wall of my chest as I awaited his answer. For a long moment there was silence, and my lower lip trembled. But then he reached to gently caress my chin with his forefinger, slowly raising it so that I could not hide from his smouldering gaze.

"Bella, my love, I would like nothing more than to prove to you, once and for all, that you have absolutely nothing to fear in that regard. But if I were to take you in my arms and kiss you the way I so desperately desire, I fear that both the King and your father would make good on their threats, and the opportunity for me to express my delight at your passionate response to my lovemaking would be extremely short-lived."

Blushing at the husky timbre of Edward's words, and the torrid images they inspired, I regretted my lack of a fan. I could have sorely used one to cool my suddenly heated blood.

"Oh, my," I breathed, and swayed towards him. Groaning, Edward steadied me with his free hand.

"Later, sweetheart," he whispered, his eyes dark and filled with promise.

Blinking rapidly, it took me a moment to regain my composure. When I did, I couldn't keep the smile from my face. It was clear to me that Edward was sincere in his declaration, and my heart overflowed with hope for a wonderful future.

Still holding onto my hand, Edward moved to kneel before me, and my smile faded as I was overcome with emotion. I held my breath, suddenly aware that I, Bella Swan, a girl who'd thought of herself as a plain little nobody from the quiet village of Forkston, was about to be proposed to by the most wonderful, handsome and eligible young man in the Empire, in the garden of the King...*my cousin*...and with my father's blessing.

Edward wanted me for his wife, not because marriage to me was the most advantageous political alliance he could form—though I startled a little when I realised that it probably was—but because he loved me exactly as I was and had been willing to sacrifice a great deal to prove the sincerity of his feelings.

Gazing into his dear but oh, so serious expression, I waited for the words I had dreamed of hearing.

"Isabella Swan." He began, his voice infused with the love I could see shining from his eyes. "You are, without doubt, the most amazing young lady I will ever have the privilege to meet. While I know that I don't deserve it, I promise to spend every single day of the rest of our lives proving myself worthy of your love. Will you do me the extraordinary honour of agreeing to be my wife and thereby make me the happiest man alive?"

"Yes...I will," I breathed in reply, and Edward's eyes briefly closed, a look of intense joy and relief sweeping over his features. Then he smiled at me, his eyes sparkling as he lifted my hand to his lips, kissing the back of my gloved fingers tenderly.

"I want nothing more than to take you in my arms and kiss you properly, my love," he whispered when he finally lifted his mouth from my hand, leaning closer than propriety would normally allow. "But I dare not, though I promise to rectify the situation at the first available opportunity."

"I shall hold you to that," I murmured in reply, a warm flush heating my cheeks. "I am honoured that you want me to be your wife."

"Even though you could have married a prince and possibly become queen of your

own country one day?" he asked, a teasing tone to his voice despite its husky timbre.

I shuddered. "Oh, don't even jest," I moaned. "Becoming a marchioness is frightening enough. You will help me so that I don't embarrass myself, won't you?"

"I seriously doubt you will need much assistance," he chuckled. "I've seen you accomplish everything that's been thrown at you with remarkable aplomb. But I promise that I will be with you every step of the way, basking in the glow of your outstanding success and thoroughly enjoying being the envy of every man I meet."

I giggled at his silliness, but then my smile faded. "I love you, Edward," I whispered, infusing my words with all the emotion overflowing my joy-filled heart. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth about who I was from the beginning."

"I wish you had, but I understand why you didn't," he responded, his tone gentle.

"Do you think you would have still been interested in me if you'd known I was a member of the gentry?" I asked, shyly dropping my gaze. "Or would you have thought me beneath you...a country girl from a *supposedly* inconsequential family?"

Edward surprised me by laughing out loud. "Oh, Bella, I can guarantee you I would have been interested. In fact, wild horses couldn't have kept me away...or us apart." He glanced to the side, and I followed his gaze to see the King and Papa standing in the doorway watching us with matching and decidedly fatuous smiles on their faces. "But while your father is being extraordinarily obliging, all things considered, your meddling cousin just might have," he grumbled, rising to stand and assisting me to my feet.

I hid my smile behind my hand and quietly murmured, "What do you suggest we do?"

"Be very firm in our determination to negotiate the shortest betrothal possible," he answered sotto voce as we approached our audience. "I fear the King will want a protracted engagement to attempt to sway you to his will by parading his preferred candidates before you in an endless stream of European manhood."

"But I thought once a betrothal was announced, it couldn't be broken." I whispered earnestly.

"Try telling him that," Edward muttered, and I immediately considered a possible solution, albeit one that would require a fabrication...or the hint of one.

If the King thought Edward and I *had* to marry with all haste, his plans would be stymied, and Edward and I could marry at our earliest convenience.

Smiling, I approached my illustrious cousin and my thankfully smiling father with a very satisfied smile of my own. Two could play at this meddling game, and after everything I had endured, I felt no qualms whatsoever about manipulating things slightly in my...and Edward's...favour.

~AFL~

Le sigh...as one of my lovely betas commented. I just love a happily ever after, even a mini one along the way.

Thanks for all your lovely, encouraging reviews, and I'm so glad you're enjoying the story. A welcome reduction in angst for a little while, I foresee. ;)

xxx TLSue

Blessing

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have the loveliest betas, one who just told me she believes I could have my original stories published one day. Sigh...it's nice to dream.

Thanks to my awesome betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro. I can't tell you how much I appreciate all your help and inspiration.

Updated: Thursday, 5th April 2012

Words: 5477

Chapter 59

Blessing

BPOV

The day had turned out better than my wildest dreams: I was betrothed to my beloved, with my father's blessing. Now I just had to ensure that the wedding would not be long-delayed by royal ambitions. Not wanting to shock or distress my father, I made sure to send a surreptitious wink his way before addressing the King's declaration that my introduction to society must precede the announcement of Edward's and my betrothal.

"A heretofore unknown and yet surprisingly close relative to the crown will require a protracted and highly public engagement," the King announced after hearing the unsurprising news that I'd accepted Edward's proposal. "But only *after* you've been suitably and extensively introduced to society—domestic, foreign and royal, of course—at a series of formal events."

The King clearly harboured the belief that I could be enticed away from Edward's side by one of the supposedly charming princes he proceeded to speak of...at length. Edward was right, and despite our betrothal, the King apparently still planned to introduce me to his preferred candidates.

"The Crown Prince of Bavaria sounds quite delightful, your Majesty," I boldly interrupted when it became apparent that he intended to laud each prince's individual merits in minute detail while Edward fumed quietly at my side. "And I do

appreciate your desire that my introduction to society is suitably memorable. But I'm not entirely sure that delaying Edward's and my nuptials for a period of many months is the *wisest* course of action, considering the events that preceded our engagement..."

I let my voice trail away and my free hand wave vaguely in the vicinity of my mid-region. The King's eyes widened and his mouth formed a moue...the exact response I was hoping for as my insinuation had its desired effect. What I hadn't taken into account was Edward's response to our supposed news.

"Bella?" he whispered hoarsely, and I glanced up to see that he had become quite pale. For a horrible moment, I thought his knees might buckle again, and I instantly regretted my impetuous plan. With eyes wide, I smiled sweetly at Edward, willing him to understand the silent message I was attempting to convey.

"Or we could wait, for a *long* time, while I am paraded before every eligible royal prince from here to the Baltic Sea if you'd prefer," I murmured, my tone pointed.

"What? Oh...no, waiting is *not* a good idea," Edward agreed, his gaze dropping uncertainly to my stomach before returning to my still widened eyes. He smiled tentatively, and then we both turned to find the King eyeing us suspiciously.

Blushing, I bit my lower lip, convinced that he had seen right through my ruse. To my relief, he smiled...albeit ruefully.

"Well, Sir Charles." The King's tone was wry as he turned to address my father. "It would appear that young love may well be more powerful than the wishes of the King of England, but I'd prefer you kept that particular disclosure to yourself. If you are in agreement, I believe we must grant this young couple their wish to be married or suffer the consequences of your delightful daughter's machinations. It *appears* the wedding must occur earlier than I might have hoped, though probably not soon enough for the two of them," he chuckled, and Edward and I both breathed a sigh of relief.

"They have my blessing," Papa declared, smiling at me before directing a surprisingly fierce look Edward's way. I glanced up to see Edward swallow hard and then bow his head briefly in acknowledgement.

"Very well then," the King responded regretfully, though fortunately his eyes twinkled with humour. "The matter is decided. I will hold a ball in your honour, Isabella, five days from today, and introduce you to society, at which time you may announce your happy news, if you so desire."

"Thank you, your Majesty." I curtsyed low. "You are too kind."

"Just make sure you name at least one of your sons after me when you *eventually* have a child. You shall find that I'm quite the doting relative."

"It would be an honour, your Majesty," Edward formally intoned. "And we thank you for giving your blessing to our engagement and not insisting on my disinherittance."

"Yes...well..." the King harrumphed. "I can't have a cousin of mine betrothed to a ne're-do-well. It's bad enough she's marrying somewhat beneath herself, though I suppose I shouldn't grumble. At least she had the good sense to fall for a marquess and heir to a dukedom and not some usurper engaged in trade!" He shuddered.

"I would advise you to keep your wits about you, Lord Edward," he continued. "As I do believe that marriage to this particular young lady is going to provide you with quite the challenge. It's not often I find myself outfoxed...and by such a deceptively sweet opponent. God help us all if she decides to team up with your father and starts demanding social change. The two of them will have the empire in an uproar in no time."

Blushing profusely at the knowledge that the King appeared to have seen straight through my attempt at deception, I was relieved beyond measure that he was nevertheless willing to accommodate it. Under the circumstances, it seemed wise to refrain from admitting that I was indeed determined to make a difference in the lives of vulnerable girls and young women regardless of my station or marital status...though discovering that I was highly connected and independently wealthy, along with having Edward's and his family's support and backing, would surely be of tremendous assistance.

Reunited with Alice, and with a promise to return in three days' time for afternoon tea with the Queen, we returned to Cullen House at a far more sedate pace than the one we'd used on our mad dash to the castle.

Sitting beside Edward in the carriage with our arms entwined, I couldn't keep the smile from my face. Papa had taken the seat beside Alice, allowing Edward to remain at my side...one more sign that we had my father's approval for our soon-to-be-announced nuptials.

"Have you determined where we shall stay, Papa?" I asked once our journey was under way, and both Edward and Alice replied in unison.

"With us, of course!"

"Would that not appear unseemly, my residing under the same roof as my fiancé before the wedding?" I queried. Naturally, I would prefer to stay with Edward's family, considering the opportunities that would be presented to us to spend time together. But I was determined not to expose my father to further gossip...something I probably should have considered before implying there was a reason that would require a hasty marriage.

I attempted to apologise for my impulsively implied tale, but Papa forestalled me, surprising me with his sentiment.

"I'm not upset, Bella. In fact, I applaud your quick thinking as I don't think either of us would have particularly enjoyed the protracted process his Majesty had in mind. The way he was talking, you'd not have been free to marry for months, possibly years! We're country folk at heart, you and I, and I imagine that even a few weeks of being paraded before society's critical eye at one ball or soiree after another would stretch our endurance to the limits. I know it would mine!"

"Mine, too," I admitted before turning to Edward. "Will that be a problem?" I asked a little nervously. "I've promised to do my best, but I don't know how well I will be able to adapt to court and city life."

Edward lifted my hand and tenderly kissed the back of my fingers.

"Have no fear. You're forgetting that I will be with you every step of the way," he assured me. "Not that I'm one for spending *too* much time in the city. This might come as a surprise, but I'm a country lad at heart myself. Oh...I'll do the pretty in town and make the necessary appearances when Parliament is sitting. But I can't wait to show you Masen Park, in particular the magnificent stables which boast one of the finest horse-breeding programmes in the country.

"Sir Charles, you may be interested to hear about the modern farming practises I employ, as well as the cottage and manufacturing industries I've assisted to establish and continue to support. It is all part of the programme my father is encouraging landowners to implement to help find employment for returned soldiers, and to see an improvement in the working and living standards of our tenants and the villagers that rely on our patronage."

My father's eyes lit up, and I ducked my head against Edward's shoulder to hide my smile. He couldn't have chosen a better topic to gain Papa's interest—and win him over—than the care and support of our oft neglected and ill-treated returned

servicemen. The discussion that ensued between the two men looked as if it might engage them for some time to come.

"Yes...yes...That's all well and good," Alice interrupted, rolling her eyes. "But what I want to know is when are you and Edward going to get married? These things take time to organise, you know. There's the dress and trousseau to be fitted for, invitations to be sent out, flowers to be ordered...oh, the list is endless. And that doesn't include the fittings for the gowns we'll require for the King's ball—and we've only five days to prepare—not to mention our introductions to society, your engagement ball and all the invitations we shall receive to soirées and dinners and picnics...and we still haven't determined where you shall stay, though really, I can't see anyone batting an eyelash at you staying at Cullen House. It is enormous, with a veritable plethora of chaperones available, what with your father, my father and Lady Esme in attendance."

Barely stopping to draw breath, Alice continued in a similar vein for the rest of the journey. It was only when we drew up at the front of Cullen House that Edward finally managed to interject.

"With your permission, Sir, he addressed my father, "and with Bella's agreement, I should like to propose that our marriage occur one month from this Saturday." He raised a hand to halt Alice's impending outburst and continued. "That shouldn't appear too unseemly a rush, as one only requires a month for the reading of the banns and no special licence will be required. Location shouldn't be an issue, as London has no lack of cathedrals and abbeys, and I can virtually guarantee the various bishops will be lining up to do the honours when they discover Bella's connection to the crown.

"A little over a month of balls and parties will hopefully not be unendurable for you, Sir, and as an excuse for the shorter than average length of our betrothal, Bella and I can state our desire to honeymoon on the continent as reason, wanting to embark on our travels while the weather is still clement.

"That's unless your veiled comment to the King regarding the *timing* of our nuptials was not a clever subterfuge to avoid the plot to marry you off to some European prince but was based in truth?" Edward turned to me, his eyebrows raised uncertainly.

Smiling, I patted his hand. "A month from now will be perfectly acceptable," I assured him. "Don't you agree, Papa?"

"Fine by me." My father nodded. "I can see you two settled and still be home in

time for the harvest."

"And don't forget the opportunity you will be afforded to become a little better acquainted with Lady Penelope in the meantime," I teased, and it was my father's turn to blush.

~AFL~

We arrived home to discover both Uncle Carlisle and Lady Esme in residence and eager to hear our news. Carlisle quickly admitted his part in the plot to test Edward's mettle, though he had the grace to look abashed when Papa pointed out the unnecessary distress his plot had caused.

"A letter would have been appreciated," Papa admonished his old friend. "Something to alert Bella to the actual circumstance and assure her that a future with Edward was still an option. My daughter has suffered enough these last months, and she could have done without having to experience the despair of believing her future happiness had been sacrificed to expediency. Then there was the uncertainty of not knowing whether or not we would be too late to prevent your son from making an extreme and ultimately unnecessary sacrifice."

Carlisle paled a little at Papa's bald stating of affairs and apologised profusely for leaving me so thoroughly out of the loop. I was more than willing to let bygones be bygones on the condition that neither Edward nor I were left uninformed again...intentionally or otherwise. As far as I was concerned, we'd endured enough misunderstandings and near tragedies based on ignorance to last a lifetime.

"Edward and I just want to move on together," I spoke for us both, squeezing the hand of my beloved that was still laced with mine. My statement was met with rejoicing at the news of our betrothal and an assertion from Edward's parents that, of course, my father and I must reside with them until the wedding.

Papa mentioned Lady Penelope's invitation for me to stay with her, but Carlisle informed us she was still visiting with her boys and was not due to arrive in town for another few days. My hope that this meant Edward and I would be allowed at least *some* time together to reacquaint ourselves after our weeks apart was quickly dashed, however, when I was whisked away by Alice and Esme to begin what felt like a never-ending discussion regarding couturiers, milliners, shoemakers and the like. I thought the lovely gowns I'd brought with me from Worthington Hall were more than sufficient for my introduction to society...but apparently I was mistaken.

With only five days until my coming-out ball, my days were quickly booked up with

appointments for fittings with the various experts that Alice and Lady Esme deemed essential for me to grace with my patronage. Fortunately, Papa recognised the air of desperation that exuded from me in waves by the time dinner was announced that evening, and he insisted time be allotted in my ridiculously busy schedule to "see some of the city sights and take a turn around the nearby parks and gardens"...with Edward in attendance, thankfully.

In contrast to the stresses of the afternoon, dinner was an extremely pleasant affair, seated as I was between my father and my fiancé—oh, how I rejoiced to be able to describe Edward thus! If Edward occasionally let his hand slip beneath the fine, white linen tablecloth at the same time as I chose to do the same, and if we occasionally took the opportunity to clasp each other's hands, our gloveless fingers entwining in a gentle dance of joyous remembrance...none of our dinner companions were the wiser...or so we hoped.

After dinner, Edward declined both brandy and a cigar and requested leave to accompany the ladies to the adjoining drawing room. It thrilled my heart to know that he was as eager to remain in my presence as I was to be in his. Under Lady Esme's amused but watchful eye, we took a seat together just a little closer than propriety would normally decree. At first, we sat in silence, our matching smiles conveying both mood and appreciation as we revelled in the knowledge that nothing would ever part us again...well, other than our chaperones imposing the restraints society placed on couples during their betrothals.

My smile fell at the thought, though I inwardly scolded myself for my impatience.

"What is it, my love?" Edward murmured, his brow furrowing.

"Nothing really," I whispered with a shake of my head, but he insisted I share my thoughts. "I was just thinking how challenging it will be not to bristle at the restrictions we'll be faced with these coming weeks, when we've known such freedom in the past."

Edward's eyes darkened, the planes and angles of his face standing out in stark relief as his jaw visibly tightened.

"Should I not have admitted to such a thing?" I queried on a quick intake of breath. "Forgive me for my lack of decorum. I fear it may take me a while to find my footing in our relationship," I admitted, ducking my head with embarrassment.

"Bella, no..." Edward breathed and lifted my chin so that I could not hide from his gaze. "Your honesty is one of the many things I love about you," he declared, and my

eyebrows rose.

"My honesty?"

"Yes...your honesty." Edward smiled ruefully. "You may have been forced by circumstance to keep certain matters hidden, but you have always been honest in the expression of your thoughts, opinions and affection. I would not change that about you, Bella, even if it does mean I am sure to be thoroughly discomposed on occasion by your openness."

Leaning closer, he whispered huskily, "I, too, am torn between an almost overwhelming desire to whisk you away somewhere that we can be alone...society be damned...and a keen determination to show the utmost respect to both you and your father."

Sighing, I silently applauded the strength of Edward's character and his good intentions while calculating how many nights we must endure until the day of our wedding.

Papa and Uncle Carlisle soon joined us, and I feared they would insist we all engage in a group game or activity. But to my relief, they seemed content to spend a desultory evening catching up on general news and discussing shared acquaintances with Lady Esme and Alice, leaving Edward and I to continue with our personal reacquainting.

"So tell me everything," he insisted, eliciting a giggle as I recalled his previous inquisitions when he'd thought I was a maid. "Seriously, Bella, there are so many things I don't know about you, things you couldn't tell me before without giving away your true identity. I'm assuming that much of what you told me was based in truth, but I want to know it all: what your childhood was like, your friendships, your dreams for the future...everything."

Discerning that she would not be intruding, Alice soon joined us, and between brother and sister, I was subjected to what felt like a rather intense interrogation. Their curiosity and eagerness to know everything about me was endearing, and so I happily obliged, though I was quite grateful when tea was served as my throat had become quite parched.

"Enough!" I laughed after another half hour had passed and there appeared to be no end to their incessant questioning in sight. "I'm thoroughly sick of the sound of my own voice," I declared emphatically. "It's time for you to answer some of my questions. Edward, in particular...what exactly have *you* been up to since we were

last together at Worthington Hall? Alice has been very informative, but I fear there are considerable gaps in her knowledge...gaps I'm sure she would like to have filled also."

Alice readily agreed, and Edward found himself on the receiving end of his sister's rather demanding interrogative style. I let her do the questioning, happy to rest against the padded couch...and the warmth of Edward's shoulder.

We'd inched closer and closer as the evening had progressed, with no rebuke or complaint forthcoming from our admittedly indulgent parents. While I listened avidly to Edward's detailed accounting of events, a part of me was content to savour the closeness of his body to mine. The press of his long, lean muscular thigh against my own was a particular delight, as was the way his fingers gently and continuously caressed my hand as if he was memorising its lines and planes anew.

It was only when Edward mentioned Jasper's role in events, and Alice visibly tensed, her lovely features becoming drawn with sorrow, that I interjected.

"You still care for him, don't you?" I murmured, and she nodded, tears welling in her eyes.

"Father says that he must prove his trustworthiness before I am allowed to see him again," she admitted, clearly puzzled by her father's stance.

Sighing, I wondered if I should have been more forthcoming with regard to the truly dreadful things he had said in my presence, though he was surely not an orphan when it came to partaking of such horrid practises as his cavalierly spoken words had intimated. It pained me to acknowledge that Edward had no doubt been party to the same appalling behaviour that was considered quite appropriate for young gentlemen to engage in...visiting brothels and assuming that the young girls working in them were grateful for the opportunity and better off than those in service.

"Edward?" I looked up to see him watching me closely, his brow furrowed with concern. "Would you say that Lord Jasper is a *good* man...despite...well, the things he said in my hearing?"

Edward eyes widened at my question, and he shot a wary glance Alice's way.

"Bella's told me some of what goes on, Edward," she admitted, and he swallowed hard. "About the double standard that society deems acceptable to impose on its young men and women. Personally, I don't know what's worse, the damage that

surely must be done to the character and sensibilities of young gentlemen instructed in such duplicity or the misery inflicted on young ladies forced to deny their natural inclinations and doomed to a life of deceit as both victim and resentful perpetrator."

"And then there are the poor girls, some still children, used and abused by a society that condones both cruelty and blatant hypocrisy," I added passionately, and Edward visibly paled. "Not that I am saying you or Lord Jasper would have ever knowingly hurt a child..."

"But we've done naught to protect them either and, I hate to admit it, may well have inflicted great harm in ignorance," he offered soberly, the atmosphere in the room suddenly fraught with tension as we became aware that our elders had interrupted their conversation to listen in.

"I'm sorry," I quickly apologised. "I shouldn't have brought up such an indelicate subject."

"You've done nothing but expose a frightful truth; one that I regret few gentlemen could count themselves completely innocent of having been in some way involved," Carlisle interjected, his tone and expression sombre. "I suspect you had a reason for raising the issue...particularly regarding my daughter and her continued affection for Lord Jasper. Would you mind divulging your thoughts with us, Bella, as personally, I am at somewhat of a loss as to know how to proceed? Maybe younger, fresher eyes than mine will bring a different perspective."

Swallowing the lump that had formed in my throat, I summoned the courage to speak openly. "I believe that Lady Alice's feelings for Lord Jasper are heartfelt," I offered.

"As are his for her," Edward interjected, and Alice's quick intake of breath drew all our attention.

Carlisle's clearly pained observation of her hope-filled expression did not soften his response. "That's all very well," he demanded. "But how shall I ever trust the man with my daughter?"

"In the same way that I am willing to trust your son with mine, I imagine," Papa retorted. "By making sure that the gentlemen our daughters have chosen know precisely what the consequences of failing to live up to their word will be."

"Yes, I suppose there is that," Carlisle conceded. "But there is only so much influence a father can have over his daughter's well-being once she is married." His

expression sympathetic but resolute, he turned towards Alice. "I am sorry, my dear, but I'm afraid I've discovered that Lord Jasper has a reputation barely one step removed from a libertine. He has vowed to change his ways and prove himself worthy of your hand, but I really don't see how I will ever be able to trust him."

"Then who will you trust?" Alice cried. "For while Jasper may have behaved badly in the past, how different is he than any other young man you may choose for me other than by degree? Don't they all receive the same license to indulge their desires at whim and to treat their wedding vows with almost total disregard, while being instructed to keep their wife or daughter on the tightest possible leash lest she is compromised in some way and brings disgrace and ruin upon her family?"

Alice's outburst was met by an uncomfortable silence, though no one spoke up to contradict her rather brutal summation.

"I have a suggestion as to how to address this dilemma," I eventually offered, albeit tentatively.

"I'm sure we'd all like to hear it," Lady Esme kindly responded, and Edward gently squeezed my hand in encouragement.

"We can't change the past, but we can do something about the current situation...and the future," I began. "I had already intended to speak with Lady Esme and Lady Penelope about the plight of girls and young women abused in their places of employment or forced into prostitution...something I'm sure would be of great concern to you also, Uncle Carlisle." He nodded in agreement, and I continued, emboldened.

"I'm hoping there are already charitable organisations operating that rescue young girls from their dreadful predicaments and help them to establish new lives that we may support financially, practically and by championing their cause. If not...I propose that we look at establishing our own charity to assist those girls in need, as well as programmes designed to prevent girls falling prey to such dangers in the first place."

"I think that is an excellent idea, Bella, and a credit to your own personal resilience and compassionate nature," Carlisle offered warmly. "But I'm curious as to what bearing your benevolent intentions have on my being able to trust Lord Jasper or any other young gentleman for that matter, as Alice so eloquently pointed out?"

"I believe it is a matter of education," I explained. "When I was masquerading as a

maid, I received the impression that Lord Jasper, like the majority of young gentlemen of his station, I'm sure, was ignorant of the terrible dangers, distress and hardships young girls face when they are without protection. He also failed to recognise that being born to a lower class does not equate to reduced sensitivity to suffering or an intrinsic lack of value. What better way for him to prove that he has had a change of heart than to see if he is willing to assist us in making a difference...to become intimately acquainted with the painful reality of the situation, and to work for the betterment of the same sort of girls that he may have disrespected in the past? That's if you think that would be appropriate and he'd be interested..." My voice trailed away, as I wondered if I'd overstepped the mark.

"I *know* he would be, and I certainly am," Edward declared emphatically. "You've opened both our eyes, Bella, to a world of injustice we'd previously ignored and, to our shame, personally exploited on occasion. I, for one, would greatly value the opportunity to make amends...and make a difference. And I know that Jasper is determined to do whatever it takes to prove that he's worthy of my sister's affection."

"There is still the matter of fidelity to be discussed," Carlisle observed. "But if you believe he is genuine in his intentions, Edward, and if he would be willing to prove his contrition by contributing to Bella's noble plan, then I would be willing to reconsider his application to court my daughter."

"Thank you, Father," Alice murmured, blinking back tears once more. "I do care for Jasper, though I have been more than a little distressed by recent disclosures regarding his character. I should appreciate the opportunity to discuss these matters with him in private before I commit to the possibility of us sharing a future, as I need to be certain of his sincerity."

Moving to sit beside Alice, Carlisle pulled her into a gentle embrace. "That's very wise, my dear, and something I am happy to allow," he assured her. "But now, I think we must call it a night as the hour grows late, and we've all been given much to ponder."

Standing with Alice and Lady Esme to either side, he bid my father, Edward and I goodnight.

"There are servants waiting to escort you to your rooms when you are ready," Lady Esme assured us.

"Thank you, Esme, Carlisle," Papa acknowledged, indicating that he wanted Edward and I to wait. "I should like a few moments with the newly engaged couple,

and then Bella and I will be following suit and retiring for the evening."

"As will I," Edward added, bidding his family good night.

Tentatively relieved that, despite the controversial subject matter, the evening's conversation appeared to have reached a positive conclusion; I turned expectantly to my father.

"Papa, I hope I did not offend you with my words," I offered by way of apology. "I know I can be terribly blunt some times, and I do forget myself..."

"Nonsense," he interrupted. "You are brave and passionate and caring...very much like your mother and everything a father could hope for in a daughter."

"Hear, hear," Edward seconded, and, blushing profusely at their praise, I ducked my head.

"You wanted to speak with us, Sir?" Edward enquired politely, stepping a little closer to my side.

I squeezed his fingers tightly, knowing that we must soon be parted and dreading the moment when I would have to let go of his hand, which had been linked with mine since we'd left the dinner table some hours earlier.

"I just wanted to offer you both my own personal congratulations and, by way of an early betrothal gift, mention that it will probably take me a good five minutes to make my way up the stairs; I shan't need Bella's assistance until I reach the top. Good night, Lord Edward. My dear, I'll see you in a little while...five minutes to be precise."

With that, Papa left the room, closing the door behind him and leaving Edward and I staring after him, mouths agape.

Realising the wondrous opportunity my father had granted us, I spun to face Edward. Five minutes wasn't a very long time, but it would be long enough for him to make good on the promise he had given me in the King's garden that afternoon...to kiss me passionately...something I had been reduced to dreaming of and had tragically believed I would never experience again.

At the sight of Edward's dark, desire-filled eyes, my smile faded, and I moved willingly into his arms.

"Bella," he breathed, reaching down to bestow a tender kiss on my forehead.

I quivered at his touch, and my body melted into his. Lifting up on tiptoes, I entwined my arms around his neck and reached for his kiss, mewling with dismay when he forestalled me.

"I'm afraid if I start kissing you, I simply won't be able to stop," he whispered close to my ear, his breath tickling the tender skin and sending shivers rippling down my spine. To both our surprise, a giggle erupted from my lips.

"I wouldn't worry about that," I murmured against his cheek. "I'm sure Papa will stop us if we're unable."

Groaning, Edward buried his face in my hair, his arms holding me so close I could barely breathe...not that I cared. I wanted him more than air, needed him more than life itself, loved him more than reason.

"Kiss me, Edward," I pleaded. "You promised."

Leaning back just far enough to capture my gaze, he lifted one hand to gently cup my cheek.

"So I did," he rasped, his passion-filled voice a husky whisper.

My eyes fluttered closed as he lowered his head, and I felt the brush of his lips over mine. Moaning against his mouth, I welcomed the soft stroke of his tongue against my lips and kissed him in return. My hands tangled gently in the silky locks of his perpetually tousled hair, the memories kindled by the tactile pleasure almost overwhelming in their intensity.

The kiss was everything I hoped it would be...given our circumstances: tender, gentle, and infused with love. The slow simmering passion it incited was undeniable, but we kept it banked, enjoying the aching sweetness of our reunion.

Our bodies melded, our breaths intermingled, and our hearts overflowed.

"Dream of me tonight," Edward whispered when we reluctantly drew apart, our time together drawing to a close. "For I know I will dream of you."

"I will," I sighed, as we slowly made our way up the stairs, arm in arm, to where my father was waiting.

I already felt like I was in a dream, one from which I never wanted to awaken.

~AFL~

Not too hard to guess what I've been dreaming about. Sigh...I am soooo ready for some gooey sweetness. How about you?

xxx TLSue

Wonderful

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT! A Forbidden Love will be removed from Fan Fiction Net on February 24th 2013. My reasons for doing so are detailed in Ch 74.

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight.

If you don't want to read the sexy Domward OOC dream sequence at the beginning of the chapter, skip down to the first break. It will still make sense (sort of) but you'll miss the #ahem# fun at the beginning. ;)

Updated: Tuesday, April 10th, 2012 - Twice!

Words: 5762

Chapter 60

Wonderful

BPOV

I had returned to the palace, but it was night time, and I was lost and alone. I couldn't seem to find Edward no matter how hard I tried. A wide and endless corridor stretched before me lined with paintings of long dead kings and queens, their eyes peering at me in judgement.

"She doesn't look the part."

"Her clothes are all wrong, as is her speech and demeanour, not to mention her dreadful manners...quite *provincial*."

"Yes, and we all know what sort of girl she really is...the true nature of her character."

"Temptress!"

"Ruined!"

"Whore!"

I tried to run from their cruel words but was hindered by my gown. It was a monstrous affair, decades out of fashion and constructed with layer upon layer of stiff, embroidered fabric overlaying corsetry and contraptions designed to distort my shape, giving me enormous artificial-looking hips. The wig atop my head stood fully two feet tall, padded and teased with braids, curls and ringlets that danced around my face, obstructing my view.

A door appeared to my right, and I opened it with panicked fingers, struggling to grip the knob. Gasping for air, I found myself in a room filled with robed and crown-wearing princes; supercilious, leering...

"Is this *her*?" one demanded, studying me through the monocle perched on his beak-like nose.

"At least she's young," another commented. Old and rotund, he lunged at me with fingers that ended in hooked claws.

"Trainable...biddable...fertile..."

Ducking and weaving to escape their grasping hands, I ran from the room through the nearest door, only to find myself in the middle of a vast ballroom that glittered with the light from numerous crystal chandeliers reflecting the flames of a thousand candles. Half-blind, I shaded my eyes and saw that I was at the centre of a crowd of extravagantly...*fashionably*...dressed lords and ladies all staring at me.

"She can't possibly be related to the King. Look at what she is wearing." I heard whispered repeatedly and looked down to see that I was dressed in my simple maid's uniform from Worthington, my hair pulled back into a stark bun.

"She doesn't belong here."

"She's not one of us."

"Where are the guards?"

"She is an imposter. She must be denounced!"

Bewigged and liveried footmen surrounded me, swords drawn and expressions fierce, as the fashionable crowd continued with their bitter condemnation.

I turned and fled, once more finding myself running down the portrait-lined hallway. Gasping, I ducked my head, trying to hide from the accusing glares and

wishing I could find Edward. I couldn't understand why he'd left me to face everyone alone.

Another door beckoned, but this time, I paused at the entrance, afraid of what I'd find on the other side. Not knowing what else to do, I knocked with trepidation.

"Come." Edward's voice clearly beckoned from within, and I threw the door open wide, entering in a rush.

"Oh, Edward. Thank heavens I've found you!" I exclaimed before coming to a sudden halt. We were in his study back at Worthington Hall, and he was seated at his desk, his fingers slowly drumming on the gleaming mahogany surface. The room was cloaked in darkness with only a soft glow from the fireplace and a lone candelabra for illumination. Edward's eyes were dark and hooded...and he did not look pleased to see me.

"I beg your pardon, m'lord," I demurred with uncertainty, bobbing a belated curtsy.

"You're late," he pronounced severely. "I've informed you of the consequences of keeping me waiting."

"I'm sorry, m'lord," I stammered hesitantly. "But, Edward, it's me...Bella."

"I'm well aware of who you are...or, at least, who you purport to be. But I do not believe I have given you leave to use my Christian name."

My gasp of dismay at his words and tone was clearly audible, but his expression softened not one whit. Nervously, I bit my lower lip, and his eyes darkened further.

"Come here," he beckoned, his voice low and husky but no less commanding.

On trembling legs, I approached, halting some feet from where he sat angled away from his desk.

"Closer," he admonished, gesturing me forward with a curl of his fingers until I was standing in the V of his legs. Reaching out to grasp my hip, he held me firmly in place with one hand while the other rose to release my hair from its bun, sending the dark locks cascading around my shoulders.

Standing, I was only a little taller than he was seated, and with a slight tug of the hand that had wound its way through my hair, he brought my lips into alignment

with his for a searing kiss. It was savage in its intensity and ended almost as soon as it began.

"And so your punishment begins," he murmured, his eyes roaming my face before traversing the length of my body. Glancing down, I saw the evidence of his arousal straining against his breeches and felt my own desire rising...along with my uncertainty.

"Punishment?" I whispered. "But what have I done wrong?"

"You've kept me waiting," he barked harshly, and I flinched, unable to move backward due to the hold he had upon me at hip and shoulder. I'd only ever seen Edward angry with others, usually on my behalf. It had never been directed at me before, and I trembled under the intensity of his gaze, failing to understand the reason for his ire.

"I'm sorry, mi'lord. I won't let it happen again," I tried to assure him.

"And what of your lies, your deception? Do you think I should forgive those as easily?" he demanded.

"But I've told you the truth now, and I've explained why I had to lie. I thought you understood?" I cried, my hands rising to clutch at his shirt in supplication.

"Oh, I understand," Edward murmured softly, leaning forward so that the words were carried on a tantalising brush of his sweet breath against my ear. "I understand that the blood that rages with passion through your veins is far from blue. You don't fool me, Isabella," he whispered before leaning back, his eyes dropping to my suddenly bare chest and the hand that was cupped intimately around my breast.

I'd not felt him undo the buttons, but my blouse was fully opened, and shockingly, I wore no chemise beneath. We both watched, entranced, as my breasts visibly swelled with his gentle ministrations. The teasing strokes of his thumb across one rosy nipple caused both buds to distend as if they were reaching for him...begging to be suckled.

The moan that escaped my lips caused his lips to curl into a sardonic smirk.

"My point exactly, *Isabella*." He drew out my name, making each syllable last for a long, fraught moment. "You can't hide the pleasure my touch arouses in your sweet, nubile, and oh, so sensual body."

With his declaration, he brought the hand that had been holding my hip up to squeeze and stroke my other breast. Moaning again, I arched into his touch, my hands rising to tangle in his hair as I silently willed him to take my aching nipples between his lips.

"And there's a problem with my response?" I gasped breathlessly, assuming my question was rhetorical.

"Not for a common, lusty wench," Edward growled, licking one pouting, pink nipple with swirling strokes of his tongue while his wicked fingers tweaked and teased the other to a turgid peak. Panting, I pressed forward, confused by his words but eager for more of his touch as a liquid pulse caused my sex to throb with increasing urgency.

"M'lord, please," I begged, and chuckling, he drew my nipple deep into his mouth, suckling it with tongue and lips and gentle grazes of his pearly teeth.

For long minutes, he alternated between tormenting me with barely there touches and soft puffs of breath across my dampened flesh, and lavishing my breasts with sweeping strokes of his tongue, suckling kisses and bites that brought far more pleasure than pain.

"You like what I'm doing, don't you?" he murmured against my sensitised flesh, and I moaned incoherently, barely able to stand against the onslaught of his hands and mouth.

In the next instant, those same skilled fingers were right...*there*. I'd not felt my skirt being raised, but his hand was beneath it, his long fingers teasing my wet, swollen flesh and sliding between the slick folds to find the treasure hidden inside.

With his mouth wrapped around one distended nipple, his tongue feathering it with soft licks, his fingers mimicked the action in the secret folds between my thighs, lightly brushing over the swollen bud he'd found with practised ease.

I'd gone for so long without his touch—grieved and agonised over the fact that I'd never feel it again—and my moans became cries of desire and determination as I desperately sought more.

"Please," I begged, my hips rocking against his hand in rhythm with his deliberately teasing touch. He circled my opening, dipping inside with too brief but oh, so delicious strokes only to withdraw and flick lightly over the sensitised bud nestled within the soft curls of my sex...but not for long enough or firmly enough at

either location to bring the release my body craved.

"You want more don't you, sweetheart?" His words were a caress against my ear, and my eyes fluttered open to find that he had drawn me into his embrace. I was sitting on one of his breeches-clad thighs, my bare, swollen breasts swaying in time to the increasingly rapid movements of his tantalising fingers that had finally begun to probe my sex more deeply. My skirt and petticoat were gone, leaving me dressed only in silk stockings tied mid-thigh and matching silk slippers. A lacy shawl hung in a loose drape from my elbows, replacing my cotton work blouse and offering neither cover nor protection, not that I desired either. Modesty...propriety... none of it mattered, only Edward's passionate lovemaking and the rapture I sought in his arms.

"Oh, yes, please...more," I breathed, desperation making me bold.

"Then more you shall have," Edward growled, sending me spinning away from his body as he stood, only to pull me against him, my naked back to his fully clothed and highly aroused form. He thrust against me, and panting, I pressed my bottom back against the length of his seemingly immense erection.

"You want it, don't you?" He ground the words out hoarsely, his hands coming around to firmly clasp my breasts, holding me fiercely...almost roughly.

"Edward?" I whimpered, confused. While his virility and strength had never been in question, I'd not known him to behave in quite so forceful or demanding a manner before, and I was a little afraid.

"Please, what, *m'lord*?" he insisted, his voice dropping to a sultry whisper as he thrust slowly against me. Loosening his harsh grip, his hands soothingly cupped my breasts with sensual caresses.

"Yes, *m'lord*. I want you," I breathed, passion overriding my fear, the return of his typically gentle touch bringing me reassurance and intense pleasure.

"Place your hands on the desk and bend over," he instructed, and eyes wide, I did as I was told. His hands moved to my hips, positioning me where he willed. Spreading my legs with one of his still-booted feet, I gasped with surprise when he caressed the curves of my bottom, spreading my cheeks a little to expose my sex to his questing, probing fingers.

I was practically naked while he was still fully clothed, the incongruence leaving me feeling shockingly vulnerable and incredibly aroused. But there was no time to

protest, if I'd been so inclined. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw him guide his huge, rigid member to my entrance. He stroked the sculptured head up and down the length of my folds several times, and I trembled at the exquisite sensation his touch evoked.

"Tell me again," Edward commanded, the words hissing from between his bared teeth. "Say it," he insisted.

I lifted my eyes to his hot, hungry gaze and felt my insides melt.

"I want *you*, Edward, inside me...please," I begged, my voice a breathy whisper.

A low, rumbling growl tore from his throat, and I shivered in anticipation. Then his nostrils flared, and he thrust inside me in one, masterful stroke.

My cry rent the air, and my back arched as he penetrated me to my core, stretching, filling and consuming me.

"Is *this* what you want, *Isabella*?" he rasped, holding my hips in place as he slowly withdrew all the way to his tip before thrusting forcefully forward once more. "And *this* and *this* and *this*?"

"Yes, oh, yes!" I cried in time with his pounding strokes, the force of his thrusts pushing me forward to rest on my elbows, my naked breasts brushing against the cool surface of the polished desk.

Over and over, he thrust deeply, filling and stretching me as the pleasure and passion built. Growling again, he swept his thumbs up the length of my spine and brushed my hair to the side. Then with slow, deliberate strokes, his hands traced the planes and curves of my back. I arched into his touch, and his fingers lightly caressed my ribs before dipping lower to brush the curves of my flattened breasts. The softness of his touch was in stark contrast to his powerful, penetrating strokes, and I moaned uncontrollably. With his hands holding me in place, I writhed beneath him, giving myself up to the rhythm of his erotic ride as I hovered on the very edge of ecstasy.

Pleasure pulsed low in my belly like flashes of lightning along my sensitised nerves. Holding my breath, I reached for the rapture I'd only ever known with Edward...expectantly...hungrily...just as he leant forward, his body covering mine.

"Do you know *why* you're enjoying this?" he whispered into my ear.

I shook my head, *almost* overcome and impatient to be swept away. Mewling, I pushed back, desperate for Edward to finish what he'd begun, but he slowed his pace to rock gently inside and against me. I groaned my frustration, and he chuckled hoarsely before beginning an altogether different assault. Nuzzling below my ear in time with his sensual strokes, he kissed and licked and sucked the sensitive skin until my whimpering signalled that I was but a hair's breadth away from coming completely undone. But then he stilled completely, his hot, panting breath close to my ear.

"The reason you are not offended by my taking you like this," he crooned ever so softly, his words vibrating against my skin, "is because *you*, my lovely girl, are wickedly wanton!"

~AFL~

I awoke with a start, hot, flustered and horribly frustrated.

Gasping for breath, I struggled to free myself from the tangled covers, unsurprised to find that my nightgown had ridden up to expose my nakedness. Quickly setting things to right, I tried my best to ignore my tingling breasts and the throbbing ache that pulsed between my thighs...though I couldn't help feeling disappointed that the dream had not lasted just a *little* bit longer. I'd been so close to finding release, not that I was at all sure how I felt about accomplishing it in such a manner...or with Edward portrayed so uncharacteristically.

Hugging my knees, I told myself that he would never do what he'd done in the dream, taking me with such force.

Not that I would want him to, of course. After all, what would that say about me? I freely admitted to harbouring deep and tender feelings for my fiancé and *very* much enjoying his lovemaking, but that didn't make me wanton...did it?

Groaning, I fell back on the pillow and considered the varied meanings of the word:

Shameless...I'd certainly behaved that way in the dream—and in reality on occasion. I *supposed* I should feel guilty about that, but the memories of Edward's and my time together were too precious for me to sully with regret.

Immoral...having surrendered to Edward's expert seduction, it would be difficult for me to argue against that accusation, but we *were* engaged to be married which I considered a more than suitable method by which to rectify the situation.

Lustful...I could hardly dispute that description of my actions, but when I considered Edward's general aura of virile masculinity, not to mention his highly skilled lovemaking, who could possibly blame me?

But what of the other definitions?

Willful.

Reckless.

Wicked.

"Oh, dear," I whispered, covering my face with my hands.

Edward didn't *really* believe I was wicked, did he? He'd promised me that he appreciated and even valued my responsiveness and that he didn't see it as evidence of moral deficiency, and I believed him...or at least I wanted to.

Clearly, a part of me was not convinced about the appropriateness of my behaviour or my ability to live up to my new position in society.

Since I was awake early, and with no hope of falling back to sleep, I decided to join the gentlemen for breakfast. Fortunately, Angela was waiting to assist me and managed quite effortlessly to ensure I was suitably presented in one of the lovely summer gowns I'd brought with me from Worthington Hall. I'd had it redesigned so as to be worn without a corset, but I reluctantly donned the softest one I possessed in preparation for the morning of torturous fittings ahead of me. The gowns I would require for the coming prestigious events would undoubtedly need tightly laced constraints to achieve the desired, *fashionable* silhouette.

Sighing, I found myself longing for the day of Edward's and my wedding to arrive for reasons other than the obvious. Once we were free from society's critical and prying eyes, I fully intended to relax my personal standards once more in regard to dress and other frivolities. My disturbing dream and the hidden fears it exposed notwithstanding, my hope was that Edward would not be bothered by my undertaking a modest loosening of the strictures that kept young women both literally and metaphorically bound.

For now, I would do my best to make my father and Edward proud and willingly submit to whatever expectations were required of me...within reason.

~AFL~

Edward's eyes lit up when he saw me standing in the doorway to the softly sunlit breakfast room, and I offered a tremulous smile in response. A shiver coursed through me when he strode across the dining room, his determined stride reminding me of the forceful stance my dream Edward had taken the night before. The reality was every bit as handsome and shared the same commanding presence as the lover my dreaming-mind had conjured. But to my relief, his expression was warm and the tone of his greeting was kind if equally arousing in its timbre.

"Bella, what a lovely surprise," he murmured, bowing over my hand and allowing us both the pleasure of the brush of his lips across the back of my fingers.

Curtseying demurely, I stared up at him, momentarily lost for words as the thrill of his touch instantly rekindled the desire that simmered just beneath the surface of my skin. A curious quirk of his brow triggered my breathy response.

"Good morning, Edward," I murmured, unable to disguise the husky tone of my voice. "It is a pleasure to see you this morning."

His smile faded, and his beautiful green eyes darkened to a deep emerald—another reminder of our night of shared if imaginary passion. When he took a step closer, his nostrils flared perceptibly, and I whimpered softly at the erotic images bombarding my senses.

"Darling?" he whispered hoarsely, and I swayed towards him, my eyelashes fluttering as I looked up at him with both adoration and hunger.

"Ah, Bella. How lovely to see you up and about so early." Carlisle's cheery greeting burst the sensual bubble surrounding Edward and me, and we all but sprang apart.

Recovering quickly, I rejoined, "I blame my country upbringing and the habits acquired whilst working in your household." Accompanying my words with a teasing bob, I hoped my gambit was successful in distracting him from what he may have observed occurring between Edward and I, in particular my decidedly wanton response. Sighing, I wondered if I was a lost cause.

Papa, a typically early riser, soon joined us, having quickly re-established his normal habits despite the serious nature of his injuries. He greeted me warmly, and the four of us were soon seated and served a delicious-looking breakfast of remarkable variety. My appetite was minimal, but I diligently filled my plate, determined to make a respectable showing in an attempt to avoid arousing suspicion.

The disturbing nature of my dream encounter with Edward had left me feeling more than a little unsettled, but attempting to explain the reason behind my discomposure was *not* an option, certainly not where Papa and Uncle Carlisle were concerned. But I clearly needed to talk about my concerns, and my hope was that discussing them with Edward would, if not eradicate my fears altogether, at least help to ease them.

Once the older gentlemen were happily ensconced with an assortment of daily papers and political journals, Edward made a suggestion that left me holding my breath with anticipation.

"Sir Charles, I was wondering if Bella and I might have permission to take a stroll in the gardens?" he asked, his polite tone and demeanour the epitome of respectability. "It is a lovely morning, and the gardeners are busily attending to both lawns and flower beds." He gestured through the floor-length French windows that ran along one side of the breakfast room, subtly alluding to the presence of a multitude of chaperones...of sorts...as well as the clear view my father would have of our place of perambulation.

"My first appointment in town with Lady Esme's couturier is not until ten o'clock," I added, unable to hide my enthusiasm for Edward's proposal as I realised that would give us at least an hour together if Papa agreed.

"That's a splendid idea," my father responded after a barely perceptible hesitation. "I'm assuming you'll leave an exploration of the garden maze until a later date when you can share the experience with a larger number?"

Blushing, I ducked my head, embarrassed by Papa's inference that Edward and I might behave inappropriately if granted the opportunity *and* at such an early hour.

"You have my word, Sir Charles," Edward replied, his tone suitably sober though I detected the hint of a smile twitching his cheek.

Breathing deeply of the myriad of floral scents, I sighed with relief at this unexpected opportunity to converse alone with Edward. His relieved and expectant smile confirmed our like-minded view, and we gratefully wandered the well swept paths and manicured lawns of Cullen House. Around us, a veritable army of gardeners were busily cutting, pruning, shaping, weeding and planting, but they thankfully left us in peace.

It soon became apparent that Edward had a destination in mind, and I was pleased when he directed me to take a seat on a white garden bench. It was lightly

shaded by a climbing rose bush and overlooked a lily-filled pond.

"Is this all right, do you think?" he asked, looking back towards the mansion, his brow furrowed. "We're a little hidden from sight, but not overly so."

"It's fine," I assured him, hiding my smile at seeing Edward so concerned about displeasing my father. "Papa can be a bit stuffy, but I'm sure he doesn't mind us spending time together with people around."

"Good." Edward nodded decisively and turned his complete and mesmerising focus solely my way. While sitting close enough for our knees to brush, he reached to clasp both my hands in his before raising them to his lips for a gentle but protracted kiss.

"Now tell me what was bothering you this morning when I first greeted you. You went quite pale, and I was worried you were going to faint. Are you absolutely sure you are not with child?"

My brows shot up at his unexpected interpretation of my earlier discomposure, and I felt my cheeks flame with colour.

"As sure as I can be, I suppose," I murmured. "You were very careful, and my, er...natural functions have continued uninterrupted." It was not possible for me to maintain eye contact when I uttered my assurance, and I dropped my gaze to study our joined hands.

"Ah, Bella," Edward sighed. "I'm sorry to have to ask. It should not have been an issue until *after* we were married, in which case an affirmative response would be cause for rejoicing...not that I wouldn't appreciate at least *some* time together before we start a family of our own."

In light of my fears about his perception of me, the inference to his words was disturbing. Taking an emboldening breath, I raised my eyes to his. "I don't mind," I admitted, resisting the impulse to cringe in anticipation of his response.

"You don't mind my asking?"

"No." I took another deep breath. "I don't mind that there is a *need* for you to ask *before* the wedding."

It was Edward's turn for his eyebrows to shoot skyward, and I rushed to clarify my admittedly shocking statement.

"If we had met under normal circumstances, and by some strange miracle you had decided that I was the lady you wanted to wed—surprising connections to the throne, notwithstanding—then our relationship would have progressed in a very different fashion."

"And that would have been a *bad* thing?" Edward puzzled.

"It would have been a very *different* thing," I acknowledged. "You know what sort of instructions I'd already received by the local Forkston society matrons intent upon standing in for my absent mother. I imagine those instructions and advice would have been reinforced before our wedding—repeatedly—so I would have thought it necessary to...well, to pretend *not* to enjoy your attentions and to ruthlessly suppress my feelings and responses. Unless, of course, I was fortunate enough to have Lady Esme attempt to undo the damage, which *may* have made a difference," I concluded uncertainly.

"And you think I would have continued on with my plan to keep my wife at a dispassionate distance while anticipating a rewarding relationship with my mistress?" Edward queried, and I nodded sadly.

"Bella..." Edward shook his head slowly, a rueful smile curving his lips. "You completely underestimate the strength of your allure."

Puzzled by his words, I cocked my head to the side.

"Sweetheart," he breathed, leaning close and mesmerising me with his gaze. "I love you. I adore you. I *could* never, *will* never want or desire or even look with interest upon another woman for as long as I live."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry at his outrageous declaration.

"You do realise, that could be a very long time?"

"I certainly hope so," he insisted.

"What about when I'm old and grey and wrinkled up like a prune?" I teased, though I waited with bated breath for his response.

"Even then. No...*especially* then," he declared emphatically, "as we'll have had a lifetime of loving behind us. Though, you do realise that I'll probably be bald and potbellied and have hair growing out of my ears?"

"Oh, dear." I feigned dismay. "Well, I hope you're not expecting the same level of devotion from me, as I'm afraid I couldn't possibly share a breakfast table with a man who's ears sprouted hair!"

The look on Edward's face was priceless, and it took all my restraint not to throw myself into his arms and kiss him soundly, repeatedly and passionately. He was just so adorable.

"I love you, too, my darling." I took the risk of reaching to cup his face with my hand as I sought to reassure him. "And I promise that I will love you forever."

Sighing, he reached to cover my hand with his. "That is very good to hear," he murmured hoarsely, "as I really don't know how to live without you."

"Well, it's a good thing you don't have to." I nodded emphatically.

"Yes, it is." Edward smiled, but then his serious expression returned. "But it doesn't tell me what was bothering you this morning."

I dropped my hand and my gaze as I considered my words. "I dreamed about you last night," I admitted.

"And?" he urged me to continue when I hesitated.

"And I realise that it was my own mind giving form to my fears, but in my dream, I was confronted repeatedly with my inadequacy in regard to becoming a marchioness."

"Bella, please...I don't know how else to assure you but to keep repeating my absolute and complete confidence in your guaranteed success," Edward stated emphatically.

"Thank you," I whispered, staring up into his worried gaze. "I believe that *you* believe that, which means more to me than I can express. But that's not what bothered me the most. In my dream, you equated my response to our lovemaking as *wanton*."

Edward's eyes closed but not before I saw the pain my words triggered.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything," I murmured, staring down at our entwined fingers. With our knees touching, I felt as well as saw the deep breath he took.

"Maybe if I share *my* dream from last night, it will banish your fears in that regard once and for all," he eventually suggested, and I glanced up to see him studying me closely.

"*Your* dream?" I asked, my blood warming at his huskily spoken words.

"Yes...would you like to hear it?"

I nodded, biting the lip that had begun to tremble. Groaning, Edward reached to sooth the place I'd bitten with a gentle brush of his thumb before entwining our hands once more.

"In my dream," he began, "we were back at the little village Inn in Worthy, the day you went into the markets to find the elusive truffle."

"The day I was accosted by horrible ruffians, and you came to my rescue," I clarified drily, and he smiled before reaching to gently stroke my cheek.

"The very one," he admitted. "We dined together, but this time, after dinner, I captured your hand and drew you to sit on my lap."

"Oh," I gasped. "Right there in the dining room?"

"Yes." He smiled at my response. "We were all alone and completely uninterrupted."

"And what did we do?" I breathed, my heart beating like a drum against the wall of my chest.

"I slowly undressed you, rogue that I am," he admitted wryly. "When you were clothed in nothing more than a translucent silk chemise and a pair of thigh-high stockings, I, er...*encouraged* you to straddle my lap."

Smiling at his blush—and the similarities between our dreams—I wondered if a certain amount of coercion may have been involved in Edward's dream also, not that I imagined I would have needed much encouraging.

"And then?" I asked, edging closer as I urged him to continue.

"And then, my darling, we kissed and caressed one another for a very, *very*, long time," he whispered, leaning towards me.

"Is that *all* we did?" I heard myself ask, my curiosity overwhelming my shyness.

Edward slowly shook his head, his eyes practically scorching me with their heated intensity.

"Then I slowly pulled the chemise over your head, leaving you gloriously naked," he whispered. "At which point you, rather deftly I recall, divested me of my cravat, vest and shirt before tackling the buttons on my breeches and...well..." He shrugged, his expression a disarming and arousing combination of sensuality and rueful chagrin.

"Oh, how terribly wanton of me," I breathed, licking my suddenly dry lips and drawing his gaze to my mouth. Groaning again, he closed his eyes for a moment and dropped his head.

"Not wanton...*wonderful*," he contradicted, looking up at me through his long, dark lashes. "Just as it was incredibly wonderful when you did me the great honour of making love to me right there in the candle-lit dining room."

"Sitting astride your lap on the chair?" I asked, intrigued.

"Yes...astride my lap. I'd show you exactly how, but I fear that would compel your remarkably tolerant father to forbid our being anywhere in the vicinity of one another before the wedding."

Gasping, I spun around to face the house, relieved *not* to see my father striding angrily towards us. We had been sitting rather close.

Turning back to Edward, I rushed to ask one of the questions that had been bothering me since I awoke.

"Did we...I mean did *you*...finish?" I queried, every muscle tensed with anticipation as I awaited his answer.

Smiling, Edward cocked his head to the side. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because when we made love in *my* dream—with you taking me rather forcefully while I was bent over your desk at Worthington Hall, which is one of the ways you said you wanted to have me, but we never actually attempted, but which must have given me the idea—we didn't get to finish, and I awoke feeling dreadfully frustrated, and I was just wondering..." my voice trailed away as I registered his shocked expression.

"I knew it...too wanton." I winced, ducking my head.

"No...wonderful," Edward insisted once more, though his voice was so hoarse I could barely make out his words. I peered up to see him swallow hard several times before he could continue. "It distresses me to know that you were left feeling unfulfilled, and I would very much like to assist you to rectify the situation."

"Being with you like this is more than sufficient for now." I smiled and, taking a risk—with my actions and my following words—I leaned in to place a brief but heartfelt kiss on his waiting lips. "But if you can discern a method to, er...*assist* me with my little dilemma without bringing any disgrace to our respective family names—or alerting our fathers to our *somewhat* scandalous intentions—I would be most appreciative." Emboldened and reassured by Edward sharing his own nocturnal fantasies, I fluttered my eyes demurely, thoroughly enjoying the sound of his laughing response to my outrageous words.

"Darling," he whispered huskily. "I will move heaven and earth to ensure we have the opportunity to resolve your dilemma at the first available opportunity, especially if you allow us to re-enact your dream...*after* we are married."

"Oh, Edward," I sighed. "It would be my pleasure."

~AFL~

Personally, I'm fine with dreaming about Edward. How about you?

xxx TLSue

Disclosure

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have very patient, understanding readers...I hope. *flutters lashes endearingly*

I'm so glad you enjoyed the longer chapter I 'reposted' with Edward's and Bella's conversation in the garden...and a little more lemony dream sharing. Your reviews were very encouraging and really cheered me up. This is only a shortish chapter, I'm afraid, as my plans to spend my holidays merrily writing were sent completely awry with the onset of a horrible stomach flu. This was all I could manage considering the mushy state of my poor, feverish mind. (After the sympathy vote much?)

Thanks, as always, to my truly wonderful betas, SqueakyZorro and Chloe Cougar.

Updated: Wednesday, 18th April 2012

Words: 2777

Chapter 61

Disclosure

BPOV

The next five days passed in a veritable whirlwind of activity, leaving Edward and me precious few opportunities to be alone. Alice was in her element, but I found the dress fittings and seemingly endless choices to be made regarding fabrics and styles somewhat of an ordeal. The offerings were undeniably beautiful, made from the highest quality silks, satins, chiffons, organza, laces and many other fabrics, some of which I was unfamiliar with. But I could not possibly conceive of requiring anywhere near the number of ball gowns, day dresses, riding habits, evening gowns, jackets, bonnets, shoes, bags and all the other accoutrements that Lady Esme and Alice insisted I would need in the coming weeks.

"Fashionable society will be flocking to make your acquaintance once your relationship to the King is made public," Esme explained, her intention not to be unkind, but her words causing a feeling of dread to settle in my stomach.

"Even without knowing about your royal connection, the ladies of the ton are already a-twitter over the opportunity to meet the courageous young lady who outwitted the dastardly Lord Hunter and survived an unimaginable ordeal, masquerading as a servant," Alice reminded me, her typical flare for melodrama imbuing her description of events with a decidedly theatrical tone.

My plan to keep that aspect of my adventure a secret had quickly fallen by the wayside, with gossip now running rife in all spheres of society, fuelled by the 'scandal rags' as Uncle Carlisle called them. Journalists had started loitering around Cullen House and followed us on our outings as soon as news had leaked that my father and I were in residence. The servants Carlisle had brought with him from Worthington Hall, not to mention the servants who'd accompanied Alice on her journey to Forkston, had, of course, recognised me immediately, and I could only surmise that one or more of them had divulged my story. I wasn't sure how I'd ever thought I'd be able to keep the matter a secret, but what did surprise me was the sympathetic nature with which the story had been reported...so far.

I credited Ben, who'd done a masterful job of setting the tone and thereby defusing what could have easily turned into a disaster. Acting intuitively, he'd told the curious servants that Edward had known my true identity from the beginning, which was why he had taken me under his personal protection—a perfectly respectable arrangement despite appearances to the contrary—in a ruse to attempt to draw Lord Hunter out into the open.

"I can't see Lord Carlisle's staff accepting such a ludicrous story, especially one that barely fits with the actual events." I'd fretted when Angela had initially informed me of Ben's choice of words.

"Ye'd be surprised what people will accept when they *want* it to be true," she'd contradicted. "His Grace's servants are fiercely loyal to 'im, the Duchess *and* Lord Edward. They were a bit shocked when it appeared the Marquess was taking advantage of ye, and were 'appy to 'ave his actions cast in a more respectable light. None of them will forget how he put 'imself in 'arms way, more than once, to keep ye safe."

I smiled at the memories Angela's words invoked, remembering how heroically Edward had behaved on more than one occasion.

"Then there's everyone's affection for ye, Miss Bella," she declared, and I stared at her nonplussed. "Ye worked so 'ard in the kitchen and as a maid, always doin' yer share and never complainin'. And ye stopped Lord Edward from sending Mike packin', even though he deserved it for what 'e'd done, gettin' fresh wiv ye in the

library. Then there's 'ow ye 'elped Jessica with the babe, not to mention me and Ben."

I felt the urge to demur her comments, to assure her that my actions were nothing out of the ordinary, but she continued insistently.

"Ye were already well-liked, but now for us to discover yer practically a *princess*, related to the King and all...well, everyone's proud as punch to 'ave been involved in keeping ye safe. And then there's yer engagement to Lord Edward. The servants are just waitin' for the announcement to celebrate and toast yer 'appiness. It's like a fairytale, Miss Bella, and ye've made us all a part of it. Ye don't need to be afraid of any nasty gossip comin' from our quarter, I can guarantee it. The servants that are lucky enough to work for the Duke will defend yer honour to their dying breath, they will...as will Ben and meself."

Angela's heartfelt declaration brought tears of gratitude and relief rushing to my eyes, and I enclosed the girl I would always think of as a dear friend in a warm embrace. She only allowed it for a moment before shooing me off with an embarrassed dismissal of her worthiness.

"You were a good friend to me, Angela, when I thought I'd lost everything," I reminded her, "and as far as I am concerned, nothing will ever change that...not my station, marriage or fortune."

I'd already asked Edward, in one of the very brief conversations we'd been able to engage in since the chaos of preparations for my introduction to society had erupted, if Angela and Ben might be able to stay with me after our marriage. It had been no surprise when he'd been happy to oblige my wish, as I had come to believe that Edward would give me the world if it was in his power to do so.

At that moment in time, all I wanted was a little bit more than the few minutes alone that Papa allowed us each evening.

I wasn't sure whether it was because we'd sat too closely together on the garden bench the morning we'd shared our admittedly scandalous dreams, or if it was because I'd been unable to resist leaning in and kissing Edward—for a *second* time—after he'd promised to assist me with my rather persistent dilemma. But Papa had taken to leaving the door open of an evening when he gave Edward and me some time alone at the end of each day. He also waited at the foot of the stairs rather than have me meet him at the top, which gave my fiancé and I opportunity for no more than a relatively chaste goodnight kiss.

Sighing at the thought, I tried not to be ungrateful as I couldn't imagine too many fathers being as generous or understanding under the circumstances. But it was difficult to have experienced the degree of intimacy that Edward and I had already shared, and to now be reduced to this constrained form of courtship where every word and gesture was scrutinized and privacy was non-existent. I didn't want to appear petulant and tried to hide my discontent...but I *missed* him, despite the fact that we now saw each other every day.

I was overjoyed at our betrothal and counting down the days to when we would become husband and wife. But the numbness I'd felt when we'd been apart had worn off and no longer buffered me from the intense longing of my heart to be able to commune with him as we had before. We'd been free to talk about anything we desired, to share our thoughts and feelings and openly express our love for one another. I didn't expect to be able to indulge in overt displays of affection while in public view, but married couples were normally granted at least some time alone together each day...in the privacy of their bedchambers if nowhere else. Having assured me that he did not want me to change in my manner towards him, I yearned for the opportunity to simply be myself with Edward once again.

Scolding myself for my lack of patience, I refocused my attention on preparing for the night ahead...the King's ball and the announcement of Edward's and my engagement. We'd been invited to dinner at the palace before the ball, and despite my nervousness, I looked forward to seeing the Queen again. She'd been very gracious at our initial meeting, quickly setting me at ease while imparting valuable counsel about my new role and place in society...along with other, more intimate advice that I'm sure some would have found quite shocking.

"Just be yourself, Isabella," she'd assured me. "But do keep in mind that you will be under constant scrutiny, and that there are those members of the aristocracy and upper *ton* who would delight in seeing you stumble."

"But why?" I puzzled, my brow furrowing in confusion. "They don't even know me."

"I'm afraid when one has youth, beauty, position, power *and* wealth...not to mention the heart of one of the most eligible and undeniably handsome young men in the empire...envy is unavoidable."

I blushed, unsure if it was at her assigning beauty to my list of attributes, her acknowledgement of Edward's universal appeal...or that she clearly knew the story behind Edward's and my betrothal.

"I thought that marriage for love was frowned upon by the *ton*?" I plucked up the courage to ask, my curiosity aroused.

"Hmmm... it might appear that way," the Queen acknowledged. "But while forming an alliance that is financially, socially and politically advantageous is one's undisputed duty, it is not possible to completely stifle the desires of the heart. You, my dear girl, have managed something that few members of our class or gender ever achieve...a romantic attachment with a highly suitable candidate...though, of course, my husband would have preferred you aimed a *little* higher."

Determined to convince the Queen of my sincerity, I assured her that there was no one I could imagine holding in higher esteem than Edward and that marriage to a marquess was more than propitious enough for me.

"Yes...and I'm sure the fact that your young beau is an extraordinarily attractive and undoubtedly virile young man has nothing to do with your decision," she mused, triggering a blush to bloom across my cheeks.

"Well...there is that," I breathily acknowledged, and we shared a smile.

"Typically, I would consider it my duty to instruct you in the behaviour expected of a young bride by her husband," she continued, and my smile faded as I awaited her no doubt dour and oppressive counsel.

"But I gather it's a little late for that particular conversation," she continued and, with my blush deepening, I dropped my gaze, nodding jerkily in agreement.

"So I can dispense with the advice I usually impart: that if one finds one's husband disagreeable, or the execution of one's duty unpleasant, one should lie back and think of England," she elaborated drily, and my eyes shot to her face, "and instead suggest that, if I were in your shoes, I would most definitely *not* be thinking about my duty to King and country...but I should much prefer to lie back and think of Edward!"

Smiling at my reflection in the mirror, I could not help thinking how very much I was looking forward to doing exactly that...though I imagined that Edward would be better pleased if I were not entirely passive and participated more actively in fulfilling my duty.

Anticipation rose within me as I recalled the unexpected conversation I'd shared with my father earlier in the day, in particular his surprising disclosure. He'd caught me looking somewhat harried after being introduced to yet another round of

visitors, all eager to make my acquaintance *before* the King's ball.

"So that they can say they already know you and gain the upper hand over their friends...and rivals," Alice explained with remarkable cheer. Groaning, I hid my head in my hands, dreading the attention I would receive once my relationship to the King became public knowledge.

"You're looking a little overwhelmed, Bella," Papa noted kindly, drawing me aside to a quiet alcove at the end of the large drawing room so that we could speak in private...an occurrence we'd previously taken for granted, but which was now a rarity. "I'm guessing all the fuss and bother is not exactly to your liking."

"No, it's not," I agreed, sounding forlorn. Attempting to shake off my glum demeanour, I brightened my tone. "But it won't last forever...I hope."

"It won't." Papa reached to pat my shoulder comfortingly. "Once you and Edward are married, you'll be able to take a protracted honeymoon abroad, if you so desire, or retire to his estate in the country. There'll be society members wanting to make your acquaintance wherever you go, but it will be easier to manage once you are a married lady...and a marchioness."

Nodding in agreement, I twisted my mouth into a determined smile, but from the look on Papa's face, I knew I'd not been successful.

"What is it?" he asked. "I can see there's something bothering you still."

My eyes dropped to my hands and I studied them, pondering what to say without appearing overly forward or indelicate.

"Bella?" he persisted.

"I don't want to sound like a petulant child, as it's only a month until we are wed, but it's just that I...I..." Unsure how to continue, I grimaced.

"You miss spending time alone with Edward," Papa supplied, and my shoulders slumped with relief at his understanding.

"Yes, I do." I nodded, blinking back tears. "I probably shouldn't admit to this," I whispered, my eyes once again fixed on my clasped hands, "but he made me so happy, Papa. We spent a great deal of time together, talked freely about any topic, and were so relaxed in each other's presence. I knew it couldn't last, and there was nothing but heartache and peril ahead for me." My eyes rose to meet my father's

sympathetic gaze. "But it's as if we were married already, and not some horrible, stuffy arrangement, but more like how I recall things were between you and Mama."

"And you're worried it won't be like that when you are officially wed?" Papa raised a brow, and I shook my head.

"No, I'm just being foolish. I thought I'd never see Edward again, and now I see him every day, and we're to be married, but..." my voice trailed away, and I felt a blush stain my cheeks.

"But you miss being able to be together without constraints and chaperones and a multitude of rules to follow," Papa concluded for me, and I nodded my head, grateful that I had such a wonderful father that I could talk to about such things.

"I'm not ashamed of my feelings for Edward, but I do wish I could better master my impatience," I admitted ruefully. "Do you think very badly of me?"

Papa eyed me for a moment, a slight smile twitching his moustache. "Allow me to let you in on a little secret," he offered, and I tilted my head, curious. "Your mother and I struggled with the very same dilemma."

My eyes widened, and I listened avidly to his carefully worded account.

"As you're aware, your mother and I met during the war. Along with her companions, she aided me and my men when we were in dire need of assistance. We fell in love almost immediately, and with circumstances being what they were, we, ah...chose to *ignore* convention and be together from that point onwards," he stated deliberately.

"Oh!" I gasped, my hands rising to cover my flaming cheeks as I recalled the oft-told tale. It had been many weeks before they'd been able to escape to England where my parents were married in a little church not far from where the ship they'd been smuggled onboard made port.

"You were *together* before you were married?" I squeaked, and he nodded, his expression sombre.

"Do you think badly of us?" he asked, and I immediately shook my head and reached for his hands.

"Of course not!" I exclaimed, and then quickly lowered my voice. "You were in love, with no idea what the future would hold and no control over the

circumstances."

"Exactly." He eyed me pointedly.

I smiled at the parallel he'd drawn between Edward and my situation, appreciating my father's understanding.

"The circumstances are no longer completely outside of my control," I acknowledged. "And, of course, Edward and I are aware that we must wait to be *together* until after we're married," I offered in a rush, worried that he might have misunderstood my intentions.

"But the opportunity to spend a little more time alone would be welcome," he murmured wryly.

"Very welcome indeed," I agreed, nodding shyly and concluding, once and for all, that I had the most wonderful father in the world.

~AFL~

Farfetched, I know, but...oh, to have a father like Sir Charles.

Now...off to the ball!

xxx TLSue

PS...reviews aren't as good as alone time with Lord Loveward...but they come close. Swoon...

PPS...I've got a great story rec for you. Little Green and Easybella by BettiGefecht. It's just lovely. Tell her TwiLoverSue sent you. :D

Beloved

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. Romantic, possessive, impulsive Lordward owns me. Swoon...

Thank you for all your lovely reviews, recs, tweets and support, and welcome to all the new readers. My heartfelt thanks, as always, to Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, my wonderful betas...I wouldn't be here without you.

If you're wondering where I got my inspiration for Bella's ball gown and the palace ballroom, look no further than Disney's Beauty and the Beast. My gorgeous granddaughter is finally old enough for me to justify collecting the Disney Princess and musical DVDs to watch with her. Hubby grumbles a little, but he stays and watches them with our lovely little girl cuddled between us...and tears up quite regularly (just like he has at every Twilight movie premiere I've dragged him to so far,) but that's a secret...shhh...

Updated: Sunday, 22nd April, 2012

Words: 4164

Chapter 62

Beloved

EPOV

Despite vigorous contemplation, I was unable to determine what I'd done to deserve Bella's extraordinary affection. By all rights, she should despise me for taking advantage of her when she was vulnerable. But on top of being the most intelligent, beautiful and kind-hearted girl I'd ever encountered, her capacity for forgiveness was remarkable. For that fact alone, I would be eternally grateful, but when taken in conjunction with her warm spirit and passionate nature, I could only deduce that I was the luckiest man alive.

It had been daring of me in the extreme to confide in her the contents of my dream, one of many in which she'd taken a starring role. But how else to convince her that the high esteem in which I held her would not diminish if she were to continue in manner towards me as she had in our previous encounters once we were

husband and wife. To my relief, she'd not only taken assurance from my words but had been emboldened by them, resulting in my grappling to maintain the control that I always seemed on the edge of losing whenever she was in the vicinity. When, with sweet blushes and disarmingly ingenuous phrases, she'd shared with me *her* dream and resulting dilemma, I'd been surprised not to have spontaneously combusted on the spot.

I'd promised to rectify the situation, but other than the few minutes her father allowed us each evening—but never again with the door closed...unfortunately—my efforts to orchestrate an opportunity for us to be alone had been stymied at every turn.

"Whatever am I going to do with such a glorious girl?" I murmured aloud, prompting Jasper to ask if I'd been addressing him.

"No, just thinking about Bella," I answered his query, and we shared a rueful smirk.

He'd come to see me the morning after my visit to the palace to learn the outcome of the King's summons, only to find that Alice, the object of his own affection, was now residing in London. Since then, he'd been an almost permanent visitor at Cullen House, having first endured a rather intensive interrogation from my father, followed by a much anticipated audience with Alice. He'd clearly begun well in his endeavour to win back both their favour and my sister's hand, but the greatest hurdle still lay before him. At Bella's urging, Esme had arranged for us to visit the charity homes for rescued girls and young women that she did indeed support. It was an undertaking we were both committed to, but which we faced with trepidation.

For now, alongside both mine and Bella's fathers, we were awaiting the ladies' arrival to escort them to the King's ball.

"I must say, I am very pleased for you that things appear to be working out so splendidly," Jasper commented, adding to his earlier felicitations on the news of my betrothal. "Bella has turned out to be an even more exceptional young lady than any of us could have conceived."

"Yes, indeed," I agreed. "I knew from early on that she was quite extraordinary, but I have to admit to feeling rather foolish that I didn't recognize her true worth sooner."

He nodded in understanding, but then our attention was captured when Esme,

Alice and Bella appeared at the top of the landing. My sharp intake of breath was clearly audible, and Jasper reached across to clap me on the back, reminding me to snap my mouth shut...and to resume breathing.

While all three ladies were dressed exquisitely and, no doubt, in the height of current fashion, my eyes were fixed on Bella. A vision of absolute loveliness, her hair was fashioned in an elaborate style, curled high upon her head. Complimenting the elegant arrangement were the betrothal gifts I had given her: a diamond and pearl tiara and pearl drop earrings that matched the triple-stranded pearl necklace that had once belonged to her mother. It gleamed against the creamy expanse of stunningly bare chest visible above her gold and ivory gown, drawing my eyes to the décolletage revealed by the fashionably low neckline.

Smiling shyly and with a faint, pink blush gracing her cheeks, she made her way down the wide, sweeping staircase to where I stood, transfixed. Her ball gown was an off-the-shoulder affair with an ivory chiffon trim decorating the neckline caught in delicate loops by the same pearls that embellished the cinched, golden bodice and then trailed in swirling lines down and around the wide, sweeping skirt.

She looked astonishing in a gown fit for a princess, and I felt a twinge of uneasiness.

It was a good thing that our betrothal was to be announced this very evening as, considering the admittedly uncivilized direction of my thoughts, I feared for the safety of any gentleman—prince or otherwise—who dared to attempt to claim Bella for his own. She was mine, and I would fight for her...to the death, if necessary.

"Good evening, my darling," I greeted her, reaching for her hand as she approached the bottom of the stairs. My voice was a low, husky murmur, and her beautiful blush deepened in hue, the breath catching in her throat as I lifted her elegantly gloved fingers to my lips. "You look incredibly beautiful," I added, leaning in close to whisper the words in her ear, a blatant excuse to inhale her intoxicating scent.

"Thank you, m'lord...so do you," she breathed, her eyelashes fluttering as she swayed towards me. I gladly steadied her with my free hand at her waist, letting my fingers linger for just a moment before reluctantly removing them and entwining her arm with mine. "I mean, you look very handsome," she corrected with a shake of her head.

Smiling at each other, we greeted the other couples, and I made sure to compliment my sister on how lovely she looked in pale lavender. Esme, dressed

regally in a gown of sapphire blue, wore the renowned Worthington diamonds to stunning effect.

This was a special night for her and my father also, being Esme's first official engagement as the new Duchess of Worthington. The King's cleverly worded announcement, inviting the cream of society to a ball in honour of a new addition to his family, was thought by most to be referring to the latest royal duchess. A very gracious lady, my new stepmother did not appear at all concerned about sharing the glory of the occasion with her soon-to-be daughter-in-law...or the fact that once news of Bella's relationship to the crown was announced, her own introduction to society would surely be overshadowed.

After assisting her to don her matching gold cloak, Bella and I took our place in the carriage with her father. Alice and Jasper were travelling with Esme and my father, but Bella's father had arranged to collect my aunt, Lady Penelope, on our way to the dinner before the ball. Sir Charles had made no secret of his interest in Father's younger widowed sister who'd arrived in town a few days prior, and it was clear from her response to his attention that his feelings were reciprocated. I was happy for them both and quietly hopeful that Sir Charles' preoccupation would work to Bella's and my benefit, allowing us the opportunity for some much needed, if necessarily clandestine, time alone.

I had considered attempting to engineer an opportunity for us to steal a few private moments during the ball. But the crowd, which I expected to be considerable, would undoubtedly have their attention firmly fixed on the guest of honour, and I dared not risk any action that might harm Bella's reputation.

My initial apprehension when a surprisingly accurate, though thankfully far from full account of Bella's adventures whilst on the run from Hunter appeared in the press had waned at the surprisingly favourable tone of the reports. My hope was that nothing would be revealed to alter the perception the public had of Bella as the undisputed heroine of the hour...an elevation she justifiably deserved. I could only imagine the heights to which her popularity would scale when news of her relationship with the King, our betrothal, and her determination to work for the betterment of those less fortunate was disclosed. I would gladly take my place at her side, basking in the light of her glory and supporting her in every way possible.

After collecting Lady Penelope, who was resplendent in a coral-coloured gown that flattered her fair complexion admirably, we made our way to the palace, our carriage forced to wait for some time as we queued with the one hundred or so guests invited to the dinner. In no hurry to be parted from Bella, as I fully expected to be at the dinner, and with her father engaged in conversation with my aunt, I

edged closer to my beloved.

"I've been dreaming of dancing with you ever since I saw that wonderful sketch you drew of the two of us waltzing," I whispered close to her ear. "I kept it, you know, and studied it repeatedly when we were apart."

"You did?" Bella's eyes widened in surprise. "I didn't realise it was missing, but then I refused to look at the pictures when we were apart. I couldn't bear the pain of it when I thought you were betrothed to another."

"Ah...my lovely girl," I murmured while gently stroking the small patch of skin that showed between her long, golden gloves and the puffed sleeve of her gown. "I can't tell you how sorry I am that I put you through so much distress, but I *can* tell you that you are the only woman to have ever captured my heart, and I can imagine no other in my arms."

"What about all the girls who'll be lining up to dance with you this evening?" she asked, her tone surprisingly arch. "I'm sure there will be many great beauties amongst them, ladies with far more sophisticated charms than mine who would gladly take my place."

My brow furrowed, but then I caught the teasing tenor of her words...and the hint of insecurity.

"Since I only have eyes for you and will assuredly be eaten alive with jealousy when I see you dancing with other gentlemen, I would gladly stay standing on the sidelines for the entire evening...other than for the waltzes that you have promised to dance with me and no other," I reminded her mock sternly.

"But that would not be at all acceptable," Bella finished for me, her smile letting me know she recognised my effort to reassure her. Then she slowly licked her lips, making me think of all the other things I knew she could do with her very clever tongue. But it was clear she wasn't attempting to discomfort me when she bit down on her lower lip, her expression troubled.

"What is it?" I queried, edging closer and risking another gentle stroke of her arm. "You're not...*nervous*, are you?"

"I'm not a very good dancer," she surprised me with her admission. "That picture I drew was of the way I *wanted* things to be, never imagining that I might actually dance with you at a ball one day. My dance tutors all said I was hopeless. They kept resigning in disgust, and Papa had to pay a fortune to get one to stay long enough

for me to finally grasp the basics. But now I'm afraid I'm going to make a terrible fool of myself, and..."

I glanced towards her father and saw that he had paused in his conversation with Penelope and was listening in. With a slight nod of his head, he granted his permission, and I immediately pulled Bella into my arms.

"Sweetheart, you are going to be fine," I insisted, looking deep into her beautiful, warm brown eyes until, with a soft sigh, she melted against me. "I can't wait to dance with you, and while I'm dreading having to watch you dance with other men, I can assure you that they will be so mesmerised by your beauty and grace that they won't give a thought to the steps and whether or not you make a mistake."

Bella's smile stayed with me throughout the King's dinner, an exceedingly formal event that seemed to go on interminably. While disappointed, I was not surprised to be separated from Bella almost as soon as we entered the palace as the King wished to speak with her privately before welcoming his other guests. I half-expected him to introduce her as his cousin at the beginning of the dinner. But when the royal party arrived, Bella took her seat beside the King while the Queen made the long walk to the far end of the one-hundred seat table, without any formal announcements being made.

It didn't take long for word of Bella's identity to travel the length of the table, however, with the most common explanation being that she was the heroine who had bravely escaped the evil clutches of the nefarious Lord Hunter. But not all were supportive in their summations. My smile faded at the murmurs of disapproval voiced by some of the more dour and straight-laced matrons and their hypocritical spouses when mention was made of Bella masquerading as a servant during her travels and upon her arrival at Worthington Hall.

"You would have preferred she allowed herself to be captured and falsely imprisoned for crimes she had not committed...or worse?" I demanded, my deceptively civilised tone instantly silencing the critics.

"Of course not, Lord Masen," the dowager seated to my right offered obsequiously. "Though weren't you mentioned in the papers also, as having somehow *protected* the girl?"

There was no disguising the salacious inference to her query, but I addressed it directly, without flinching. "I was indeed graced with the opportunity to offer my assistance to a lady of great quality who found herself in dreadful distress through absolutely no fault of her own," I declared, my tone and expression daring the

audience to challenge my assertion.

"Well, the gel seems to have a knack for collecting highly placed champions," a gentleman a few places away, the Earl of Downton, commented dryly as all eyes turned to where the King had called for attention by tapping his crystal wine glass with the edge of a solid gold spoon, proceeding to toast "the charming, Lady Isabella Swan, for her bravery and beauty."

Bella's blush was not unexpected, and I smiled my assurance from halfway down the table when her eyes sought mine for comfort.

"She certainly does," I murmured my agreement to the earl's assessment, relieved when conversation drifted to other, less inflammatory subject matter.

Ushered through to the grand ballroom at the end of the meal, I was relieved not to have been forced to queue with the waiting crowd in the receiving line that had formed in anticipation of the King's and Queen's arrival. Along with the rest of our party, I was led to a place at the foot of the stairs down which their Royal Majesties, and Bella, would descend.

"How is she?" I asked Sir Charles, who had been seated close to his daughter for the dinner.

"A tad overwhelmed, as am I," he admitted dryly, "but standing up surprisingly well to all the attention. In hindsight, I do believe that I have done her a disservice by keeping her in the dark," he murmured, his brow furrowed with concern. "If I'd realised there was going to be this much pomp and ceremony involved, I would not have kept the secret of her heritage from her for this long. She should have had more time to prepare, to get used to the idea of being a part of this world...either that, or I could have given her the option for us to go and live in the wilds of Scotland and saved her from it altogether," he muttered, and I joined him in a quiet chuckle.

I, for one, was eternally thankful for the way things had turned out, though, of course, I would have preferred if Bella had not been frightened or forced to endure such difficulties as she had in the process of our finding one another.

My contemplations came to an abrupt halt when the orchestra began to play. After a trumpeted fanfare and announcement of their arrival by a liveried crier, all eyes focused on the royal couple when they appeared at the top of the wide, gold and velvet decorated landing. As one, the congregated crème of society made their obeisance in a cascade of bowing and curtsying taffeta, silk and satin that spread

out across the glittering ballroom in a wave of colour, like the unfurling of a jewel-encrusted rainbow. Then all attention was given to the King as he indicated he was about to make an announcement.

"Welcome, my lords, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to thank you for your gracious attendance at this little gathering...and on such short notice. My wife and I are honoured to have you in our home."

As was expected, the crowd, which had swelled to close to one thousand with those invited to the ball having arrived after the dinner, laughed dutifully at the King's equivalent of a jest. Not one of them would have dreamed of missing the opportunity to be present at such a prestigious and intriguing royal function.

The King then went on to welcome Lady Esme, the new Duchess of Worthington, and to congratulate her and her husband, the Duke, on their recent nuptials. My parents ascended the stairs and were warmly greeted by the King and Queen before turning to wave regally to the attentive crowd who gladly gave their applause.

This had been the expected purpose of the evening, but before the throng began to disperse, the King summoned their attention.

"I have another, *very special* announcement to make this evening," he declared, sending a ripple of murmured curiosity throughout the crowd. "It is with the very greatest of pleasure, and no small measure of joy, that I would like to introduce to society my long, lost relative, daughter of a princess and descendant of the French Crown, heroine of the hour for her recently reported bravery and fortitude in the face of terrible adversity, and my own dearest cousin...Lady Isabella Swan."

At the announcement of her name, Bella stepped forward from the shadows to stand beside the King under the brightly lit chandelier positioned to illuminate the landing. Smiling shyly, and with just the hint of a blush warming her lovely cheeks, she shone with a luminescent glory in her golden gown, her fresh-faced beauty and incandescent charm clear for all to see.

As one, the crowd gasped and then broke out into spontaneous cheers and applause, the sound rising to thunderous heights.

Bella's eyes widened in alarm, and I could see that panic was beginning to overtake her. Taking a decided but calculated risk, I broke with protocol and stepped forward, catching Bella's eye and reassuring her with my smile. She smiled bravely in return but I could see her lower lip trembling, and I instinctively continued towards her...though I was only able to ascend a third of the way up the

wide, marble staircase before the King halted me with an imperious wave of his hand and a decidedly pointed look.

The vast assembly fell silent...all except for the sound of the King's distinctive chuckle.

"Pre-empting the situation once again, I see, Lord Masen," he uttered dryly, and I grimaced, bowing in apology.

"Please forgive me, your Majesty," I offered, trying to remain composed despite the extremely sharp weaponry with which I was surrounded. With a wave from the King, the guards stepped back and resumed their not-so-decorative posts.

"Well, you might as well come forward. You, too, Sir Charles," the King directed, and I waited for Bella's father to make his way to my side before ascending the rest of the stairs at a pace that the still-recovering man could comfortably accommodate. Upon reaching the landing, we both bowed, and then with a brief nod from the King, I made my way to Bella's side and gratefully threaded her arm through mine.

"I don't think you were supposed to do that," she whispered, and I shrugged, unashamed and entirely unable to keep the smile from my face.

"I was going to keep this particular announcement until the end of the evening, but I see that I shall have to make it now," the King muttered sotto voce in our direction. "You could have given me at least *one* evening to see if I could shake Bella's resolve," he added ruefully, though he didn't seem too upset by the change of plans.

The King's disclosure wasn't all that unexpected, as I'd been well aware of the fact that Bella's closest dinner partners were the King's much younger and still single brother and a visiting prince from a minor European principality. I'd also been aware that while she'd behaved with impeccable politeness throughout the meal, her eyes had sought and found mine with endearing regularity despite the relentless scrutiny to which she was subjected.

"Oh, give it up, dear," the Queen surprised me with her interjection. "It's obvious that Isabella's mind is quite made up, not that I blame her." The look the Queen sent my way caused my cheeks to flame and Bella to step a little closer to my side.

"Yes...well, I suppose her becoming a marchioness is not such a terrible thing," the King harrumphed.

"Not terrible at all, your Majesty," Bella declared, holding firmly to my arm.

The crowd below us had begun to murmur, and so the King turned to face them and, with Bella's father at his side, made the announcement of our betrothal, generously offering both his congratulations and blessing.

The better part of the next hour passed with the King and Queen introducing Bella to the seemingly endless row of distinguished guests who slowly filed by. Bella and I were showered with well-wishes for our coming nuptials, though I received more than my fair share of arch looks and barely veiled comments from my peers, clearly disappointed that I had effectively taken Bella off the marriage mart before she'd even been introduced. Our engagement didn't stop numerous gentlemen, single and otherwise, from requesting Bella to save them a dance. But with no time to arrange matters during the introductions, her card remained blessedly empty...not that it would stay that way, regrettably.

While completely unaffected by the attention they directed my way, I was also aware that our news seemed to have discomposed an inordinate number of single young ladies, triggering Bella to behave in a manner that could almost be deemed territorial...an unexpected blessing, as anything that caused her to want to stay as close as possible to my side and to reach out to touch my arm at very regular intervals was to be commended, as far as I was concerned.

Finally, we reached the end of the line, and the King declared that the dancing could begin. The orchestra struck up a waltz, and almost giddy with relief that the ordeal was over, and anticipation at the thought of being able to hold her in my arms, I swept Bella onto the dance floor.

"Careful, Edward," she cried with obvious alarm. "Remember how I said I'm not very good at this?"

"I've got you, sweetheart," I murmured just loud enough for her to hear. I would have loved to draw her closer, but with virtually all eyes upon us, I maintained a suitably respectable distance. After a few turns had occurred without mishap, the fearful look in Bella's eyes began to wane, and she smiled her dazzling, beguiling, and oh, so angelic smile.

"I told you you'd be fine," I teased, and she laughed, a delightful sound that drew every eye.

"I think it must be because I'm dancing with you," she mused, her expression momentarily thoughtful. "My tutors were terrifying, but you make it seem so easy...and fun!"

Laughing in response, I swung us through a tight turn in time with the music, taking the action as an excuse to pull her just a little closer.

Our eyes locked and our smiles faded...along with the rest of the world...as we were swept away by the music, the love that overflowed our hearts no doubt clearly visible for all to see. It was not the done thing to show one's heart on one's sleeve in such a manner, but I couldn't have cared less. All that mattered to me was that Bella was safely in my arms, our betrothal had been announced and given both the King's and her father's approval, and soon, very soon, the woman that I loved beyond reason would once again share my bed...but this time, as my beloved wife.

~AFL~

Corny, I know, but oh...the thought of waltzing gracefully in Lordward's arms makes me smile. (I was going to say swoon, but I'm too sensible for that...LOL!)

xxx TLSue

Engaged

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have two tickets to go see Mary Poppins the Musical with my daughter. Yay!

Thanks to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, and my wonderful friend, Content1, for all their help and support this week. Sorry for the meltdown.

Thanks to BreeLovesEddie for giving A Forbidden Love its 9000th review. Wow!

Quick Fic Rec: The Mail Order Bride by Lady Gwynedd...Just lovely.

Updated: Saturday, 28th April 2012

Words: 4202

Chapter 63

Engaged

BPOV

Being in Edward's arms was always cause for rejoicing, and dancing with him turned out to be no exception. The feel of his strong hands holding me gently, but with such confidence, of our bodies moving together in perfect rhythm, reminded me of the far more intimate activity in which we'd previously engaged...though I tried my best not to allow the memories of our wonderful lovemaking to surface.

The formal dinner in the palace banquet hall with the gold-and-crystal-adorned, one-hundred-seat table was intimidating to say the least. Under the watchful and no doubt curious gaze of the King's most distinguished guests, I was excruciatingly self-conscious and barely able to swallow the food despite its exquisite presentation and seemingly never-ending variety of courses. Being seated so far from Edward only added to my discomposure. But the worst part of the evening was being surrounded by the eminent gentlemen, including two *actual* princes whom the King insisted I at least consider before he would announce Edward's and my betrothal. With no choice but to agree, I endeavoured to be attentive without offering encouragement that might be misconstrued. Mindful of appearing impolite but

unable to resist, I kept glancing down the table, finding assurance when I caught Edward's eye and being encouraged beyond measure by the love I saw shining in them, even from a distance.

I didn't waste time congratulating myself on surviving the dinner as the next formidably daunting obstacle loomed...my presentation to the *crème de la crème* of British society. Stepping forward to stand beside the King, I was stunned by the sight of a thousand elegantly suited, gowned, bewigged and bejewelled members of the upper *ton* filling the vast, glittering ball room. It was beyond anything I'd ever imagined, and my heart began to beat so loudly in my chest that, for a horrible moment, I feared I might faint. But then Edward came towards me, and everything else faded into insignificance.

Smiling at the memory and the joy of dancing in Edward's arms, I reminded myself to stay focused. I knew I needed to keep my wits about me for the rest of the evening...which didn't mean I wasn't determined to enjoy this blissful interlude from the stress of having my every word and action blatantly scrutinised by the curious and critical eyes of the *ton*. Of course, I was still being watched, but with my attention fixed on Edward's handsome face and the glorious music swirling around us, I could happily pretend we were the only two people in the world.

Waltzing with my now publicly acknowledged fiancé was sublime, and I was flooded with joy and relief. I'd always been a truly terrible dancer, but in his arms I felt as light as a feather and couldn't seem to put a foot wrong. It was an altogether new experience for me and added to the surreal and exhilarating atmosphere of the evening.

The ballroom was an architectural marvel with towering marble columns, cathedral-like ceilings, glittering crystal chandeliers, and astonishing gold filigree and fresco covered walls. Swirling in graceful circles around the beautiful room amidst the elegantly attired couples with whom we shared the dance floor, I found myself relaxing for the first time since this overwhelming evening had begun. I didn't want the dance to ever end, and I was terribly tempted to clutch Edward tightly when the music reached its finale.

But, of course, I didn't.

To the sound of the polite applause of the onlookers, I dutifully took a step back and curtsied in time with Edward's bow, his emerald eyes, dark and mesmerising, holding my gaze captive. My smile began to fade at the thought of the ordeal that lay ahead, but it strengthened when he raised my hand to his lips before escorting me to where my father was waiting with Lady Penelope.

Papa, though well on the way to recovery and growing stronger by the day, was not quite up to dancing. Since Edward and I were only *supposed* to dance together twice during the evening, though there were to be three waltzes and Edward had already declared that I was to dance them with him and no other, he asked for Penelope's hand for the next dance...a quadrille. She graciously accepted, and they moved to the dance floor to join other couples to form a group of four.

Immediately after Edward departed, I was surrounded by gentlemen requesting a place on my dance card, and my heart began to pound once more...with fear. Taking a deep breath, I held firmly to Edward's words of affirmation and his confidence in me. With a glance towards him and strengthened by his nod of encouragement, I placed my hand on the arm of some earl or viscount or another and joined in with the frightfully complicated routine, *somehow* managing to get through the dance with only a few, relatively minor, missteps.

The rest of the first half of the evening passed in similar fashion, with Edward dancing only with his aunt, sister, stepmother and one memorable dance with the Queen, during which I was partnered with the King, while I was passed like a package from one eminent gentleman to another. During a succession of cotillions, country dances and scotch reels, I made polite small talk with gentlemen of varying age and appearance, deflected queries of an impertinent or too personal nature, assured several surprisingly earnest young gentlemen that no, I would not prefer to break off my betrothal to Edward and run away with them at the earliest opportunity, and remembered not to talk politics, religion or any topic that might stir controversy.

To my surprise and secret relief, Edward chose not to partner with any of the never-ending stream of beautiful young ladies unashamedly vying for his attention. I was touched by his consideration of my feelings, though the way he glowered fiercely at the gentlemen with whom I was partnered, awaiting my return from each dance with the patience and demeanour of a caged tiger, was a little unsettling...if admittedly flattering. To my ongoing astonishment, it was abundantly clear that Edward only had eyes for me.

The second waltz of the evening was the last dance before supper, and I awaited it with growing anticipation. In one of the short breaks between dances, Lady Penelope informed me that it was only quite recently that the waltz had been included at such prestigious affairs, with even the notorious Lord Byron expressing shock at couples actually embracing on the dance floor.

I, for one, was exceedingly grateful for the concessions the King and Queen had made in allowing the waltz to be included, gladly accompanying Edward onto the

dance floor to await the first strains of an enchanting piece .

"You are doing splendidly," he assured me, though I couldn't help noting the tightness around his eyes.

"I just wish I could dance every single dance with you," I murmured, leaning in as close as I dared and hoping to reassure him with the love and sincerity that I knew must be shining from my eyes.

His expression lightened, and he reached to softly stroke my cheek.

"I know, my love." He smiled. "Once we are married, we will hold a private ball for our family and closest friends, and we shall waltz together as many times as we please."

"Oh...I'd like that," I breathed as the orchestra began, and we were once again swept up in the magic of the soaring music...and of being in one another's arms.

With growing confidence, I matched Edward's steps, twirling with ease around and around in time with the beautiful waltz and Edward's direction. Once again, the dance ended far too quickly, but at least this time, I was able to stay with Edward as he escorted me through to one of the adjoining rooms where a light supper was being served. We soon formed a party with Carlisle and Esme, Jasper and Alice, and Papa and Lady Penelope, but that didn't stop a steady stream of visitors from stopping by our table. Most offered polite greetings, further congratulations on Edward's and my betrothal, and invitations to a variety of coming events: soirées, dinners, parties and balls. A few eyed Edward and me with blatant curiosity, but to my relief, none dared to ask impertinent questions, and all were unfailingly polite. It was only when Alice and I excused ourselves to visit the ladies' withdrawing room that I became privy to some of the rumours that were circulating about us.

"I heard she travelled halfway across the country without a chaperone and in the company of servants...pretending to be one of them!"

"I heard she actually cooked...in a kitchen...and laboured as a maid!"

"Oh my...how horrid...and how scandalous!"

"Hmmm...If we're talking scandalous, I'd like to know whether or not she *tricked* Lord Edward into marrying her, deceiving him in some manner so that he was forced to ask for her hand."

My hand rose to my mouth at the horrid accusation. With tears stinging my eyes, I turned to leave the anteroom and the gossiping young ladies behind, but Alice shushed me and indicated that we should stay and keep listening in.

"It's better to know what's being said," she whispered. "That way we'll be able to counter it more specifically."

My shoulders sagged, but I did as she asked and stayed just around the corner from where the ladies were twittering.

"I don't know about the marquess being *forced* to do anything." I heard another voice contribute, the tone wry. "Have you seen the way he looks at the gentlemen who dare to dance with her...or the way he looks at her? Oh my...I'd give anything to have Lord Bertram look at me that way...or any gentleman for that matter. It makes me all hot and flustered just thinking about it!"

"Oh...I know what you mean," the first voice agreed, "though Mother says his behaviour is bordering on indecent. He practically undressed her with his eyes when they were dancing. She might be his fiancé, but it's still terribly shocking!"

"A man as incredibly handsome as Lord Edward can shock me any day...or that equally darling Lord Jasper who seems to have his sights set on the Duke's daughter. I'd do anything to be in either girl's shoes," another lady, with a decidedly girlish voice, giggled.

"Lady Isabella is presentable enough, I suppose, and Lady Alice appears adequately stylish for one so young, but neither could be described as great beauties," the lady who'd made the awful accusation interjected, her tone filled with hauteur and her sniff of disdain clearly audible. "It does make one wonder how they have managed to secure the interest of two such handsome and eligible gentlemen so early in the season. Of course, they're both dreadfully well-connected, Isabella surprisingly so. I guess that must be where the attraction lies."

"Well-connected, lucky and *beloved*," Alice declared, thankfully putting an end to our eavesdropping and rounding the corner to face the group of young ladies whose expressions reflected their dismay at being caught out. "My brother simply *adores* Isabella, as does my father, the Duke, and her cousin, the King, so you might want to keep that in mind, ladies," she suggested, her tone deceptively sweet. "Oh, and Edward isn't just *interested* in Isabella, he is totally committed to her well-being as his future marchioness and, I can assure you, will not take kindly to anyone deliberately causing her distress."

I wasn't sure if Alice's words were wise, but they certainly had an effect, and I was soon surrounded by gushing young ladies all apparently quite desperate to make amends and secure my future friendship. I assured them that I was not offended, but it was with considerable relief that I eventually made my escape.

As soon as we had made use of the facilities, Alice and I left the now deserted withdrawing rooms to find a footman waiting for us in the hallway. He passed us a folded missive which bid us to head in the opposite direction from which we'd come. Apprehensive, I was reluctant to obey, but Alice recognised Edward's writing, so we did as the note directed. Rounding a corner, we were met by Edward and Jasper who quickly ushered us into a barely lit drawing room.

"Edward! What are you thinking?" I cried, albeit softly, my protestation cut off when he captured my mouth with his and proceeded to kiss me ardently.

My concerns regarding the inappropriateness of our clandestine meeting dissipated in an instant, and I forgot everything but the magic of being back in Edward's arms. After the limited but decidedly arousing intimacy of the waltz, I was hungry for his touch and kissed him passionately in return, melting into his embrace. My lips softened beneath the pressure of his open-mouthed kiss and then parted to receive the urgent questing of his tongue, his delicious taste filling my mouth and instantly overwhelming my senses. Responding in kind, I slid over his sweet and yet demanding tongue with my own in soft, sensual strokes...tasting...delving...exploring. When my hands rose of their own accord to thread gently through his hair, he moaned into my mouth, pulling me hard against him and making me achingly aware of the intensity and strength of his desire.

The warmth of Edward's caresses and his intoxicating scent drove away every rational thought as our lips moved together in sweet, eager, hungry kisses. Lost in the most passionate embrace we'd shared since our reunion, it was only when I heard Lord Jasper clearing his throat that I remembered we were not alone.

Abruptly breaking the kiss, I spun around to face our companions, my cheeks catching fire to find them staring at us from not two yards away...Jasper's expression rueful but Alice's clearly astonished. Her eyes were impossibly wide and her mouth agape, but for the life of me, I couldn't think of a single thing to say to excuse her brother's and my loss of decorum.

"Alice..." Edward began, and then he faltered, raising a hand to run his fingers through his now dreadfully tousled hair. His mouth opened and closed several times, but before he could form a coherent sentence, Alice snapped her mouth shut and turned to face Jasper, her brow creasing into a furious scowl.

"Pray, kind sir...would you mind telling me why you've never kissed *me* in such an intimate and passionate manner?" she demanded, and it was Jasper's turn to stare nonplussed.

"Because he knows what I'd do to him if he did," Edward growled, and I turned to eye him archly, my embarrassment quickly replaced with annoyance.

"Oh...so it's acceptable for *me* to be kissed like that but not your sister?" I challenged.

Edward's scowl disappeared as his eyebrows shot up in alarm. "That's not what I meant," he defended, reaching for me but then letting his hand drop when I stepped back and folded my arms, one foot tapping with impatience. "It's different for us," he continued, winning himself no favour. "I mean...not because of anything that might have occurred before but because we're *engaged* to be married."

"Oh, *really*?" I drawled with blatant disdain for his excuse.

"Yes, Edward...*really*?" Alice echoed before turning to her beau. "How am I to know whether or not I should accept Jasper's proposal if I don't even know whether I'm going to enjoy his kisses? I mean, he's kissed me already, of course, but chaste little pecks in comparison to the extraordinary kiss that you and Bella were just *engaged* in!"

Jasper spluttered, and his panicked eyes shot to Edward's face, but before either man could respond, Alice continued.

"I've already informed you, Lord Jasper, that I want to be completely convinced that you will honour your promise of fidelity before I agree to become your wife. Now I have another condition that I require to be met before I make my decision. I expect a *real* kiss, one that will thoroughly sweep me off my feet," she declared and then reaching for my arm, headed for the door. "And *not* when my brother is present, if you don't mind. Now, I think we'd better head back before we're missed. Honestly, Edward, what were you thinking?"

"Alice, please...don't go. I just wanted to see Bella for a moment without half the *ton* looking on," he called, his plaintive tone dissolving the starch that had stiffened my spine. Tugging free from Alice's hold, I returned to his side, and he gently clasped my hands.

"I'm sorry, Bella. Seeing all those men ogling you and being able to dance with you while I could only watch on was very...difficult, but I shouldn't have acted so

impetuously, I just..."

"It's all right, Edward," I murmured, squeezing his hands with mine and then reaching up to gently cup his cheek. "I understand...I do. But I think Alice is right, and we should get back. There are enough rumours circulating without us adding any more fuel to the fire."

"Rumours?" Edward and Jasper both demanded in unison.

"Don't worry, I've dealt with it...for now," Alice assured them, linking her arm with mine and purposefully directing us towards the door. "But if Bella and I don't make an appearance soon all my good work will be for naught. Now, you two give us a few moments, and then I suggest you head over and play a game or two in one of the gambling rooms before re-entering the ballroom to allay suspicion."

I smiled at Alice's commanding tone and the stunned expression on Jasper's face.

"Marry my sister at your peril, my friend," Edward murmured in an aside. "For you can expect to be thoroughly managed."

"I heard that, Edward," Alice retorted, as she swept me through the door to the sound of her brother's dry laughter and Jasper's groan.

Alice's and my return to the ball occurred without further delay, and we were soon reunited with our waiting parents and their partners.

"Are you well, my dear?" Lady Penelope queried, studying me closely. "Your colour is a little heightened."

"Oh, it's just the crush and excitement," I demurred, feeling an increased flush of warmth in my cheeks at the memory of Edward's passionate kiss.

"Here, Bella," Alice offered, passing me a glass of cool punch. "This should help."

Smiling my gratitude, I sipped the ice-filled drink, pressing the glass against my swollen lips and slowly regaining my composure.

"It would seem that our perseverance with your dance lessons has finally paid off," my father commented, coming close enough to speak privately. "You're doing remarkably well."

"Thank you, Papa." We shared a rueful smile, no doubt both remembering the

frustrations, tears and occasional tantrum thrown during those times...and that was by my tutors.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" he asked, and I nodded.

"Surprisingly so," I admitted, not bothering to hide the relief in my tone. "Though I can't deny I was pleased when Edward stepped forward, and the King was forced to announce our betrothal early. It has lessened the strain on my nerves considerably, though I think I may not be in quite such good favour with my cousin, especially as I also refused his repeated offer of a duchy of my own. Do you think he will forgive me?"

"You, my dear girl, will be forgiven just about anything..." the King startled me by declaring close to my side, "...if you will grant me the next dance."

"Of course, your Majesty." I curtsied low, cursing my inattention and the colour I once again felt rushing to my cheeks. I had not realised he was approaching or that he'd overheard my comment, but he did not seem upset, and we were soon promenading together at the head of a long line of dancers assembling for the next cotillion.

The King was extremely complimentary regarding my debut, describing it as a triumph and a wonderful reflection of our familial connection and standing. The avidly watching crowd continued to take their cue from him, and if it had not been for overhearing the ladies gossiping in the withdrawing room, I might have been lulled into believing that all thoughts towards me were kind and supportive. Of course, I knew that could not possibly be the case, but when I felt the pressure to live up to the new and unrealistic expectations that had been placed upon me increasing unbearably, I sought Edward's eye...he'd not stayed away for long...and basked in his manifest approval and affection. I hoped it wasn't too dreadfully naive of me, but my heart held to the belief that, with Edward by my side, all else would ultimately fall into place.

The rest of the evening passed without incident. I even managed a few breaks from the dance floor, crying a need to rest, and was able to engage in pleasant conversation with our companions and their associates. Edward stayed comfortably close to my side during the short breaks I was able to garner until it was time to escort me to the dance floor for the final waltz of the evening...a bittersweet affair. As much as I rejoiced at the opportunity to be in his arms, I couldn't help feeling sad knowing that we must soon be parted for the night.

At least our engagement was only four weeks long, as I had heard of some

betrotals lasting for months or even longer, and I honestly didn't know how I would have borne the wait!

Overhearing a few murmured comments about what an exceedingly handsome couple Edward and I made, I smiled but resisted the urge to shyly duck my head. Various society matrons had alluded to the fact that Edward's interest in me was as a result of my surprising connection to the King and of what an excellent match *he* had made. But I was both proud and honoured to be the lady upon Edward's arm, the one he had selected to be his wife and partner in life.

Knowing that he had effectively chosen me long before he knew of my position, surprising wealth or unexpected connections merely added to the confidence that had begun to blossom within me, enabling me to brush off the occasionally snide remark that I suspected was rooted in jealousy. After all...Edward was without doubt the most handsome man at the ball, and I could not deny that I was the most fortunate of young ladies.

It was well past midnight when we were finally able to make our farewells, with a veritable receiving line of guests deciding they must repeat their best wishes and reissue invitations. We eventually made our way to our waiting carriage, the journey to Lady Penelope's townhouse made in relative quiet as we all sat back and enjoyed the peace after the noise and crowd of the ball.

That Edward had boldly placed an arm around me, allowing me to rest my head against his shoulder...an intimate and relaxed position mirrored by my father and Lady Penelope...certainly added to the comfortable ambience, in my estimation.

I tried not to feel sad that this magical evening was coming to a close, but Papa seemed to pick up on my encroaching melancholy. As the carriage came to a halt at the front of Lady Penelope's distinguished home, he caught my eye and offered me an encouraging smile.

"Rather than keep the horses standing whilst I escort Lady Penelope inside and wish her goodnight, I thought I would instruct Ben to drive you once around the park and then return for me," he explained after they'd both exited the carriage, addressing us through the door.

"Papa?" I queried in time with Edward's startled, "Sir?"

"I'm very proud and happy for you both, and I thought you might appreciate a *little* more time alone than I've been allowing," he clarified, and Edward and I glanced at one another, shocked and delighted by this highly unexpected

development.

"I am trusting you to be good." Papa continued, his expression severe...all except for the twinkle I could see in his eye. "Well...*reasonably* good," he added before closing the door and leaving Edward and I alone in the dimly lit carriage.

"How long will it take us to drive around the park?" I asked, my heart beginning to pound with rising anticipation as a flurry of butterflies took up residence in my stomach.

"About fifteen minutes, maybe a little longer if Ben chooses to drive slowly," Edward answered just as the carriage lurched forward. He used the momentum to lift me bodily onto his lap, and I gladly wrapped my arms around his shoulders to steady myself and make the most of being in his arms once more.

"What do you think Papa meant by '*reasonably* good'?" I murmured, my voice a breathy whisper as Edward's lips began to burn a path from just below my ear to the fashionably exposed décolletage that I had thought rather scandalous when I'd first been fitted for this gown, but which I was now exceedingly pleased about.

"I have a fairly keen idea," he murmured, his breath brushing my sensitised skin and causing my breasts to ache with the most delicious tingles. "And just enough time to fulfil a promise I've found deuced difficult to keep."

"A promise?"

"To solve your dilemma, my darling," he murmured huskily, and I shuddered at the prospect of finding delight in Edward's arms...an exceedingly fitting end to a perfect evening.

~AFL~

Thanks so much for all your reviews, recs, and tweets. Your support for this story has been wonderful.

xxx TLSue

Approval

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I've had an awful case of writer's block due to excessive real life stress and challenging plot lines.

Thanks Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar for all your support and wonderful beta'ing.

Just a short chapter, I'm afraid, due to aforementioned writer's block and a ridiculous amount of real life drama to contend with.

Updated: Saturday, May 5th, 2012

Words: 2145

Chapter 64

Approval

BPOV

The horses' steel-shod hooves made a clip-clopping noise as they pulled the carriage at a slow but steady trot around the park. Inside the gently swaying and dimly lit cocoon, Edward's and my kisses became increasingly heated.

Between the corsetry I'd been forced to don to do the magnificent ball gown justice and the voluminous layers of fine linen petticoats and yards of gold material that made up the skirt, it was not particularly comfortable sitting perched on Edward's lap...nor an easy matter for him to gain access to what lay beneath. But if there was one thing I had come to learn about my extraordinarily handsome fiancée, it was that he could be quite determined.

His lips slowly drifted from their worship of my mouth to nibble a path along my jaw and then suckle teasingly at the sensitive curve of my neck. At the same time, his questing fingers expertly sought and captured my ankle beneath the hem of my gown, circling it with his thumb and forefinger before his large, warm hand made its languorous way along my leg, pushing the frothy fabric out of the way. With gentle caresses, he mapped the curve of my calf, the bend of my knee, and the contour of my thigh. When he reached the lace-trimmed edge of my silk stocking and his fingers stroked the bare skin above, I gasped as desire and pleasure mingled,

coursing through me in a sensual, shuddering wave.

"Bella, my love," Edward groaned, the sound rumbling close to my ear as his lips brushed my neck. The feel of his rigid member pressing insistently against my hip, brought back the memory of the first time I'd found myself on Edward's lap, and a girlish giggle escaped my lips. Lifting his head to look deeply into my eyes, he whispered, "You find this amusing, sweetheart?"

"No," I insisted with a shake of my head, my words and actions belied by the continuing chuckles I couldn't seem to contain. "Well...maybe a little," I admitted reluctantly.

"Would the lady care to enlighten the gentleman as to the source of her mirth?" my clearly unimpressed fiancée uttered drolly, his husky tone at odds with his sardonically raised brow.

Pressing a hand to my lips for a moment to stifle my laughter, I wriggled a little on his lap, pressing boldly against the very prominent evidence of his desire.

"Do you remember the night you drove me back to Worthington Hall after rescuing me in the markets?" I asked, fluttering my eyelashes shyly at the memory.

Edward nodded, his eyes going impossibly dark.

"I thought your...er...well...your...um...the part of you that..." My words trailed off.

"My erection?" he supplied, and I giggled again.

"Yes, your *erection*. I thought it was the pistol that you'd used to threaten those horrid men, which made sense at the time. But I couldn't for the life of me understand why it was in your pocket on every single occasion that we embraced thereafter."

Edward's eyes widened, and then he burst out laughing. I soon joined him, and our bodies shook together as we gave vent to our humour.

"Oh, Bella...what a rogue I was. Did you know that I peeked beneath your skirt and gazed upon your lovely legs while you slept?"

"You didn't!" I gasped in mock outrage, one hand coming to flutter in front of my bosom in a gesture of feminine distress.

"I did." His smile faded, and I let my hand fall, sensing his sudden change of mood. "And worse than that, I'm afraid," he continued, his expression sombre. "I spent the drive imagining all the things I wanted to do to you and attempting to convince myself that you were not an innocent when it was blindingly obvious that you were. I justified my behaviour by telling myself that I was doing you a favour and that there was no other way for me to keep you safe." Sighing, he let his head fall back against the padded leather seat, his eyes filling with remorse. "I'm so sorry I didn't treat you with more respect."

Lifting a hand to smooth away the furrows on Edward's brow, I stroked the side of his face before gently cupping his cheek. "All's well, my love, that ends...or is *about* to end...incredibly well," I murmured.

Edward removed his hand from beneath my skirt and captured my hand, turning his head to place a sweet and yet searing kiss to my palm.

"Not an end," he whispered hoarsely, "but a beginning."

"A *wonderful* beginning to a joyous future," I agreed, and his mouth found mine in a kiss that was both loving and yet somehow...reverent.

Coming to a sudden decision, I broke away from his mouth and took a deep breath...an action that drew Edward's gaze to my exposed cleavage. My resolve almost faltered as the resurgence of hunger I saw in his eyes sparked a deep longing in my heart. But then I realised that it was, indeed, my *heart* that ached for communion with Edward even more intensely than my body desired the fulfilment I knew I could find in his arms.

Lifting his chin with my forefinger until his gaze once more met mine, I whispered a highly unexpected request.

"Edward, would you mind too terribly if we...waited?" I murmured, nervously catching my lower lip with my teeth while I watched his expression go from shocked comprehension, to disappointment, and then, oddly, to one of relief.

"To make love?" he asked, his eyebrows rising curiously, and I nodded. Reaching to release my lip from between my teeth, he ran his thumb soothingly over the place where I'd bitten.

"I wasn't intending to go that far just now," he murmured softly. "There really isn't time, and I don't imagine that's what your father had in mind when he granted us this opportunity to be alone, though I was hoping to bring you...*comfort*."

"I know," I breathed.

"But you'd like to refrain from being intimate until we are properly wed?"

I nodded again, and he reached to gently brush his finger down my cheek, an action that caused a tingling sensation to flood my body and momentarily challenge my decision.

"I would like that, too," he surprised me by saying, and my eyes widened. "Please don't misunderstand me, my love," he whispered, leaning in close to brush a tender kiss across my lips, "for I can assure you that I am very, *very* much looking forward to taking you to our marriage bed where we shall love one another freely as man and wife."

"Without shame or regret," I added soberly, and we shared a look of understanding. But then his brow furrowed, and he tilted his head, causing his tousled hair to fall across his forehead in a way that was quite unfashionable but that I thought utterly adorable.

"What about your...*dilemma*?" he queried softly.

"Four weeks is not a terribly long time to wait," I murmured, feeling confident in my decision now that I knew Edward felt similarly...not that the voice of my desire wasn't protesting rather indignantly, of course.

Edward didn't respond straight away, his high, sculptured cheekbones unexpectedly blooming with colour.

"What is it?" I puzzled.

"I could *explain* to you how to find your own release," he whispered, his eyes dark and intense.

My own cheeks bloomed with embarrassment, and I thought it odd how discomposed we both were by the topic considering the physical intimacies we had already shared.

"That won't be necessary," I offered shyly, struggling to hold his gaze.

"Because you'd rather wait?"

"Well, yes, but also because I already...er...fathomed the er...*mechanics* of it for

myself."

"Oh!" Edward sat back, clearly shocked, and I instantly regretted mentioning the rather surprising discovery I'd made following a particularly vivid dream.

"I only tried it the once," I defended, hoping I hadn't offended him too badly. "While it was pleasant enough, I suppose, it was nowhere near as wonderful as when you, I mean when we, I mean... Oh, Edward. Do you think badly of me now?"

"Of course not," he quickly assured me, carefully schooling his features. "So you're saying you have no need of my assistance now that you can take care of the problem yourself?"

"What, no!" I exclaimed, clutching at the lapels of his dress jacket. "I'm merely saying that I understand the process, but to be perfectly honest, it left me feeling a little, well...lonely. I'd rather wait until I can be with you fully...as your wife."

This time Edward's "Oh" was of relief.

"So we wait," he murmured, leaning forward to brush a kiss to my forehead.

I nodded. "Until our wedding night."

"Which is only four weeks away," he declared.

"Only four weeks," I agreed, suppressing a smile at his grimly determined expression.

"Besides," I offered, looking coyly up at him through my eyelashes. "There is something to be said for letting the anticipation build."

"Indeed there is," he chuckled wryly. "As well as making it considerably easier to meet your father's eye when he rejoins us."

Groaning, I covered my face with my hands, not having given that embarrassing eventuality its due consideration. "But he'll think we've been doing more than we have."

"There, there," Edward crooned, pulling me close against his chest to nestle my head beneath his chin. "Your father only wants your happiness, and I'm sure he does not begrudge us a few passionate kisses and caresses."

The tension drained from my body, and I settled comfortably into his embrace. "I suppose you're right," I murmured, the excitement of the long day and much longer night quickly overcoming me as I surrendered to a highly unladylike yawn.

Edward chuckled again and kissed the top of my forehead. "Rest, my love," he murmured, and warmed by his embrace, I somehow managed to ignore the horrid strips of whalebone digging into my ribs and succumbed to the allure of sleep. The next thing I knew, the rhythmic sounds of horseshoes striking cobblestones had been replaced by silence, and Edward was gently shaking my shoulder.

"Bella, sweetheart, it's time to awaken," he murmured, and I reluctantly opened my eyes. "I'd happily carry you inside," he continued. "But I fear we would thoroughly scandalize my father's staff."

"We can't have that," I mumbled, content to lean on his arm as he assisted me from the carriage. Papa was waiting for us, his expression without censure and his eyes filled with their customary love and acceptance...along with a healthy dose of fatherly pride.

"Papa," I greeted shyly, embarrassed at having fallen asleep...and at what Edward and I had *almost* done in his absence, though my father's thoughts were thankfully centred on earlier in the evening.

"You did incredibly well tonight, Bella," he complimented, coming to walk beside Edward and I as we made our way inside. "Your mother would have been very proud to see you triumph in front of the highest echelon of society...not that she paid them much mind."

We shared a smile at the memory of my surprisingly free-spirited mother, my eyes prickling with sudden tears.

"I wish she could have met Edward," I admitted, glancing up at my fiancée who was eyeing me with both love and concern. He raised a hand to gently brush a stray tear from my cheek as we came to a halt at the foot of the grand, curving stairway.

"I'm sure I would have admired her greatly," Edward offered kindly.

"Well, son." Edward's eyebrows rose at my father's unexpected use of the term. "I can guarantee she would have loved you."

"Sir?" Edward queried, clearly surprised.

"You adore her little girl as much as she did," Papa clarified, giving Edward a decidedly fatherly pat on the shoulder before turning towards the stairs. "She would most definitely have approved. As do I," he added over his shoulder, "though if I catch Bella asleep in your lap again before the wedding, I doubt I'll be so obliging."

"Papa!" I groaned, feeling my cheeks flame with chagrin.

"Goodnight, my dear," my father chuckled as he made his slow but steady way up the stairs. "Goodnight Edward. I'll expect my daughter at the top of the stairs in five minutes."

"Very well, Sir, and good night," Edward called after him before hurriedly drawing me into the shadows and kissing me soundly, clearly not as worried about scandalising the servants as he'd intimated earlier.

"Edward, the footmen might see," I rebuked half-heartedly even as I moulded my body to his and my hands disappeared in his hair.

"They're all looking the other way," he assured me, and I chuckled against his lips.

"Whatever you say, m'lord," I murmured, giving myself up to the wonders of Edward's magical goodnight kiss...the perfect end to a truly remarkable day.

~AFL~

I know, I know...I *ahem* blocked the lemon, but I just couldn't make it work with Charlie on the scene. I'll make up for it on the wedding night and honeymoon, I promise.

xxx TLSue

Enlightening

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I own a growing collection of Disney DVDs and am off to see Mary Poppins the musical tomorrow. Yay! :D

Thanks to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for their wonderful support. I can't believe it's been almost a year now.

I'm so glad that most of you appreciated Edward's and Bella's decision to 'wait for the wedding'. This next chapter was incredibly difficult to write and addresses a very challenging topic. I almost gave up and skipped the scene that takes up the second half of the chapter, but I felt like it would be cowardly not to address this issue. My apologies in advance for the angst and for not quite managing to get all the loose ends tied up...but I'm working on it, I promise.

Updated: Friday, 11th May 2012

Words: 4532

Chapter 65

Enlightening

BPOV

Following the triumph of my introductory ball, the days of Edward's and my betrothal passed in a flurry of activity. My quiet, bucolic upbringing had done little to prepare me for the frenzy of a London Season—particularly one where I was the unexpected main attraction—and I found the endless round of social engagements, with their formal introductions, rigid protocols and typically banal conversational topics, quite trying. Lady Esme and Alice were complimentary regarding my efforts to comply with society's rigorous expectations regarding my presentation and demeanour. But I privately owned to feelings of relief when given the opportunity to socialise with our private party without the prying eyes of the *ton* looking on and judging my every word gesture.

Edward's extended family, which more often than not included Lady Penelope and her two boys who'd come to visit with their mother for the summer, and Lord Jasper, who was steadfast in his endeavours to win back both Alice's and Carlisle's good

favour, were a welcome buffer from the outside world and becoming dearer to me by the day.

Papa fulfilled his promise that I be allowed at least some time in my hectic schedule to savour the delights of the city: visits to museums and places of interest, picnics in the park, and open-air drives along the promenades being amongst my favourite activities...activities enhanced by Edward's very welcome and most attentive presence at my side. Alice and Jasper, along with the requisite chaperones consisting of one or more of our senior family members, often accompanied us, giving opportunity for our fledgling friendships to blossom.

With our engagement formally recognised, Edward and I received a veritable mountain of invitations to soirees, dinner parties and prestigious balls, with Lady Esme kindly advising me which to decline and which to attend. While I relished the dances Edward and I could share together, it was the visits to the theatre and opera that I delighted in the most. The calibre of the entertainments was unlike anything I'd seen before, and I found myself captivated by the dramatic tales and majesty of the music. But it was being seated beside Edward in the Cullen's or Royal boxes, depending on our companions, with our hands discreetly entwined and ample opportunity to converse in quiet whispers during the show or more freely in the intervals, that provided the greatest enjoyment.

Papa continued to allow Edward and me a few precious moments alone together at the end of each evening, often times when he was engaged in bidding his own farewell to Lady Penelope. I was thrilled to see the bond growing between them, for Carlisle's sister appeared in all ways to be a genuinely charming and agreeable lady. She and my father seemed very well suited and increasingly, if discreetly, enamoured of one another. I would not have been at all surprised if their nightly words of parting were actually less conversational and more in keeping with the non-verbal expressions of affection that Edward and I employed...not that I wanted to imagine my very own father engaged in even remotely amorous conduct. But I was very happy for him. Even though I knew I would miss him terribly after my marriage, Masen Park being some distance from Forkston though thankfully not as far away as Worthington Hall, I felt considerably more at ease knowing that he was unlikely to be alone for long.

Edward's and my attempts to keep our own nightly farewells relatively chaste, in keeping with our decision to abstain from intimacy before our wedding, were not particularly successful. Our kisses would start out soft and sweet, with gentle brushes of lips and hands entwined between us. But the desire that simmered barely beneath the surface of our increasingly sensitised skin would soon overtake us, leading to deeper, more passionate kisses and caresses of a far more heated nature.

I inevitably finished the evening breathless, wanting and oft-times questioning my resolve.

I had certainly not been incorrect in my assumption that abstaining would magnify the intensity of our feelings.

As the days passed, our hunger for one another grew until the slightest brush of fingers could induce sharp intakes of breath, and the inadvertent bump of a knee provoked a veritable kaleidoscope of sensation. Edward's gaze was upon me almost constantly. I could feel it touching me even from across a crowded room, like an invisible caress sending tendrils of longing weaving magically down my spine. By the end of some evenings, his eyes appeared more black than green, the desire humming between us like lightning strikes in a summer storm.

Though a part of me secretly hoped that Edward would throw caution to the wind and seek my room in the middle of the night, I could not help but admire the strength of character he revealed by refraining from doing so. He was clearly determined to show his respect for my father and his willingness to fulfil my request that we wait...despite the fact that I sorely tested his resolve on occasion.

As much as the tension growing between us could be distracting and at times even uncomfortable...an almost constant liquid ache low in my belly...I relished the thought of how truly wonderful it would be when the waiting was over and we were finally wed. Other than the fulfilment of our physical desires, I longed for the opportunity for us to spend time alone as we had at Worthington Hall. While our familial chaperones were extraordinarily obliging, giving Edward and me opportunity to converse quite candidly on any number of subjects, we so often found ourselves under the watchful eyes of the inquisitive *ton*, that I longed for the time when we could be completely free with one another without fear of censure.

It was quickly apparent to me that the majority of the lords and ladies that sought my company and favour weren't particularly interested in me as a person, but securing a highly prestigious connection via my supposedly naïve and pliable self with King, Duke and Marquess was their primary goal. Others were fascinated by the idea of one of their class having masqueraded as a servant, and I quickly became adept at divulging just enough information to satisfy their curiosity whilst diverting any inappropriate or prurient questioning about my time on the run from Lord Hunter or when I was working as a maid and pastry chef. Fortunately, not all members of the supposedly superior class that made my acquaintance were as shallow in their motivation, and I looked forward to strengthening ties with a few intelligent and considerate ladies, in particular those who expressed an interest in the charitable work I was determined to pursue.

Papa's insistence that I be given regular reprieves from the insatiable demands of the *tonnish* hordes turned out to be a godsend in ways other than allowing Edward and I time to cement our relationship and enjoy one another's company. Without it, I feared my philanthropic endeavours would have been postponed indefinitely.

With Edward's insistence that it was his role to support me in all areas, up to and including the provision of all the jewellery I could ever require as the Marchioness of Masen, I'd carefully gone through my mother's cache. After selecting a few pieces as keepsakes, I'd had Papa sell the rest of the jewels and gold coin and now had a formidable fortune at my disposal...one I intended to put to good purpose.

My first step was to learn as much as I could about what was already being done to assist young women and girls in need of rescuing from brothels and abusive workplaces. What I discovered was that most of the existing charitable institutions and female penitentiaries for the rehabilitation of prostitutes were reliant on funding by donation. Consequently they were open to public tours where members of the upper classes were able to attend religious services where they could view the 'fallen women' through screens. The sermons preached and rhetoric espoused focussed heavily on the licentious and sinful nature of the girls with no mention made of the men who took advantage of the "libidinous temptresses'" services, or the fact that many of the women would have been young and unwilling girls when they were forced to their abusive trade and cruelly robbed of their innocence. Conditions were often more akin to a convent or penal institution, and though there were stories of women grateful for the opportunity to escape their hopeless and horrid circumstance and having their lives set in order, the method of delivery did not sit well with me...or Lady Esme*.

The charity that Esme had discovered on one of her visits to town during the years of her own, highly abusive, marriage, and now wished to support, was run on very different principles. More like a home, it offered safety, nurture and education to the girls who resided therein, along with much needed privacy, despite the fact that the titillating public exhibitions employed by the other institutions were highly profitable exercises.

Through Lady Esme's connections, we were able to make an appointment with the director of the charity and explain our desire to visit the home and witness the programmes on offer, as I was looking forward to the opportunity to learn more and hopefully be of assistance. Apprehensive after learning how the more traditional institutions were run, I had begun to reconsider the wisdom of having Edward and Jasper accompany us on the visit, but the Director, Miss Horsefall, a retired governess with a stern but capable demeanour, assured us the gentlemen would be welcome.

"We need the support and understanding of gentlemen in positions of power if we are ever to see laws formulated and passed that will protect the rights of young girls and see those who profit from their exploitation and suffering brought to justice," she declared. "Of course we make sure that the most vulnerable girls are made to feel protected, but our young women must one day return to a world dominated and ruled by men. It is an important aspect of their recovery and rehabilitation to learn that not all members of the male sex are abusive and amoral...in particular not all *gentlemen*."

Edward and Jasper had both visibly blanched when I'd repeated her words, and I'd wondered if they would decline the invitation to accompany us. But they held firm to their promises of support, Jasper particularly motivated to endure whatever discomfort the experience might afford his clearly twinging conscience.

He had made steady gains in his efforts to convince both Alice and Lord Carlisle of his sincerity, winning both myself and my father over in the process with his steady and attentive manner. But Alice insisted that she would not even hear his renewed proposal until he'd confronted the darker side to his previously cavalier conduct...a sentiment with which I did not disagree.

So it was that one overcast summer morn, Esme, Alice, Jasper, Edward and myself found ourselves on our way to a far less salubrious part of the city than we normally frequented. An uncharacteristically subdued party, we were dressed soberly in deference to our destination, though Alice's choice of violet floral day gown, purple velvet pelisse and lace-trimmed bonnet wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind.

"I removed *most* of the silk lilacs from the brim of my hat, *and* I'm wearing my smallest cameo brooch," she defended upon seeing my questioning look when we gathered in the foyer to await our departure, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

My own dress, the same sombre navy gown I'd worn for so many days in a row when I'd been on the run from Lord Hunter, only including it when I'd hurriedly packed for London for sentimental reasons, raised eyebrows of its own...Edward's.

Stepping close to my side, he grasped my hand and queried, "Is that the same gown you wore to the markets in Worthey?"

"Well, yes," I acknowledged warily. "I realise it is getting quite worn and is hardly appropriate attire for a future marchioness, but I thought I might appear less intimidating to the girls in the home if I was dressed plainly. I hope you don't mind?"

"Mind?" he murmured close to my ear, his eyes darkening. "I was going to ask if

you could wear that dress for me again *after* we're married. There's a dream I may have mentioned that I would dearly like the opportunity to enact one day...recreating the scene at the inn in Worthey...and involving a chair?"

"Edward, behave!" I hissed, feeling my cheeks flame even as my heart began to race at the rather vivid images his torrid words inspired in my far too easily stimulated imagination.

Chuckling, he assisted me to don my plainest jacket, his expression quickly sobering when Lady Esme commented on the wisdom of my suggestion regarding our attire.

"I'm sure some of the girls will find our presence daunting," she advised, having had heartbreaking experience with the issue in the past, in particular through her rescue of Angela. I'd wanted to invite my friend to come with us as she was especially enthusiastic about my involvement in such a personally relevant endeavour, but Esme didn't feel that the members of the charity's board would understand our including a common maid as one of our party. It didn't seem fair to me, but I did not argue the matter, though I did promise Angela both a full accounting and to find a way to include her in future.

The nondescript building to which our coach delivered us was set back from the road and surrounded by a high, brick wall. Once past the gates that were opened by the guard who was expecting us, we discovered well-tended flower beds and fruit trees with what appeared to be vegetable and herb gardens to the side and rear. A few plainly dressed young women paused in their labours and stood watching us as we disembarked from the carriage. I offered a tentative wave and then as a group, we approached the front door which opened before we could knock.

Miss Horsefall greeted us warmly before ushering us through to a plainly furnished drawing room, where introductions were made to the waiting members of the charity's board and the matron of the home, a rotund lady of friendly appearance by the name of Mrs. Morley. While morning tea was served by a wide-eyed maid whose gaze kept darting between Edward and Jasper, her expression clearly awed, Miss Horsefall catalogued the services provided by the institution, though she appeared reluctant to answer our many questions in deference to Alice's and my presence. Assuring her that our tender sensibilities did not require protecting, we encouraged the director to be honest in her responses...though I sincerely doubted that any of us were prepared for the depth of depravity they would expose, as she told tale after harrowing tale of girls, many still children, finding their desperate way to the home's door in search of rescue and relief from their terrible suffering.

Shaken by her words but not deterred, we were then taken on a tour of selected areas of the home before being shown to a large, sunlit classroom where we saw groups of young women engaged in a variety of tasks designed to supply them with useful skills and increase their chances of gaining respectable employment.

Miss Horsefall introduced us to the class of girls and young women who quickly stood to attention and made their curtseys. She instructed them to return to their work and then indicated that Alice, Esme and I could mingle amongst them. Edward and Jasper maintained a discreet distance, remaining in the hallway with a gentleman from the board who had accompanied us on our tour. But that didn't stop their presence causing somewhat of a stir amongst the residents. A few did indeed seem a little apprehensive of their presence, but most appeared curious, and a few, who were quietly spoken to by the matron, sent openly flirtatious glances the men's way.

I was glad that not all of the girls' experiences had caused their spirits to be dampened, and I could hardly blame them for taking note of two such handsome young gentlemen. But my attention was drawn to those girls who shied away, visibly folding in on themselves and clearly discomforted by the presence of males. I found myself questioning the director's assertion that the gentlemen's inclusion in this part of the tour was necessary and wished there was some way to reassure the girls of our group's good intentions.

Some young women engaged in hat decorating caught Alice's eye, and she offered compliments on their efforts. Shy at first, the girls quickly warmed to Alice's cheerful manner, and I inwardly applauded my new friend's brave determination. It was soon apparent that they were all very taken with her bonnet and gown, and she eyed me pointedly. I merely smiled and then pulled up a spare seat beside a timid, golden-haired girl who looked to be several years younger than I. She was making rosettes out of satin ribbon for the other girls to use in decorating the hats they were working on. I admired her needlework, and after a faltering start, she summoned the courage to speak.

"Are ye really the princess wot worked as a maid when ye was on the run from that villain?" she whispered, her eyes wide in her pale face.

"Indeed I am," I replied with a gentle tone. "But I'm not really a princess, though I will be a marchioness when I marry Lord Edward."

The girl flinched at my words, her eyes darting to where Edward stood stiffly to attention beside the other gentleman in the wide, double doorway.

"He's a very good man," I assured her. "He helped me when I was in trouble."

"E's certainly 'andsome...like a *prince*," she whispered, appearing a little awe-struck, but then her expression turned doubtful. "Not that that means anything."

Hunching her shoulders, she ducked her head, and I returned my attention to her very neat stitching, informing her that it was much better than mine.

"How'd ye manage as a maid, m'lady?" she asked after a while, her innate curiosity getting the better of her. Smiling, I told her about my love of baking and how I'd managed to find work assisting the pastry chef in the kitchen. I kept my tales light, managing to inspire a giggle or two at the revelation of my incompetence at tea pouring and flower arranging, and of how much I detested the cleaning and polishing that occupied so many of my hours. One by one, the other girls crept closer, listening in.

"Did ye find the work 'ard and the 'ours long?" a thin, red-haired girl asked.

"Very," I admitted, with an exaggerated slump of my shoulders. "My muscles ached, and it felt like my head had just hit the pillow of a night when it was time to arise the next morning and start all over again."

My comment brought smiles to a few faces, though one girl's wistful comment caused a lump to form in my throat.

"I wouldn't care how 'ard I 'ad to work or 'ow long me days were if it was respectable employment and I wasn't being bovered by one fella after another all night long."

"Or beaten," another girl added.

Their words were echoed by the majority of the girls in the room, but when the slender young girl beside me quietly added, "Me neither," her eyes fixed on the floweret she held tightly in her hands, her thin shoulders trembling, I felt a vice grip my heart.

A noise from the hallway caught my attention, and I looked up to see Edward's and Jasper's stricken expressions. Alice had gone to join them, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs, and the group moved away, leaving Esme and I alone with the girls and Mrs. Morley.

Blinking back my own tears, I wondered what I could possibly say into the heavy silence that followed. But then one of the girls asked if it was true that I was related to the King, and the sombre mood lifted as I was peppered with questions about my experiences...as both maid and society member. The girls were particularly taken with the tales I told of visiting the palace and dancing at the King's ball. So I did my best to describe the glittering event in detail as they hung on every word with rapt attention. Recalling how much my Worthington friends enjoyed hearing humorous tales about the society members they served, I made it a point to mention a few of the more preposterous things I had seen and heard in my dealings with the upper *ton*...without mentioning any names, of course.

"And ye really made friends wiv a maid?" one of the girls asked, her expression suspicious. "Ye a proper lady cousin to the King and 'er a servant?"

"I would count most of the staff I worked with in that category, but Angela especially so," I confirmed. "She's working as my lady's maid now, but she's much more of a friend than a servant. Hopefully you can meet her when I return, as I shall insist she be allowed to accompany me."

"Why would she want to meet us?" one of the girls asked warily. "Ye know wot we are...or were."

"You are girls who have been dealt a terrible hand in life through no fault of your own, but who are now making a new and hopefully much brighter future for yourselves," I declared with feeling. "And while I am not at liberty to share Angela's story, I can assure you that she would be the last person to judge a single one of you."

"Wot about ye, Miss?" the red-haired girl timidly enquired. "Why are ye 'ere?"

"Because, while I can only imagine what you have suffered, I do know what it is like to be afraid and to fear for my life," I offered quietly. "I promised myself that if I was ever in the position to make a difference to the lives of vulnerable girls and young women, that I would do so...which brings me to a question of my own. How can I be of service?"

My question engendered a variety of reactions: astonishment, wariness and curiosity...but no response.

"What? You have no dreams for the future? There is nothing you would like to do or become?" I persisted, keeping my tone light and hoping I wasn't overstepping the mark.

"I'd like to be a seamstress and make beautiful dresses like your golden ball gown," the young, fair-haired girl beside me offered, and I smiled my encouragement, her words soon opening a flood-gate.

"I want to be a cook."

"I want to be a pastry chef like Lady Bella,"

"I want to learn to be a midwife and bring bairns into the world."

"I want to be a maid, but in a house where the master won't expect me to...well...you know."

A number of girls murmured their agreement, and I swallowed the lump that returned to my throat.

"I want to marry and have a family of my own, but who would ever have me after the life I've led?" The girl who voiced the question looked no older than Alice or I, except for the hardness around her eyes. I had no answer, and was very relieved when Mrs. Morley stepped forward to reply.

"Now, Mary, I've told ye afore that there are plenty of good men, farmers and miners and the like, who'll take on a capable lass who knows how to tend house and will make a good mother," she assured the dejected-looking girl.

"Aye...but not without a dowry," Mary muttered, "and I ain't got nuthin' to offer...not even me virtue."

"How much is needed for a respectable dowry?" I enquired, and Mrs. Morley named a very modest sum. I was fairly certain that the dozen pairs of gloves I now owned cost more than that per pair. One of my new bonnets would supply the dowries for several girls, and I suspected that my stunning new wardrobe of gowns could have furnished the entire contingent of girls resident in this home with a new start in life, whatever their dreams might be.

A wave of guilt swept over me at the knowledge of my own exceedingly good fortune and how just a small percentage of the largesse with which I had been blessed could make such a tremendous difference to these girls' lives. I vowed silently to do whatever I could, not only for this particular group of girls, but for the myriad like them still trapped in the most deplorable of circumstances.

Mrs. Morley indicated that it was time for us to leave, and after thanking the girls

for their candour and promising to see what I could do to assist them in the fulfilment of their dreams, we made our farewells.

"There is much to be done," Esme declared on our return journey to Cullen House. "Assisting girls to find suitable and *safe* places of employment, and furnishing dowries for young women if and when they are ready to take that step, are both very worthwhile methods of assistance, though I foresee the need for many more homes like the one we've just seen that can offer succour, education and hope for the future."

"Yes indeed," I affirmed, holding tightly to Edward's arm for comfort. He and Jasper remained silent for the duration of the journey, their matching expressions reflecting the gravity of their thoughts. Alice had regained her composure, though her eyes were reddened and it was clear that the revelations she'd heard had touched her deeply...as they had us all.

"Tell me what you're thinking?" I asked when Edward and I were seated together by a window overlooking the garden later that afternoon, a little distance from the rest of the family and finally able to converse in private.

He sat silently staring into the distance for a few moments longer, and I wondered if he'd heard me. But then he took a deep breath and sighed. "I agree with Esme that there is much we can do to help, and as to the need..." Shaking his head, he turned to face me, his expression anguished. "I could try to blame my youthful indiscretions on ignorance and conformity to a code of behaviour that I had no reason to question, but I make no such excuses and take full responsibility for my actions." Straightening his shoulders, his declaration took on the cadence of a solemn vow. "I promise to do whatever I can to make amends for the harm I unwittingly inflicted by supporting such an evil practise and to fight to protect young girls like those I saw today." His voice choked up on his final words, and I reached to clasp his hands with mine.

"We'll fight together," I vowed in return, loving him all the more for his willingness to face such an unpleasant truth...and for his brave and compassionate heart. "And we will make a difference."

~AFL~

I've taken considerable poetic licence in this chapter, as though I've read historical romances that mention the type of refuge and educational style home that I've described, I could not find any proof of their existence at this time in history. Women's rights were almost non-existent in the early 1800s,

and the homes and female penitentiaries established for the 'rehabilitation of penitent prostitutes' in the late 1700s and early 1800 were very grim. If you'd like to read more, check out the following - just take out the brackets. [http://www\(.\)stgite\(.\)org\(.\)uk/magdalenhospital\(.\)html](http://www(.)stgite(.)org(.)uk/magdalenhospital(.)html)

Reforms advocated by the likes of Catherine Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, and the Suffragette Movement did not begin to occur until the second half of the 1800s with the age of consent for females, designed to protect very young girls and stop them from being forced to work in brothels, not raised from ten to thirteen until 1875 and then 16 in the 1885.

Sadly, child slave labour and sexual slavery is an ongoing problem in our world. If you are interested in doing something to help, there are some wonderful charities working hard to make a difference in the lives of girls and young women such as World Vision Child Rescue.

Thanks so much for all your support and encouragement for A Forbidden Love. I read every review and appreciate all your varied views, opinions, ideas and the inspiration they provide. This chapter was particularly tough to write, and I'd love to hear what you think.

xxx TLSue

FanFic Recs

Serenity's Prayer by ladylibre - a wonderful Eclipse AU, beautifully written and quite captivating.

The Parachutist and The Parachutist 2 by Camilla10 - a fascinating vamp AU with our favourite characters transported to WWII Italy and post war America. You'll love this vigilante Edward who is far from 'Edwardian' in this carnation.

Resolution

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I wonder if she enjoys seeing our lovely couple having a wonderful, loved-up time at Cannes as much as we do?

Well...here it is folks, the chapter that some of you are dying to read and others may choose to skip. I'm sorry it's taken me two weeks to get it posted, but it is twice as long as my usual chapters, so hopefully that will make up for the delay. The first section is tying up some more loose ends (for those of you keen to see how things turned out for Alice and Jasper), but then the angst, drama and excitement begins. No evil cliffy...as promised!

Thanks to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for all their hard work and support...and congratulations Squeaky!

Updated: Sunday, 27th May 2012

Words: 9725

Chapter 66

Resolution

BPOV

It felt like all of London was caught up in the excitement of Edward's and my pending nuptials...the closest thing the city had seen to a royal wedding for some time. Between the daily updates in the social pages, the incessant questioning to which we were subjected at whatever society event we attended each evening, and the seemingly never-ending fittings and preparations, I struggled not to become overwhelmed. My impatience to become Edward's wife was never in doubt, but my enthusiasm was tempered by the knowledge that the majestic ceremony to be held at Westminster Abbey would bear little resemblance to the small, intimate affair I would have preferred.

I tried not to dwell on the growing enormity of the event: the crowds I'd been informed would line the street to watch the bridal procession, the more than a thousand guests invited to the church service, the wedding breakfast to be held at the palace in the early afternoon for three hundred special guests, or the fact that I'd be attended by no less than seven bridesmaids and flower girls chosen from

amongst the King's and Queen's closest relatives and friends and Edward's second cousins. Alice would be acting as my maid of honour, and her enthusiasm was unbridled, not that I minded, our having become fast friends over the previous weeks. Lady Penelope's two boys were to act as page boys, and I assured the nervous lads that they would be very dapper in their roles. Jasper would be standing up with Edward, and having warmed to him considerably during our time in London, I did not have to feign my pleasure at this announcement. My reaction upon discovering that Emmett would also be included in the wedding party had not been nearly as charitable and had led to Edward's and my first domestic disagreement.

"Emmett is like a brother to me." Edward defended his cousin's inclusion when he'd noted my antipathy. "His behaviour at Worthington was boorish, to say the least, but was his apology not sufficient? I'm certain he would be willing to proffer it again if that would help."

"His apology is not the issue," I muttered crossly.

"What then?" Edward queried, clearly perplexed. "Are you nervous about being in his presence? I can assure you that you have nothing to fear from my cousin."

"It's not your *cousin* I'm afraid of," I retorted meaningfully, and Edward's eyes widened in understanding.

"Rosalie," he uttered soberly, and I nodded, hugging myself protectively around the waist.

"I didn't think I'd have to face her again so soon," I admitted, unable to keep the dismay from my voice.

"She's family, I'm afraid," Edward offered with a rueful shrug before drawing my stiff and uncharacteristically unwilling form into his embrace. "But that's no excuse for her rudeness. I guarantee that in future she will treat you with the utmost respect, or she'll have me to answer to."

"Rudeness?" I retorted angrily, pulling out of his arms. "It's not lack of respect or poor manners I'm worried about, Edward...but my survival. She tried to *kill* me! If you hadn't come to my rescue, I fear I would have been trampled to death the day of the hunt. Don't you remember?"

"Of course, I remember." His complexion paled as we shared the awful memory, and my irritation with him faded. "Running through the crowd...seeing you fall." He shuddered, reaching for me again and cupping my cheek with his hand. "I thought

I'd lost you, and I couldn't bear it...even though I'd not yet acknowledged that you were meant to be mine."

"Mine," I echoed, leaning into his touch and regretting my snappish tone...but not the sentiment behind it. "As long as Rosalie understands that I'm not masquerading as a servant any longer, for if she thinks I'll meekly submit to her abuse or stand by while she makes a play for *my* fiancée; she's got another thing coming!" I insisted fiercely.

Edward's smirking response to my outburst—and the insecurity I'd unwittingly revealed—served to rekindle my ire. But before I could scold him, he leaned forward...completely ignoring our family members engaged in a spirited game of whist at the far end of the drawing room...and brushed his lips softly over mine.

"You have nothing to fear with regards to Rosalie, or any other woman for that matter," he whispered huskily, "for I only have, and will only *ever* have, eyes for you."

His declaration brought a reluctant smile to my pouting lips, one that curved more freely when I considered how he had already demonstrated the truth of his words on numerous occasions since our betrothal. I'd been dismayed by the way so many of the beautiful and sophisticated young debutantes gracing the social engagements we attended practically threw themselves at Edward...blatantly ignoring the fact that he was betrothed or that I was invariably standing by his side at the time. But Edward paid them little mind, his attention so assuredly fixed on me at virtually all times that it would have been embarrassing...if it wasn't so incredibly gratifying.

I'd always thought of myself as rather plain and insignificant, a belief reinforced by the Merryton sisters back home in Forkston, but Edward's unwavering devotion and adoration had done wonders for my confidence. When I imagined the reaction of my childhood friends-cum-nemesis to discovering their mousy little neighbour was related to royalty...and to Edward when they met him...I couldn't help but chuckle. They, along with the rest of Forkston society, had been invited to the wedding, but I was actually most looking forward to seeing Jake, Leah and my extended family of household staff, whom I'd insisted receive invitations.

The visit we'd undertaken to the charity home, while challenging to our sensibilities, had been a welcome distraction from the fuss and drama of the wedding preparations and stimulated vigorous conversation amongst our immediate and growing family group. With considerable resources at our disposal, we were eager to be of assistance, our first course of action being to commission the board of the charity to advise us of areas of need and formulate a plan for expansion.

Edward's suggestion that we look into establishing a home and training college close to Masen Park, one that I could be actively involved with when we were settled into our life in the country, endeared him to me even more than I thought possible.

Jasper's determined if sober involvement in our discussions and planning had a similar effect on Alice, and she joined me in my room late one evening to share her feelings regarding his efforts.

"I am convinced that his change of heart is genuine," she informed me as we sat cross-legged on my bed, clothed only in our nightgowns. "He was sincerely moved by what he saw at the home, and his conscience was exercised to make confession as well as spur him to action."

"Confession?" I queried curiously. "He spoke with you regarding his previous experiences?"

Alice dropped her eyes to where her hands plucked at the white linen sheets and jerkily nodded her head.

"What did he say?" I whispered apprehensively, recalling the horrible words Jasper and Emmett had spoken so cavalierly in my presence that day in Edward's study.

Alice took a deep breath and then raised her eyes to mine, her words spoken in the form of a recitation. "He said that after coming into his inheritance as a young man, he did not conduct himself in a gentlemanly or moral manner. He admitted to visiting houses of ill repute, seducing young village maidens, and entering into illicit affairs with a number of society widows and bored wives abandoned by their husbands once they'd fulfilled their duty and provided an heir."

"Oh," I breathed, more than a little shocked by her words. It appeared that Jasper had been surprisingly candid in his disclosures...not to mention an extraordinarily busy young gentleman.

Edward's disclosure to me that he'd visited brothels on a number of occasions when he'd gone to London to attend university, whilst painful to hear, had not been unexpected. Finding the encounters emotionally unfulfilling, he'd chosen upon reaching his majority and taking on the role of Marquess of Masen to focus on his new responsibilities and await the day he met the woman he wanted for his mistress to pursue a relationship...that woman being me. He'd not considered his eventual marriage as anything other than a means by which he could fulfil his duty, but his opinion in that regard had been irrevocably altered...also by me, and I smiled at the

thought of how we would both benefit from the transformation that had occurred in his thinking.

Alice and I spoke some more of Jasper's disclosures, his remorse for not considering the repercussions of his actions, and his determination to both make amends and prove that he'd put his rakish ways behind him.

"He says he loves me, and that he wants to spend the rest of our lives proving the genuineness of his feelings," she added, her eyes rising shyly to meet my encouraging gaze.

"And you believe him?"

Alice took a moment to answer, her expression thoughtful. "Yes...yes I do," she acknowledged.

"And he's kissed you...properly?" I voiced my suspicion, and a dreamy smile curved her lips.

"Oh, yes," she breathed. "Yesterday, when we all took a walk together in the maze, and it was everything you said it would be...warm and tender and really quite breathtaking. I didn't want him to stop, but he said that he is determined to behave as a true gentleman and treat me with the utmost respect. I told him that was perfectly acceptable as long as that meant we could share many more such kisses during our courtship and betrothal and that once we were married, he promised to bring me to the pinnacle of passion as often as I required."

Gasping, I covered my mouth with my hand. "Oh, Alice. You didn't really say such a thing?" I implored, and she shrugged before we both succumbed to a fit of giggles.

"However did Jasper respond?" I eventually enquired when our laughter died down.

"Well," Alice offered conspiratorially. "He didn't say anything for the longest time, just staring at me with his mouth opening and closing repeatedly, and when he finally agreed to my demand, his voice was quite hoarse."

"I'll bet it was," I murmured, shaking my head, happy for Alice and smiling at the memory of my own experience in the maze the day before.

A lovely, summer's day, Esme suggested that the eight of us: Carlisle and Esme, my father and Penelope, Jasper and Alice, and Edward and I, all take a walk in the

gardens of Cullen House. I half expected that Papa would want to keep a watchful eye upon Edward and me, but we no sooner entered the maze than the other three couples promptly disappeared down various pathways, leaving us to our own delighted devices. Edward wasted no time in finding a secluded alcove conveniently furnished with a carved, stone bench where we sat and indulged ourselves in a series of kisses: languid and leisurely to begin with in keeping with the lovely afternoon but increasingly passionate as we were reminded of other kisses shared in other garden settings when we'd not had compelling reasons to exercise restraint.

When we reconvened at the exit to the maze some time later, I worried what the others would think of my appearance. But I was not the only one with swollen lips and flushed cheeks, darting shy smiles in the direction of my handsome escort and no comment was made.

The memory of our garden interlude returned to me many times over the ensuing days, never failing to bring a blush to my cheeks or to cause my heart to race with anticipation. As our wedding drew closer, I did my best not to worry about the more intimidating aspects of the day and focussed on the part I looked forward to with my whole heart...being proclaimed Edward's wife and us embarking on a new life together, starting with a wedding night at an undisclosed location followed by a honeymoon in France. We'd decided to wait until the following year to undertake the tour of Europe we'd discussed and dreamed about, as it was not difficult to predict that our presence would be required at two more weddings before the season was over: my father's and Lady Penelope's, and Jasper's and Alice's.

I wanted to believe Edward's assertion that our trials were behind us, with Lord Hunter fled to foreign soil and Papa almost fully recovered from his injuries. But while I expected no further trouble from that quarter and had successfully put the disgraced rogue from my thoughts, I could not dispel a nagging sense of unease. Blaming it on my continued fear that Rosalie would attempt to cause me further distress, and with her and Emmett due to arrive at any time from their sojourn in Scotland, I found myself on tenterhooks with nervous emotion and in dire need of a diversion. With the gentlemen busy with their various estate and business matters and Lady Esme occupied with a visit to a sickly friend, I gratefully accepted Lady Penelope's invitation to escort Alice and me on a shopping expedition...not for more gowns, shoes, or the endless fripperies of which Alice never seemed to tire, but to a bookstore, a far more appealing destination in my opinion.

I'd returned to the charitable home to discuss with Miss Horsefall ways in which I could be of more direct assistance. While females of the lower classes were almost never given the opportunity to learn to read and write, she was of the opinion that a basic education could open up a world of opportunities for the girls. It was an

opinion with which I agreed wholeheartedly. When Seth learned of my intentions, he volunteered to be my guinea pig. The young kitchen-hand-cum-stable-boy had finagled his way into Edward's employ and consequently earned a trip to London in the service of his new master. I'd been happy to be reunited with my young friend, and since he was keen to better himself, and I was determined to develop my teaching skills, we made a good team.

When Penelope sent word for Ben to bring the carriage around, I asked if she could request Seth accompany us, as I was keen to hear his opinion on which books I should choose to use with my new students. Twenty minutes later, I was happily ensconced in the children's section of the bookstore with an eye to purchasing the latest Jane Austen novel once Seth and I were finished making our selection.

"Bella." Alice approached from where she'd been perusing the latest fashionable journals. "There is a quaint little shop just two doors down that sells parasols and fans. Would you mind if Aunt Penelope and I go take a look and meet you back here when we're finished? We won't be long."

"Of course not. Take as long as you need," I demurred, happy to be able to take my time to explore the shelves without interruption. With Seth engrossed in the pages of an illustrated copy of *One Thousand and One Nights*, I savoured the opportunity to be alone with my thoughts.

Despite my preference for anonymity, I was slowly becoming used to the idea of being somewhat of a public figure, recognised by passers-by on the street from the drawings of Edward and me that regularly appeared in the papers. So it was with a resigned sigh and a polite smile that I turned to face the young woman who approached me a few moments after Alice and Lady Penelope departed.

A commoner by her plain attire, but with uncommonly beautiful red ringlets, she curtsayed politely and asked for a moment of my time.

"Are ye Lady Bella?" she asked, her eyes nervously flitting from side to side. "The one who the paper says is 'elping young girls wot need rescuin'?"

Nodding, I stepped closer. "I am she," I acknowledged, smiling to reassure her. "Is there some way I can be of assistance?"

"It's me sister, m'lady. She was taken by some bad men, but she managed to escape. She's 'urt real bad, and I'm afraid they're going to find her and take her wiv 'em again."

My heart broke at her tragic tale. "Where is your sister now?" I asked, my tone calm but urgent.

"She's hidin' in the alley out back of the shop, m'lady. I need yer to take her to that place wot keeps girls safe."

"How did you know where to find me?" I puzzled, determined to help but a little apprehensive by her coming upon me this way. Edward's and my father's insistence that I be escorted at all times and never venture alone in public would have seemed ludicrously restrictive before Lord Hunter's entree into our lives. But London was a far cry from the village of Forkston, and I was not unaware that my newly elevated position in society carried with it certain risks.

"A friend of mine saw ye with the other ladies out the front of the shop. She recognized ye from the papers and ran to tell me," she explained, and I nodded for her to continue. "I was tryin' to think 'ow to find ye before it was too late, knowin' the likes of me would never be granted an audience with a grand lady like yerself, and it's like God answered me prayers." Tears sprang to her eyes, and I patted her shoulder comfortingly, relieved that she'd found me while praying my own silent prayer for her poor sister. Convinced of her sincerity, I called for Seth who quickly put down his book and approached, eyeing the young woman warily.

"There's a young girl who needs our assistance waiting at the rear of this shop," I informed him. "Could you ask Ben to bring the carriage around to the alley to collect us, then go and tell Lady Penelope and Lady Alice that we shall meet them out front in a few moments? I'm going to wait with..." I raised my eyebrows in query, and the pretty, red-haired lady responded.

"Victoria...me name's Victoria."

"I'm going to wait with Victoria and her sister for Ben to bring the carriage around."

Seth looked uncertain, his brow creasing worriedly. "Why don't ye just bring the girl through the shop, m'lady?" he surprised me by questioning, though I could see he was motivated by concern for my safety and did not rebuke him for his impertinence.

"Because she's been hurt, and I don't want to draw attention to her plight," I explained, and he nodded reluctantly, leaving me to go with Victoria while he turned to follow my instructions. The shopkeeper was naturally curious when I requested permission to pass through his living quarters to the alley behind, and I chafed at

the time it took to explain the situation, my thoughts with the poor, injured child waiting frightened and alone.

"What is your sister's name?" I asked, as we entered the dark and dingy alleyway.

"Beth," Victoria replied, grabbing hold of my wrist and pulling me down the lane.

"Wait! Where are we going?" I demanded, surprised by the strength of her grip. "I thought you said that your sister was waiting behind the shop?"

"She's hiding further down behind those rubbish bins," Victoria muttered over her shoulder, not slowing her pace despite the fact that I was practically having to run to keep up.

Her reply, though tersely given, was plausible, as I could only imagine how terrified the girl must be. But when we reached the bins, there was no child to be seen. Glancing up ahead, I caught sight of what looked like the rear end of a vehicle protruding into the alleyway and a knot formed in the pit of my stomach, my instincts belatedly warning me that there was something amiss.

"Oh, look, there's ye carriage waitin' for us already." Victoria gestured, ignoring my frantic attempts to loosen her grip on my wrist.

"No, it's not!" I argued, knowing it couldn't have possibly arrived already. "Let me go!" I shouted.

"Not till I'm paid me doss," she muttered, and I began to struggle in earnest, realising too late that I'd walked into a trap, her carefully constructed tale a ruse to play on my sympathies and trick me into accompanying her.

"Help! Somebody he..." I cried, my words abruptly cut off when a man stepped out of the shadows and clamped his large, sweaty hand over my mouth.

"Now ye be quiet, missy, or the master will 'urt ye bad," my captor hissed in my ear. "Well...worse than 'e's already intendin'."

I struggled against his hold but was no match for his superior strength, unable to prevent him from dragging me towards the carriage. My heart beat furiously in my chest, as I was unceremoniously bundled inside, landing painfully on my knees. The door shut behind me, and the carriage lurched into motion before I had a chance to get my bearings in the shrouded interior.

"Reunited at last, Isabella." A voice that I had hoped to never hear again came forth from the darkness, and I felt my blood run cold.

"Lord Hunter?" I whimpered, cringing away from the direction of his voice at the same time as a match was struck and used to light a lantern attached to the wall, and his despicable visage came into view. Scrambling backwards, I came up hard against the bench opposite, my eyes darting to the door handle. I lunged for it, determined to throw myself from the moving vehicle, if necessary, to escape him. But the door was locked, and I cried out in frustration and fear at the realisation that no one knew where I was.

"Oh, don't carry on so, Isabella," Lord Hunter scolded. "The journey is not overly long, but you may as well make yourself comfortable...while you can."

"What do you want from me?" I demanded, rising to take a seat and grabbing hold of a leather strap to steady myself against the twisting turns of the fast-moving carriage. "What can you possibly hope to achieve by abducting me in this way?"

He smiled slyly, the look in his eyes sending a cold shiver down my spine.

"Hmm...let me see," he mused, rubbing his chin. "I want revenge for all the trouble you've caused me, recompense for the fortune I was denied, and oh yes, your complete and abject ruin. Your father really shouldn't have rejected my offer of marriage. It was meant in quite good faith...well, other than the fact that I was more interested in the jewels I suspected you had hidden away than marriage to a little country miss, and I had planned to sell you on to one of my less gentlemanlike acquaintances at the first opportunity. Oh...how droll," he laughed. "The outcome for you is much the same, I see."

"You're insane," I hissed. "Edward, my father, even the King...they will not rest until they've rescued me and made you pay. You cannot possibly get away with this."

"We'll have to beg to differ, I'm afraid, Isabella. Less than twenty-four hours from now you'll have been smuggled out of the country, and we'll both be well on our way to meet our destinies: me to a life of ease and you as a rich potentate's concubine or working in a brothel in some far-lung corner of the globe. It matters little to me, other than the money I plan to make on your sale. Pity you aren't blonde as they fetch a much higher price, but I'm sure there'll be plenty who'll pay for the privilege of bedding a sweet, English rose who just so happens to be cousin to our King. The novelty value alone should send the sale price through the roof."

I stared aghast, horrified by his words and the stark cruelty in his eyes.

"You're right about the jewels," I bartered in desperation. "My mother brought a treasure trove with her from France..jewels and gold coin worth a fortune. You can have them in exchange for my freedom."

"And risk being caught in a trap?" Hunter's mocking smile was not the answer I hoped for. "You need not worry about my financial well-being, my dear. I might have barely escaped with my life the last time I fled these shores, but I fortuitously stumbled upon some like-minded individuals and am now engaged in a particularly lucrative trade...one you'll become all too familiar with in good time. You're older than the other girls I've collected, but as we've already established, your unique status and prior connections should increase your appeal."

A sob rose in my chest, but I stifled it ruthlessly, silently praying for a miracle and trying not to panic at the thought of never seeing Edward again.

If only I'd seen through Victoria's duplicity, I berated myself. If only I hadn't gone into the alleyway alone.

As Hunter continued to pontificate about the cleverness of his plan, a movement above his head caught my attention. A corner of the flap over the rear window had been lifted, and Seth's wide eyes peered in at us.

My eyes widened and the breath hitched in my throat, but Hunter was too busy gloating about how easily I'd been fooled to notice my reaction.

Hope rose within me, but the relief I felt that I wasn't alone was quickly overtaken with concern for Seth's safety. He was riding on the roof of the carriage and hanging upside down to be able to look inside, a highly risky undertaking considering the breakneck pace at which the carriage was being driven...not to mention the danger he faced if his presence was discovered.

With a finger to his lips, he signalled my silence, and I blinked to acknowledge his instruction. First pointing at me, he then mimed plucking something from his wrist and letting it go. While James droned on, I brought my right hand to my left wrist, encountering the pearl bracelet that Edward had given me a few days prior. It matched my mother's necklace and the earrings and tiara he'd given me to wear the night of the King's ball. The clasp had been broken when I'd struggled to free myself from Victoria, and the ends of the bracelet were caught in the sleeve of my pelisse. I could feel by the gaps in the strand that a few pearls were missing, and blinking slowly, I acknowledged Seth's plan as I slowly released the pearls to fall free into my hands. Each precious bauble reminded me of Edward's love...and gave me hope that Hunter's evil plans would be thwarted.

The carriage eventually lurched to a halt, and Seth quickly dropped the flap, disappearing from view. Swallowing my fear, I didn't resist when James reached for me, hauling me against his side and clasping a hand over my mouth.

"I considered drugging you," he murmured close to my ear, his voice soft and deadly. "Or blindfolds and gags, but you've no possible chance of escape, and I do rather like the idea of you observing every single step along the pathway to your humiliation. Now be a good girl and don't struggle," he ordered. "We wouldn't want to bruise the merchandise...not yet, anyway."

With no chance of overpowering him, I pretended to meek submission born of abject terror...a charade that took little effort on my part.

Loosening my fingers, I dropped a couple of pearls as we alighted from the carriage and heard them skitter away. James took no notice of the sound and hurried me towards the entrance of the building opposite. But before I could catch sight of more than towering brick walls in another dark alleyway, I was forced through a narrow doorway and up a flight of steep stairs. Pretending to stumble, I dropped to the ground and quickly placed another pearl in a slight crevice between the stair and the wall, accomplishing a similar feat halfway along the hallway that we turned down at the top of the landing.

Cursing my clumsiness, James gripped me more tightly around the middle, preventing me from placing anymore pearls until we'd made several more turns. It was only when he stopped outside a doorway and began to fumble with a large bunch of keys that I was able to leave another pearl on a windowsill. Once he'd unlocked the door, he pushed me inside, and I stumbled forward, landing heavily beside the bed that dominated the cheerless room.

Now that I was no longer focussed on attempting to memorize the path we'd taken and leaving a trail, my fear returned with a vengeance, and I whipped around to face him.

Seeing my expression, he smirked, stalking closer and lifting me to my feet with a painful grip on my upper arm.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not planning on robbing you of your virtue just yet," he murmured silkily. "I'll await the doctor's verdict before making my final decision. Virgins collect the highest price, I'm afraid, so if you are intact, the pleasure of your deflowering will be granted to your new master who'll pay handsomely for the privilege, I assure you. But if not," he chuckled evilly. "Let's just say that you can expect to spend the time from now until your sale pandering to *my* every perverted

desire."

Tears stung my eyes, but I refused to cry in front of him and stubbornly raised my chin in what little defiance I could muster.

"You will regret your actions this day, Lord Hunter," I countered, my warning engendering more of his mocking laughter, the mirthless sound staying with me even after he'd shoved me backwards and exited the room. I'd not heard the door being locked, but before I could attempt an escape, it opened again and Victoria entered, her girlish features twisted with contempt.

"Ye're to undress and wait for the doctor," she ordered.

I refused, but she was much stronger than me and began to strip the clothes from my body. After a brief, fruitless struggle, I was left quivering with both cold and outrage, dressed only in my thin, silk chemise and huddled in the far corner of the room, my fists clenched. I had no intention of going anywhere near the bed...willingly.

"James wants me to leave ye in 'ere, but I don't see why ye should get a room to yerself...or wot 'e sees in ye," she muttered, scowling. "Ye can wait with the other girls. The doctor has to examine 'em, too, and maybe ye can stop their bloomin' caterwaulin'...wot wiv ye bein' an angel of mercy an' all."

Ignoring her sarcasm, I went with her willingly, dropping a couple more of the pearls I'd kept secreted in my closed fists along the way. By the pitiful sounds of weeping, I knew when we'd arrived at the room where the girls that James had 'collected' were being held.

"Ye sure the master wants 'er in wiv this lot?" the man standing guard outside questioned Victoria, and she cursed him soundly.

"I'm 'is woman, regardless of all the others, and ye better remember that," she hissed, and the guard raised his hands in surrender before unlocking the door. I'd taken the few moments of their altercation to lean against the wall in feigned exhaustion, carefully dropping a pearl which landed a couple of inches from the edge of the doorframe. Nudging it with my bare toes, I pushed it back against the wall where it would hopefully be visible to a searching eye but not easily spotted otherwise.

Once inside the room, I stumbled to a halt and stared in dismay. A dozen or so girls, some little more than infants, sat huddled together on the floor of the cold,

bare room. Uniformly pretty, they were all fair with varying shades of blonde or red hair. While some wore clean dresses, others were clothed in little more than rags, and my heart broke at their forlorn and fearful expressions.

"What sort of people are you?" I hissed furiously, turning on my captors. "They're just little girls...babies. Don't you know what is going to happen to them?"

The man shrugged and returned to his place outside the door, while Victoria just laughed.

"Oh, I know all right...same as 'appened to me when I woz their age and same 'as wot's goin' to 'appen to ye, miss 'igh and mighty...maybe sooner than ye think. Now keep 'em quiet or I'll send someone in to shut 'ye's all up."

The door slammed behind her, leaving the cold, shuttered room in semi-darkness, and the girls began to whimper and cry in earnest.

~AFL~

EPOV

"What do you mean, Bella is missing," I demanded, pacing towards Alice and catching hold of her upper arm. She was weeping inconsolably, her words barely making sense.

"I'm sorry, Edward, so sorry," she cried. "I shouldn't have left her alone, and all for a stupid parasol, but I thought she was safe enough in a bookstore. A bookstore!" she repeated before dissolving into hysterics once more.

"Here, you comfort her," I ordered Jasper and turned to my aunt, Penelope, who was standing quietly beside the door, tearless but ashen-faced.

"We only left her for a few minutes, and not completely alone as young Seth was right beside her," she offered, her hands wringing tightly together in distress. "But when we returned from visiting the haberdashery a few doors down, they were both gone."

"Gone where? You must have some idea?" I insisted, endeavouring not to alarm her with my tone but determined to get answers. Bella couldn't have disappeared into thin air...she *couldn't* have. Just this morning we'd shared breakfast and a brief stroll in the gardens, smiling at one another as we'd contemplated how soon we would be wed. Bella had gone from counting the days until our nuptials to the hours,

and I'd laughed delightedly at the enthusiasm she expressed at the prospect of becoming my wife...and at my inordinate good fortune.

Shaking my head, I focused intently on Penelope's words.

"The owner of the bookstore said that she and Seth went with a young woman through the back of the shop and into the alleyway behind, something about rescuing an injured child. But when we looked, the lane was empty," Penelope explained, and I shuddered at the implications.

"A trap," Jasper uttered grimly, and I momentarily hung my head as despair threatened to overwhelm me.

A firm hand gripped my shoulder, and I looked up into my father's determined gaze. "Don't worry, Edward, we'll bring her home," he vowed, and I nodded jerkily in response, my fear receding to be replaced by an icy resolve.

I would find Bella and make whoever had taken her pay...with his life.

"Are you sure this is the place?" I whispered, and Seth nodded. We were huddled together with Jasper and Emmett behind some crates left abandoned in an alleyway, our horses tethered close by but out of sight.

"See...there by the step," Seth pointed, and I followed the line of his finger, squinting to catch sight of the pearls that he swore he'd seen Bella drop before he'd climbed down from the carriage roof and retraced his steps to the bookstore.

Proving once again his innate intelligence, the lad had made the right decision in not travelling the extra distance to Cullen House to find me. Within moments of our hearing Alice's and Penelope's report, we'd called for our horses and ridden straight to the last place that Bella and Seth had been seen with Carlisle following with the carriage. The bookstore owner repeated his claim to have escorted Bella and her companion through to the alleyway behind his store where she'd told him there was a child in need...the perfect ruse for capturing Bella's attention and engendering her compliance. If Seth hadn't listened to his instincts, choosing to follow her into the alleyway rather than delivering her instructions to Ben and the others, we'd have had no way of knowing where she'd been taken.

My blood ran cold at the thought, and I silently vowed to both thank and reward Seth properly at a later date. But for now, every fibre of my being was intent on

rescuing Bella and punishing those responsible for taking her. Seth didn't recognise the man whom he'd seen holding her captive, his vantage point atop the carriage providing only a view of the man's top hat and cloak. But he was certain her captor was a gentleman, and my bet was on Hunter.

He'd not escape alive this time, and so help me, if he'd done anything to harm Bella, I would make his death as protracted and painful as possible.

Jasper edged up beside me, staying in the shadows, Emmett tracing his steps. Jasper's military service had included training and some experiences of a clandestine nature, and I listened intently to his advice.

"These old buildings are like rabbit warrens, with connecting doors and hidden corridors," he whispered. "We'd do best to call for more support and quite possibly to wait for nightfall, but clearly that's not an option."

He eyed me intently, and I nodded, swallowing hard. We needed to get Bella out of Hunter's clutches before it was too late...before... I couldn't allow my mind to complete the thought, shaking my head once more to refocus my attention.

"What do you suggest?" I asked, the emotion in my voice not completely disguised by my harsh whisper.

"Carlisle will have alerted the authorities. They'll be on their way using the directions Seth gave us, but he should go back and guide them here or they'll end up driving around in circles. This place is like a maze. It's a wonder he found his way out or back again."

"I've always had a good sense of direction," the lad offered with a shrug.

"Take Sabre," I offered, and Seth nodded before scurrying away to fulfil his vital task.

"I'll go up on the roof and enter that way," Jasper continued. "Emmett can go around the front to create a diversion and you go in through this door. Use your pistol to get inside, but we should stick with swords once inside, if possible. A stray bullet could just as easily take out an innocent, so don't fire your weapons unless absolutely necessary."

"Remember to keep an eye out for any pearls Bella may have dropped," I instructed, and he nodded before clasping my arm.

"We'll find her, Edward, and we'll make the bastard pay."

"Bloody oath, we will," Emmett quietly agreed, and then my two closest friends disappeared into the shadows while I waited the minutes Jasper had stipulated before approaching the door through which Bella had been taken.

The man who answered the door was much larger than I, but he granted me entry quickly enough when I shoved my pistol in his face.

"Hey, there's no need for that, gov," he whined. "There're plenty of girls to go around. Ye should a just come in the front door, and ye could take yer pick."

"I'm interested in a different sort of girl...a lady that was brought here against her will this afternoon. Help me find her and you'll be richly rewarded," I lied, as I had no intention of seeing anyone involved in Bella's capture or imprisonment benefit from the experience.

Fear filled his eyes before they flitted to the nearby stairs and then returned to the pistol under his nose.

"I...I don't know nuthink about no lady," he stammered, and I cocked the firing mechanism on the pistol, causing him to quickly change his tune.

"All right, all right," he conceded, sweat breaking out on his brow. "She's up the stairs, but yer too late. The master's wiv her, and she won't be no use to yer once he's done. Better to forget her, gov, and find yerself another lass."

"Take me to her," I insisted, suppressing a howl of rage and shoving him before me.

Halfway up the stairs, a glimmer caught my eye. *That's my brave, resourceful girl*, I reminded myself as I bent down to snatch up the pearl that I spotted wedged against the wall.

At the top of the stairs, I checked to make sure there was no one waiting for us, and then took note of the hallway that stretched in both directions. Jasper was right, and the buildings were connected internally.

"Move," I growled when my unwilling guide hesitated. "And don't even think about leading me astray, or I *will* gut you," I threatened, waving the sword I held in my right hand so that he could see it out of the corner of his eye even as I pressed my pistol more firmly against his back.

"I'm a dead man either way for crossing the master," he grouched but turned decisively to the left and led me along a winding path.

Faint noises drifted up from below, growing louder as we neared another stairwell. I bade him pause for a moment as I listened in, smiling when I heard Emmett's raised voice. He was insisting that he'd seen smoke billowing from an upstairs window and that the building must be evacuated immediately. The brothel madam was arguing that there was no fire, but his words did their job and panicked shouts soon echoed up the stairs. The hallway quickly filled with scantily clad women and half-dressed men, swearing and shoving one another as they ran for the stairs. Tucking my sword against my side so as not to draw attention, I kept a firm grip on my guide and urged him forward.

"Quickly," I demanded, and he led me down a side corridor where I found Jasper waiting, holding up a pearl.

"Her clothes are inside, but she's not there," he informed me, his expression grim.

Rage and fear warred within me, momentarily clouding my vision.

"Told ye, ye were too late," the pitiful excuse for a man who'd led me thus far blurted unwisely, instantly recognising the folly of his words when the point of my sword found his throat. "But I might know where she is...if ye still want her."

Jasper moved so fast he practically blurred to the man's side.

"Where?" he growled, and with us urging the man to a run, we moved quickly, following his directions down another corridor until we came to a door guarded by a hulking brute whom Jasper felled with swift and vicious efficiency.

Shoving our guide aside, I tried the door only to find it locked. A quick search of the unconscious guard's body produced a bunch of keys, and with shaking fingers, I tried them one by one until the lock turned. Steeling myself for what I would find inside, I raised my sword, and with Jasper at my back, slowly opened the door and stepped inside the shadow-darkened room.

My eyes quickly adjusted to the gloom, and I hesitated at the sight before me: a huddle of terrified girls whimpering with fear and clustered together against the wall. Jasper entered the room and halted beside me.

"Good Lord," he whispered. "They're just children...*infants*."

A few of the girls began to cry, and I crouched down before them.

"Don't be afraid," I cajoled. "We're not going to hurt you."

One of the older girls, a pretty lass with a mass of strawberry blonde curls, stepped forward and bravely addressed me.

"Are ye Lord Edward, Lady Bella's fiancé?" she asked, and I nodded.

"What do you know of Lady Bella?" I attempted to keep my voice calm and nonthreatening despite the urgency of my query. "Was she here?"

"Yes. She told us ye'd be comin' and that she'd take us wiv 'er somewhere safe when ye rescued 'er. Will ye do that, sir? Will ye 'elp us?"

"Of course," I nodded. "Do you know where she is now?"

"The bad man came and took 'er back to 'er room. 'E was really cross that she wasn't waitin' for 'im, and 'e said it was time for 'er to see the doctor. Lady Bella tried to fight him, and she looked very afraid. Ye need to 'urry and go rescue 'er. I don't think 'e's a nice doctor."

My stomach lurched, and I turned to Jasper. "The room with her clothes, do you think? But we didn't pass them on our way here."

"She was 'ollerin', callin' yer name, so the bad man put 'is 'and over her mouth and took 'er the back way, through the hidden door. " The lass pointed to a wood panelled wall, but when we pushed against it, it wouldn't budge.

"She dropped these," the girl added, opening her hand to reveal a few loose pearls. One by one, the other girls opened their hands to reveal more of the same. "Do ye want them back?" she asked, and I reached to pat her shoulder.

"No...You keep them. We'll be back as soon as we can...I promise."

Jasper and I ran from the room, almost colliding with Emmett in the hallway.

"Have you found her?" he demanded, and I shook my head, not pausing to explain.

Jasper told Emmett to stay and guard the girls, and that we were going to find Bella. But I kept running back the way we'd come, dodging and weaving between panicked patrons of this hell-house, escaping the imaginary fire. Twice along the

way, I spotted loose pearls gleaming against the faded carpet, but I didn't stop until I reached the room where Jasper had seen Bella's abandoned clothing. Dreading what I would find, I burst through the door and was confronted with a scene that caused the fiery rage I'd barely been suppressing to flame fully into life.

Bella, dressed only in a thin shift, was lying on the bed, her arms stretched above her head and tied to the bed frame. A man leaned over her, the so-called physician I presumed, while Hunter held her bare legs still as she struggled and fought against his superior strength. Her cries filled the air, slicing straight to my core.

I didn't hesitate, but barrelled straight into the doctor, shoving him away from the bed and sending him crashing against the far wall. He collapsed, unconscious, but I paid him no mind and rounded on Hunter whom I half expected to have already been run through by Jasper's sword. The rogue was unharmed, reaching for his own sword and preparing to defend himself.

Through the open door, I caught sight of Jasper engaged in a fight with two men, guards who'd come to defend their employer, I imagined. More than capable of holding his own, I left him to it and focused my attention on the villain before me.

"Edward! Be careful," Bella cried when Hunter lunged towards me, but there was never a doubt in my mind how this fight would end.

Hunter was a seasoned fighter, older and with more training than I, but I easily parried his blows, his greater experience no match for the monstrous rage that had solidified into a cold and deadly intent in the region of my heart.

He'd touched Bella...frightened and possibly hurt her...and he would pay.

Initially well matched, the fight raged on with blows and parries, lunges and retreats. Sweat broke out on both our brows, but while Hunter wasted his breath with crude taunts, boasting of how he would defeat me and of his plans for Bella, I refused to be distracted, his words serving only to strengthen my resolve. The resounding blows of my sword took their toll, weakening my dissolute opponent, licentious living having taken its toll on James' strength, and little by little, I gained the upper hand. With lightning quick strokes, I drew blood...provoking...punishing...intending to drag out his defeat and make him suffer for all the pain and misery he'd caused. But the heartbreaking sound of Bella's soft cries reached me between the clash of steel against steel, and my priorities changed.

Determining to end this quickly, I pressed forward, my next two strokes slicing

deeply, one the length of Hunter's arm, the other his thigh. He cried out in agony, and I revelled in the sound, storing it in my memory to savour later when I would undoubtedly find cause to regret his swift demise. It pained me beyond measure to think that I had ever counted this pitiful excuse for a man as a friend.

Unable to maintain his guard, he dropped his weapon, and I took full advantage, thrusting my sword deep into his chest before pulling it free. With a gurgling sound spluttering from his throat, Hunter dropped to his knees. But I wasted no time watching him fall and quickly crossed to the bed, untying Bella's sorely abused wrists and lifting her slender form into my arms.

"Oh, Edward," she cried, burying her face against my neck as I sat on the edge of the bed, cradling her close. "Thank God, you're all right."

"Thank God, *I'm* all right?" I lifted her chin to meet her tear-filled gaze.

"I was so afraid that he would hurt you, the horrid man," she admitted, glancing warily towards where Jasper was checking Hunter for the pulse I knew he would not find.

"I'm fine," I murmured, directing her gaze back to my face before gently wiping the tears from her cheeks. "And Hunter won't bother you ever again."

She flinched at his name, and I wanted to ask what he'd done to her, if she was hurt anywhere other than her bruised wrists. But she was trembling with cold and shock, and the questions were too personal to ask with Jasper present. Intuitive as ever, Jasper dragged Hunter's body into the hall and then returned to grab the still unconscious doctor, unceremoniously dumping him beside the other bodies that were lined up in the corridor...dead and alive.

Keeping his eyes averted from Bella's barely clothed form, he spoke from the doorway. "I'll go and see if your father has arrived with the carriage," he offered, closing the door on his way out.

Bella continued to shiver in my arms, but the blanket on the bed was stained with God knew what, and I was sure she wanted nothing to do with this place. Shrugging out of my coat, I wrapped it around her, covering her bare legs as best I could and rocking her against me.

"It's all right, sweetheart. You're safe now," I crooned in an attempt to soothe her.

"I know," she whispered, wiping away the tears that persisted in falling from her

eyes. "I knew you'd come for me, but I was so afraid. I tried to fight him, but he was too strong, and that horrible doctor..."

"Did they...did they hurt you?" I forced myself to ask when her words trailed painfully away.

"They were going to," she murmured, her voice breaking. "Hunter threatened...awful things. If Seth hadn't climbed aboard the carriage and seen where I was taken, and if you hadn't gotten here in time..." Her voice broke, and I held her tightly while she sobbed against my shoulder. My own eyes stung with tears of fury for what she'd been put through and relief that I'd arrived in time to save her from Hunter's plan. I'd deduced why he'd wanted her examined by a doctor, and I shuddered to think what he'd intended for her regardless of the outcome.

Determined to let her cry for however long she needed, I murmured endearments, rocking her in my arms. But Bella surprised me by suddenly sitting up, her eyes wide with panic.

"What is it?" I asked, as she clambered from my lap.

"There are other girls being held prisoner, and we have to save them. Hunter had accomplices, and they might come and take them away."

Standing and clasping her gently by the shoulder, I assured her that Emmett was guarding the girls. With a sigh, she slumped against me, relief robbing her of strength after her ordeal. Having spotted her own clothes piled in a heap in the corner, I helped her don her gown and coat, relieved when a knock on the door announced my father's arrival.

After first gently checking on Bella's well being, he assured me that he would take care of both the authorities and the press, who had gotten wind of the abduction.

"You just take care of Bella and get her home safely," he advised. "Sir Charles will be waiting for his daughter's return and no doubt quite beside himself."

"But the girls," she protested as I lifted her into my arms. "I told them I would come back for them."

"We'll check on them on our way," I promised, unwilling to deny her anything, though her insistence that she was too heavy for me to carry and quite capable of walking fell on deaf ears.

"Indulge me," I whispered close to her ear, gratified when she circled her arms around my neck and rested her head against my chest. "I'll have to let you go soon enough."

"Not if I can help it," she muttered, and I chuckled with relief at the evidence of my truly admirable fiancée's indomitable spirit.

After seeing the girls settled at the charitable home and running the gauntlet of the newspapermen waiting in front of Cullen House, I had the carriage driven around to the rear of the house and then insisted on carrying Bella straight up to her room. A tearful reunion with her father ensued, followed by one with her friend and lady's maid, Angela, and others with Alice, Penelope and Esme. Once the tale had been told several times, Seth's ingenuity, Bella's bravery, and Jasper's, Emmett's and my derring-do remarked upon repeatedly, I excused myself to go confer with Jasper and my father as to the state of affairs.

The doctor, an integral member of the dastardly cohort, was singing like the proverbial canary, and the authorities were wasting no time in acting on his disclosures, rounding up a number of Hunter's accomplices and rescuing more girls in the process. Some of these poor, unfortunate lasses were not in as good shape as the ones Bella had encountered, and it was evident that our plans to establish another safe haven would need to be accelerated. My father assured me that he would see to the matter, as with my wedding but three days hence and Bella's and my honeymoon to look forward to, my hands were full...or they would be.

Holding Bella in my arms for a goodly portion of the evening had been the silver-lining on the thunderous events of this dreadful day, and I felt somewhat bereft at our separation. I did not expect to see her again until the morrow as I was sure her many caretakers would rightly insist that a bath and supper in bed was in order after her horrendous day. So it was that I felt no small measure of relief when Sir Charles summoned me to visit his daughter's room later that evening.

He met me in the hallway outside Bella's room, and I bowed respectfully.

"Edward...son...I can't begin to thank you for the service you rendered both Bella and me today," he began, reaching to clasp my arm, his voice catching with emotion.

"It was my pleasure, Sir, and a team effort," I demurred.

"Yes...yes...and I'll be thanking the others directly as well as devising a suitable method of reward for young Seth, though how I can ever thank him for the quick thinking and brave actions which led to the salvation of my daughter..." His voice

broke once more, and I waited patiently while my future father-in-law regained his composure, my own throat uncomfortably tight. When I was certain I could speak without betraying myself, I decided to take what I hoped would only be considered *minor* advantage of the situation and asked permission to bid Bella goodnight.

"Ah...well...as to that..." Sir Charles looked uncomfortable, and I suppressed a sigh. But before I could apologise for overstepping the mark, he continued, his words taking me completely by surprise.

"Bella is quite shaken, as you can imagine, and I'm worried her dreams will not be pleasant. While Angela has offered to stay with her for the night, I believe it is your company that will bring her the most comfort."

"Sir?" I stared, nonplussed.

"Go to her, Edward. She needs you. I trust you not to take advantage of the situation, especially considering the circumstances of her day."

"Of course not." I shook my head in complete agreement. "But what of the servants...the household?"

"I'll deal with any repercussions, though I don't imagine anyone begrudging the two of you one another's company after the traumatic events you've both endured. Angela will sleep on a cot in the dressing room, and I'll be in to check on Bella periodically. If anyone asks, I'll say you spent the night in a chair by her bed, though I wouldn't advise it...hell on one's back, and it *is* only three days to the wedding. Just lie on top of the covers...yes, that should do nicely," he mused while I did my best to suppress my smile...and my jubilation.

More than willing to abide by her father's conditions, I spent the night stretched out on Bella's bed—*atop* the covers—my arms wrapped tightly around her and my lips nuzzling her hair...and cheek...and neck. I slept little, content to watch over her.

When the nightmares inevitably came, I soothed her back into a peaceful slumber.

When she murmured my name, I reassured her that I was with her and of my complete and undying adoration.

And when she sighed contentedly and snuggled as close as possible into my side, I thanked God, grateful beyond measure that the woman I had come to love more than life itself was safe and in my arms.

~AFL~

Phew...that was intense and very challenging to write. I didn't want Bella to seem completely passive and helpless, but I couldn't exactly have her turn into a modern day female warrior. I'd love to hear if you thought I pulled it off or not.

The reality for those who find themselves in such dire situations is that they are often powerless to help themselves. That's why we need to support such wonderful organisations as World Vision Child Rescue, Destiny Rescue, International Justice Mission and the like, who give a voice to the voiceless and actively work to rescue victims of sexual slavery and abuse.

Just a quick comment about Jasper's confession to Alice. My intention all along in this story was to compare the behaviour of Meyer's traditional vamps who cared nothing for the humans they fed off, to the attitude of the ruling class to the working class and also the attitude of males towards females. Consequently, just as Jasper fed off humans for a very long time as a vampire before becoming disillusioned and eventually finding Alice, he has quite the amoral and uncaring past in this story (not at all uncommon for powerful men of the time) but has now had a genuine change of heart. I hope that helps explain his journey.

As to the wedding...I know, I know...over the top, much? But I'm picturing Bella as the Princess Diana of her time - without the tragic ending, of course. ;)

xxx TLSue

Celebration

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight...and she's not the only one who enjoys a lovely wedding. :D

Thank you so much for all the wonderful reviews, recs, tweets, and encouragement you continue to give this story, and welcome to the new readers. Sorry—again—for the epic fail in the reply department, but I'm afraid RL has not been overly kind to me lately. Last week my laptop died, and I lost the lot. So on top of scrambling to save everything off FFn in case the 'purity police' decide to take my stories down, I've been reduced to sharing the home computer with hubby who needs it for work and our latest foster teen who needs it to feed her facebook addiction. I've tried explaining that I have over 10 000 readers waiting on a very important update, but those outside of the Twidom just don't quite understand our obsession. ;)

PS: I reworked the last chapter in response to a challenging but apt review: more foreshadowing and build up to the abduction, a short scene showing Edward's response to hearing that Bella is missing, and a slightly longer fight scene with a bit more of Edward's feelings throughout the second half...if anyone can be bothered rereading. The changes aren't huge, but I do think they make a difference. The updated version was posted last Friday.

Thanks, as always, to my wonderful betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, for their wonderful support and help with this mammoth (for me - LOL!) chapter.

Updated: Wednesday, 6th June 2012

Words: 4972

AFL Ch 67

Celebration

BPOV

The midday sun shone bright and warm upon the crowds that lined the roads, cheering Papa and me as we were driven in one of the King's grandest coaches to

my wedding. Smiling shyly, I waved through the window, trying to settle my nerves by taking shallow breaths...the only sort my beautiful gown would allow. A confection of ivory satin and the finest, hand-spun lace, it floated around me like a cloud, perfectly complimented by my mother's pearls and the tiara, drop earrings and replacement bracelet that Edward had given me. The pearls from the original bracelet now adorned the necks of a dozen young girls currently resident at Miss Horsefall's charity house while awaiting a home of their own in the new establishment we were in the process of purchasing.

While eyebrows would probably rise at my wearing the same jewels I'd worn to the King's ball a month earlier, my decision had nothing to do with a lack of choice. The Masen jewels were now mine to wear as I pleased, a stunning array of diamonds, sapphires, rubies and the like. But the pearls held special meaning to both Edward and me as well as being a poignant reminder of my mother.

I felt her absence keenly, wishing she were alive to see me wed and curious as to what special words of encouragement or advice she may have had for me on this, my wedding day. She would have surely been astonished that her skinny little pigtailed girl, with perpetually skinned knees and a dusting of freckles on her nose, was now a woman grown and about to marry a man more handsome, dashing, and regal than the most charming of princes.

I could barely give credence to it myself.

One belief that I held with total confidence was that she would have adored Edward. How could she not? Regarding her opinion of myself I was a little less certain, but my hope was that she would have been proud of the woman I had become.

The newspapers had made a terrible fuss over my abduction and subsequent rescue, with bold headlines and numerous pages devoted to the admittedly shocking story. Lord Hunter's plan to sell both me and the young girls he'd bought or stolen from the streets of London on the slave markets of Eastern Europe had made for titillating reading. And the populace was horrified to learn that such dreadful practices were occurring under the very noses of the authorities. Calls for changes to the laws and increased protection for girls and young women resounded loudly across London from the streets to the throne room, though it was the same lords who held power over the parliament and too often had vested interests and took pleasure in the trade of young lives who would need to be swayed.

With all the publicity the crime had received, the city constabulary applied themselves diligently to the matter. The perpetrators were quickly

detained—Victoria, the red-haired girl amongst them—and gladly gave up their contacts and accomplices in exchange for leniency in sentencing...deportation rather than the death sentence. A few of the names put forth, the alleged ringleaders along with Lord Hunter, were gentlemen of elevated position and power. Considering themselves above the law, they were uniformly shocked to find themselves arrested and charged like common criminals, never having expected to be held accountable for their evil ways.

It made the ordeal I had endured worthwhile in my thinking, though I still shuddered at the memories my mind insisted on replaying. When Hunter had dragged me from where I'd huddled beside the terrified young girls, attempting to comfort them even while I'd quivered with cold and fear, I'd cried out for Edward. Struggling in vain, I was taken back to the room where Victoria had stripped me of my clothing, tied to the bed, and then forced to submit to the humiliation of having both Hunter's and the doctor's hands upon me. The memory of being pinned down in preparation for the intimate examination that would determine if I were still a virgin was dreadful enough, but I couldn't seem to stop my mind from creating those events that had been prevented by Edward's arrival...the assault that would have undoubtedly followed the doctor's verdict.

Calming my suddenly racing heart, I reminded myself that the worst had not occurred. Seth's decision to trust his instincts and check on my safety rather than obey my instructions, clambering aboard the fast-moving carriage and then alerting Edward to my presence—his bravery and quick-wittedness earning him a lifetime of both my father's and Edward's gratitude with the promise of an education of the highest calibre and acceptance as virtual family—had made the difference between my salvation and a fate I had not dared contemplate. Edward *had* arrived in time to save me, and Hunter could never hurt me or my family again...which did not stop some of the more prurient-minded of Society's members speculating about the timing of the rescue, intimating that it might not have occurred soon enough to protect my virtue. They'd expected the wedding to be postponed—or even cancelled—for surely a young lady of refined breeding and tender sensibilities would not recover easily from such an ordeal...if ever.

Refusing to be intimidated by their insinuations, I'd insisted that I was perfectly well and determined to go ahead with the wedding as planned...not that I hadn't fleetingly considered taking advantage of the situation to press for the small, intimate affair I would secretly have preferred. But I was acutely aware that such an action would disappoint a great many people...ones who genuinely cared about me.

Real life fairy tales were few and far between, and my improbable tale had captured the imagination of my countrymen, in particular those of the lower

stations. Inspired by my journey—a country miss of good family, to terrified runaway and unlikely maid, to my surprising kinship with royalty, and my ultimate betrothal to one of the most eligible gentlemen in the land—they had opened their hearts to me...and their pockets to the exceedingly worthy charity Edward, our family, and I now supported, with me acting as it's unofficial figurehead.

The least that I could do was to show my gratitude for the public's support and generosity by graciously enduring 'the wedding of the century,' as Edward and my nuptials were being touted.

Looking across the carriage to where my father sat, proud and distinguished in his military uniform, I couldn't help comparing the grandeur and pageantry of this particular journey to the flight I'd undertaken from Forkston, hidden in the back of a ramshackle cart and believing my father to have been murdered.

My life had changed almost beyond imagining and all in a matter of mere months...from tragedy to triumph along an admittedly tumultuous path. Overwhelmed with relief at my father being hale and hearty beside me, at the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that we'd both overcome, and the joy that lay before us, I blinked back tears of happiness. Looking towards a future with my growing family's loving support and Edward by my side, I acknowledged that I was truly blessed.

But before Edward and I could begin our lifetime together, I first had to survive our nuptials, a lavish ceremony to be performed by the Archbishop himself before one thousand of the most prestigious members of the British upper *ton*. Momentarily forgetting the constricting nature of my corsetry, I attempted a deep breath as the carriage came to a halt in front of the imposing edifice of Westminster Abbey.

"Are you well, Isabella?" Papa enquired as I attemptedg ineffectually to slow my racing pulse.

Panic welled within me, and I closed my eyes for a moment, allowing images of Edward to fill my mind.

The first time I'd seen his oh, so handsome visage when I'd peered curiously from the upper window of Worthington Hall on my first day of employment as a serving maid, mesmerised by his commanding presence.

The way he'd glared at me so fiercely while I'd stood trembling in the breakfast room; the feel of his hand when he'd steadied the coffee pot, whose contents I'd threatened to spill onto his lap, and his laughing response to my rambling

admittance of my clumsy tendencies.

His brusque command that I be dismissed from my duties; words that had caused me to take offence until I'd come to realize that he'd been acting to protect me.

The way he'd interrupted me in my dismal attempts at flower-arranging to gently stroke my cheek with his finger, causing the first fluttering of desire to stir within me.

How I'd almost swooned against him when he'd murmured "beautiful girl" in Italian...bellissima ragazza.

How he'd run between the horses and shouted my name, intent on rescuing me the day of the hunt.

The way he'd complimented me on my baking, discovering my hobbies and tastes, insisting I be given the opportunity to pursue my interest in art and then debating with me the qualities of various poets and writers.

How he rode to my rescue in the dark alleyways of the markets, and then later told me that he couldn't stay away from me any longer.

The way he held me close on the carriage journey back to Worthington.

How he transported me to another world with his tender kisses, passionate caresses, and the intimate joining of our bodies as he gently initiated me into the delights of lovemaking.

The way he'd pressed me against the wall of his study and then carried me to his desk before taking me with a desperate and shocking hunger...a hunger that my body matched even as my heart craved tender words of love.

His declaration that he would protect me always, that he would love me forever, and that he would give anything...everything...for us to be together, words that his actions had proved to be true.

"Bella?" Papa interrupted my musings, and I turned to him, my lips no longer trembling but curving into a smile.

"I am well, Papa," I declared, my voice steady though my confidence wavered a fraction when we alighted from the carriage and the crowd erupted into thunderous cheers. I took a moment to wave and smile my appreciation for their welcome,

stunned by the way the city seemed to have taken me to its heart.

Alice and the bridesmaids, flower-girls and page-boys awaited Papa and me just inside the abbey, looking resplendent in their matching cream-coloured gowns with flower posies for the girls and smart-looking suits with black jackets and cream brocade vests for the boys. Practically vibrating with excitement, Alice hugged me close and then made sure my skirt with its long flowing train and the cascading veil that swept back from my tiara were all carefully arranged. Once we were all in position, my father gave the signal, and the majestic organ music that would accompany our procession filled the air.

"Ready?" Papa asked, linking our arms, his eyes filled with both love and pride.

Nodding, I murmured, "Just don't let me fall."

"Never have, never will," he declared, and together we made our slow and steady way along the carpeted north aisle. Smiling nervously, I acknowledged the admiring looks and smiled greetings of the guests who filled the nave. When we'd travelled far enough to see past the choir, I caught a glimpse of Edward standing before the High Altar, Jasper and Emmett at his sides. My eagerness to be with Edward caused my pace to increase, and Papa steadied me with a pat to my hand. I smiled at him, chagrined but oh, so happy to feel my nerves dissipate as exhilaration that the waiting and uncertainty were over and that Edward and I were about to be wed filled my heart.

When we reached the north transept, my friends from Forkston came into view, and my smile stretched my cheeks. Unable to resist, I gave a tiny wave of the hand that was linked with Papa's arm, the other holding the beautiful bouquet of creamy white flowers that cascaded before me.

Tears pricked my eyes at the sight of Billy, Harry, and Mrs. Waters dressed in the finery that my father, with Esme and Penelope's assistance, had provided for his employees-cum-life-long friends, not wanting them to feel out of place at the ceremony and wedding breakfast to which we'd insisted they be invited. They were our family, after all, and they beamed at us with justifiable pride.

My smile was widest for Jacob and Leah, now Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Black. My childhood friends made a handsome couple in their fashionable attire and were doing their best not to appear overawed by the august assembly and grandiose surroundings.

I would have liked to have attended their wedding, but Leah had admitted to me

upon her and Jacob's arrival two days prior that they may have precipitated events a little themselves after their return to Forkston, and a lengthy engagement would not have been wise.

I offered them my heartfelt felicitations...on both accounts...and then nervously awaited Edward's arrival so as to introduce him. Jacob and Leah were, or had been, Papa's and my servants, but they were so much more, and I feared their being made to feel uncomfortable or inferior during their sojourn with us...though I needn't have worried. Edward's behaviour towards them had been everything I could have hoped for.

Smiling warmly, he approached where we stood awaiting his arrival in one of the grand drawing rooms of Cullen House, his hand outstretched to greet Jacob as an equal and his chivalrous response to Leah's curtsy a gentlemanly bow.

"Jacob and Leah, I would like to introduce you to my fiancé, Lord Edward, the Marquess of Masen," I began, my tone somewhat hesitant, my hope that he would forgive me the use of his Christian name. "Edward, these are the friends I've spoken with you about, Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Black."

"Jacob, Leah, how wonderful to finally meet you," Edward responded, the sincerity of his tone filling me with relief. I'd followed convention, introducing him formally by his title but secretly hoping he would not demand its use despite Jacob's and Leah's lowly station.

As ever, he did not disappoint.

"Please, call me Edward," he continued, gesturing for them to take a seat and calling for afternoon tea to be served.

Jacob and Leah appeared uncertain, even going so far as to state their concerns about taking up too much of our time. But to my relief, Edward was having none of it.

"You could have no higher recommendation than Bella's friendship," he insisted earnestly. "Not to mention the fact that I owe you both a debt of gratitude which I shall never be able to repay. You kept Bella safe on the journey to my father's home, inadvertently bringing her to me, for which you have my heartfelt thanks."

"T'was our pleasure," Jacob assured him, but his tone and posture were somewhat defensive as my oldest friend sized up the man that was my future. "We're just glad things worked out as they 'ave, as I 'ad me doubts when Bella returned home. She

wasn't in a good way, not good at all, and I'll admit to bein' worried about what 'ad 'appened to 'er while she was at Worthington pretendin' to be a maid. 'Twas a relief to us all to discover she was suffering from a broken 'eart and nothing worse...though, of course, we rejoiced to 'ear that her feelings were returned and that ye were set on doin' the 'onourable thing and marrying her."

I blushed at Jacob's pointed phrases and the perceptiveness they revealed, Edward paling a little and reaching to grasp my hand in his.

"I should never have let her go," he acknowledged soberly. "But there was some confusion upon my father's return and matters I needed to see settled before I could ask for Bella's hand. It was never my intention to see her suffer, and in hindsight, I should have communicated my intentions clearly before she departed to be reunited with her father."

In the quiet that followed Edward's declaration, he and Jacob came to a silent understanding and the final vestiges of tension drained away. The next thing I knew, they were engaged in animated conversation about the latest farming technology and Jacob's ideas for designing a new type of plough. His apprenticeship as a blacksmith now almost behind him, and with my father's endowment as seed money, Jacob was intent on venturing into design and manufacturing, a topic that Edward appeared to find enthralling. Leah's and my fascination with the topic quickly waned, and I drew her into a separate conversation, eager to discover how she was finding married life...not that she needed to say. There was a softness and contentment about her that I'd never seen before, a confidence that came from the way Jacob looked at her with such love and pride. I was so very happy to see that my friends had found the sort of lasting love that Edward and I had found and even happier that it appeared our friendship had survived the changes in our relationships.

By the time I'd finished asking all about Leah's and Jacob's new home and plans for the future, Edward had convinced Jacob to let him invest in his proposed venture. Consequently, the handshake they shared at our parting was not only one of newfound friends but business partners, and I looked forward to the opportunities this would allow for us to socialise in future.

My smile faded a little as Papa and I moved past our Forkston friends and neighbours and I recalled another, less welcome reunion I'd endured but two days prior to the wedding...though its outcome held promise.

Spending the night after my abduction wrapped in Edward's arms, albeit dressed in my most modest nightgown and with the bedding between us, almost made up for

the horrors of the day. Waking in time to watch the dawn arrive, unwelcome but inevitable, I reluctantly released Edward who removed himself to the more respectable location of the padded chair positioned beside my bed. Refusing to be parted, we shared a breakfast tray, and I briefly considered taking up the offer of a day spent recovering abed as recommended by the doctor who'd been called the night before to assure my worried family that I was, indeed, fine...if somewhat exhausted. But with the wedding fast approaching, and to avert the whiff of scandal that I suspected the rumour mongers would be only too happy to ignite, I chose to face the day head on...an audience with my future cousins-in-law dauntingly high on the list of my priorities.

Dressed impeccably to boost my confidence, and with Edward standing staunchly by my side, I awaited Rosalie's and Emmett's visit to the drawing room we'd set aside for greeting our many visitors. The expression on Rosalie's face when she'd crossed the room on Emmett's arm led me to believe she might possibly be dreading the encounter even more than I was.

"Lady Isabella," she offered primly, her words accompanied by a respectful curtsy.

"Lady Rosalie," I responded, matching her tone and actions.

"I trust you are well after your ordeal," Emmett added after his greeting, and I assured him that I was, thanking him for the part he'd played in my rescue.

The apology that Emmett had promised Rosalie would proffer followed, though it was difficult to vouch for her sincerity considering her stony expression and the stilted nature of her words. Sighing inwardly, I considered my options. The tables had been well and truly turned, and I now held the undisputed position of power. With a few well chosen phrases spoken in the right company, it was not inconceivable that I could ruin Rosalie's standing in society, something that was clearly of great importance to her...or I could take a different approach and hopefully pave the way for a more amenable future.

Asking to speak with Rosalie in private, a request that was met with mutually concerned expressions on Edward's and Emmett's faces, I waited until she and I were alone to respond to her apology...such as it was. But before I could address her coolly spoken phrases that revealed more justification than contrition, she blurted out words that I imagined were a truer reflection of her feelings on the matter.

"I apologise for putting you at risk when I thought you were nothing more than a lowly maid, as I do realise that was unacceptable behaviour for one of my elevated

station," she began, and my back stiffened at the inference behind her words. Maybe being required to volunteer at the charitable home would change her opinion regarding her so-called superiority, I speculated, though I quickly decided it would be unfair to inflict her particular brand of snobbery on girls who had already suffered so much.

"But if you think I'm going to grovel for your forgiveness," she continued in a rush, "after the weeks of trial and deprivation I've endured in the godforsaken wilds of Scotland, only to be called back to attend your wedding, of all things, and to Edward...not to mention the revelation that you are not only related to royalty but being touted as a heroine, when we both know that if the truth of your behaviour at Worthington were to be revealed, you would be seen in a far different light, ruining your reputation..."

"Just as the truth of your behaviour towards me during that time would surely ruin yours," I interjected, and the colour that had risen to Rosalie's cheeks during her diatribe quickly drained away. She stood frozen, eyeing me with what I recognised as fear in her eyes, and not for the first time...I pitied her.

I had everything she wanted...position, power, standing...yet I would have traded them all for the man I loved if it had been necessary. She, on the other hand, had the love of a good man, Emmett's continued regard for his recalcitrant wife still clearly evident in his expression towards her, and yet she spurned it, preferring to hold fast to her bitterness and contempt.

With nothing to lose or greatly fear, as I highly doubted Rosalie would risk bringing any more of her husband's or Lord Carlisle's wrath upon her head by attempting to discredit me, I told her how it saddened me to see her throwing her life away when fulfilment, joy and contentment were hers for the taking.

"There is nothing stopping you from experiencing the happiest of marriages to a man of excellent standing whom I have been informed worships the ground you walk on despite the fact that you treat him so very ill," I concluded, waiting for the backlash of outrage that I fully expected my words to engender. But to my surprise, tears welled in Rosalie's eyes, and I took the risk of continuing.

"I don't expect us to be friends, Rosalie," I admitted sadly. "But we are to be family, which is far more important to me than our positions in society or whatever titles may come before our names. Edward cares a great deal for his cousin, and it is for that reason that I offer an olive branch of peace between us...and these words of advice that I don't expect you to take but do wish you would consider. Lay aside your pride and accept your husband's love, returning it in kind if at all possible, for I

believe that you will find what you're looking for...not through your position in society, but through opening your heart."

Rosalie surprised me by accepting my words and offer of a truce with unexpected grace, and I wasn't the only one to notice a decided softening in her bearing towards her husband. I could not take all the credit, however, as Emmett admitted to Edward that he'd made considerable inroads in thawing his wife's icy demeanour during their sojourn in the north, though he was more than receptive to receiving additional support for his cause.

Being surrounded by so much love and happiness appeared to have a further impact on Rosalie's manner, giving me a tentative hope that our growing family may eventually include a fifth loving couple. Carlisle went so far as to predict that our group may well inspire a revolt against the fashion for husbands and wives to treat each other with cool disinterest if not outright disdain, hopefully inspiring others with our example to consider treasuring their spouse in hopes of reaping the joys and benefits of a loving union.

It was a good thing I'd never been a slave to fashion, for I feared that my heartfelt feelings for Edward were very much evident as Papa and I passed where Edward's family were seated alongside the King and Queen and various visiting royals and dignitaries. Confronted by a sea of elegant attire, splendid jewellery, dashing uniforms, medallions and crowns, the enormity of the situation threatened to overwhelm me. But then I looked up to see Edward watching my approach, his emerald eyes intense and a soft, encouraging smile curving his lips.

My breath hitched in my throat at the sight of him standing so tall and regal-looking in his wedding finery. His snowy white cravat, cream brocade vest and white breeches contrasted with his perfectly cut dark coat and shiny black hessians, complimenting his fair colouring and the bronze of his ruthlessly constrained locks with poetic perfection. A fleeting image of the disarray my fingers would cause when I ran them through his hair later that evening caused a deep blush to stain my cheeks, and I ducked my head, eyeing him coily through my lashes.

As if he'd read my mind, Edward's eyes darkened and his nostrils flared as he drew in a deep breath, love and desire evident in his gaze. The passion that simmered between us, even here in this holy location and before such an august audience, was undeniable...but it was only a part of the pure and perfect love that drew us together, binding us as irrevocably as the vows we were about to declare.

Finally, after what felt like the longest walk of my life, I came to stand beside the man I was to marry. I barely noticed when Papa squeezed my hand and went to take

his place on the pew beside a radiant Lady Penelope or when Alice relieved me of my large bouquet before taking her place to the side with the rest of the wedding party. My complete and undivided attention was upon Edward.

Ignoring the waiting Archbishop, he leaned close and whispered next to my ear. "You are so beautiful you take my breath away, and I love you with all my heart."

His words weren't a part of the carefully planned and rehearsed ceremony, steeped in centuries of tradition and designed to fulfil our spiritual and legal obligations...but they were spoken from his heart and echoed what was in mine. From that moment onwards, the crowds and distinguished guests, the grandiose location, the pomp and circumstance, the glorious music of the organ and stunning voices of the choir all took their rightful place in the background, and it was just Edward and me, joining our lives together in love before God, our family and our friends.

The Archbishop read about love from 1 Corinthians 13 before speaking of the importance of marriage for creating a new family and the raising of children. Then he charged us to take seriously the solemnity of the vows we were about to speak.

Softly smiling, Edward and I turned to face one another, and with heartfelt love and utmost sincerity we promised...

...to have and to hold each other from this day forward...

...for better for worse...

...for richer for poorer...

...in sickness and in health...

...to love and to cherish...

...forsaking all others...

...till death do us part according to God's holy ordinance.

Rings were exchanged, communion was shared, and the registry signed while the choir sang hymns glorifying God. Then the moment we'd waited for was upon us, and the most wonderful of words were spoken when the Archbishop declared us man and wife and introduced us to the smiling assembly as Lord and Lady Edward Cullen, the Marquess and Marchioness of Masen.

The smile that stretched my cheeks was matched by Edward's broad grin as we made our way down the south aisle of the abbey to the applause and congratulations of our family, friends and guests. Joy and relief bubbled within me that, despite being the focus of so very much attention, I did not feel overwhelmed. My heart was too filled with happiness to allow self-conscious to creep in and spoil Edward's and my special day.

Stepping out into the sparkling sunshine with our arms entwined, nothing could have prepared us for the thunderous welcome that awaited our arrival. The crowds who'd stood patiently behind the barricades throughout the long ceremony clapped, cheered and whistled whilst cascades of white blooms were tossed high in the air.

Gasping, I turned to Edward. "It's hard to believe that they're all here for us," I cried in amazement.

"No, my darling," he contradicted, reaching to gently cup my cheek before bestowing a soft, chaste kiss upon my lips...a gesture which sent our audience into raptures of delight. When the noise died down enough for me to be able to hear the words he spoke close to my ear, he continued.

"They're here for you, Bella, just as I am. Always you...only you...forever."

~AFL~

Oh my, I hope you enjoyed that as much as I did.

I can't believe this tale has almost reached ten thousand reviews...which would double if every reader reviewed once...*flutters eyelashes endearingly* LOL!

Seriously, I don't expect that to happen, and I am very, very grateful to those who have been able to take the time to review, even if it is only occasionally. Thanks for your support for my little tale, and I hope you all enjoy the honeymoon as much as I'm looking forward to writing it.

xxx TLSue

PS: Any preferences for whether it should be EPOV or BPOV?

PPS: I just found out that there is to be a boycott of FFn this weekend by Twific writers to complain about the way they've been taking down stories without warning or giving the authors a chance to change things or notify

their readers (145 000 so far, apparently). I've been asked to let readers know not to read, update or look at FFn this weekend, the 8th and 9th, if you'd like to support the protest. I'll be looking into posting my stories over on The Writer's Coffee Shop in case they disappear from here.

PPPS: I just heard that AFL has been nominated (again - LOL!) over on The Lemonade Stand for 'fic of the week' if anyone feels like voting. I never win, but thanks to the person who nominated. That was lovely of you!

Rapture

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have a wonderful son-in-law who fixed my laptop and retrieved all my files! Yay!

I forgot to say thank you for all the fantastic support you guys gave my abduction/rescue chapter where Lord Hunter got his final comeuppance. Phew... I was a bit nervous about that one, but not splitting it on a dreadful cliffy seemed to go over really well. I'm glad everyone enjoyed the wedding chapter, and yes, I was definitely channelling Kate's and William's wonderful day...a little bit.

Thanks also to those who supported the boycott. I'm not sure what the result of it has been, so if anyone knows, I'd love to hear. I've had a lot of queries about where to find my stories if I'm unlucky enough to be targeted and they disappear from Fan Fiction Net. I haven't gotten my act together yet (too busy trying to post two stories at once!) but I will be posting them on The Writer's Coffee Shop as soon as I can. I'd love to come up with a more interesting pen-name, but I think that would make me too difficult to find, so I'll stick with TwiLoverSue. Sigh...

Lots of love and appreciation to my awesome betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro. Mwah!

The requests were overwhelmingly in favour of EPOV for the honeymoon, but as I'd already started in BPOV, I've split the difference. Don't worry though, as the steamy stuff is from Lordward's POV. Swoon...

Updated: Wednesday, 13th June, 2012 - A little bit early because it's my birthday.

Words: 6375

AFL Ch 68

Rapture

BPOV

I couldn't have asked for a more magical wedding day, even if it was nothing like

the small affair I'd occasionally imagined as a girl. The pomp and splendour had been well balanced by the abundance of kind wishes and generosity of spirit that had imbued the atmosphere. Of course, with Edward refusing to leave my side, despite the good-natured teasing he'd received for his undeniable and explicit devotion, it was hardly surprising that I'd had a wonderful time.

We'd journeyed from the Abbey to the palace in an open carriage along roads lined with well-wishers, their bright smiles, cheers, and applause making us feel as if the entire city was celebrating our good fortune. The sumptuous breakfast catered by the palace chefs, with Chef Peters from Worthington and my very own Chef Louis from Forkston contributing their signature dishes, was a series of gastronomical delights. A far less formal affair than the previous dinners and luncheons we'd attended at the palace, and very much to my liking, it gave Edward and me the opportunity to mingle with our guests who were effusive in their praise and congratulations. The smaller, more intimate affair held at Cullen House in the evening for our closest family and friends, a large number of whom were *not* official members of the *ton*, was an event that I would have normally been keen to stay and savour. But I was not at all disappointed when Edward murmured in my ear not long after dinner that it was time for us to leave.

Anticipation for what lay ahead had been building within me for weeks, and despite the excitement and rigours of the day, I was more than ready to be alone with my husband...and not the least bit tired.

After bidding farewell to our friends and family, Papa's embrace bitter-sweet as he wished us both well and tried to hide the tears that welled in his eyes, Edward assisted me into the carriage that would take us to our destination. My luggage had been transported earlier in the day, and Angela would be waiting to assist me out of my beautiful gown upon our arrival, but I was otherwise in the dark as to Edward's plans for where we would spend the next few days before we embarked on our honeymoon. I didn't mind as long as we were together and could be alone. Well...as alone as two people can be when they require a lady's maid, valet, cook, housekeeper, butler, sundry footmen and maids, laundress and gardener to take care of them, not to mention carriage drivers and stable boys to attend to their horses.

"Something amuses you, my darling?" Edward asked when I chuckled, drawing me even closer to his side though there was barely a hairsbreadth between us.

I shared my thoughts on the nature of the solitude we both desired, and he smiled indulgently.

"Would you prefer I dismissed them all, and we fend for ourselves?" he purred close to my ear. "I realise that you are more than capable of taking good care of us, though it's been a while since you've had practise pouring hot beverages. It might be wiser if I took responsibility for that task," he teased, and I gave him an arch stare.

"I do love spending time in the kitchen," I mused with mock seriousness. "And I know how much you enjoy my delicious pastries. So if you can't think of anything better for us to be doing with our time, I suppose I could take on the household chores and save you the expense of employing all those staff members."

"Minx!" Edward growled, lifting me bodily to sit on his lap. "You know very well what I have planned for our time together...every waking moment, if I have my way. So you can put ideas of baking or my dismissing the staff out of your head, young lady."

I giggled at his paternal tone and turned in his arms to face him, my hands reaching to steady myself on his broad shoulders.

"Every waking moment?" I raised an eyebrow before leaning in to brush my lips over his in a feather-light kiss. "You plan on starving me and keeping me tied to the bed?"

As soon as the words left my lips we both froze, our faces falling as my jest brought the horrid memory of my abduction to the forefront of our minds. Groaning, Edward pulled me into a tight embrace, his face burrowing against my neck.

"I'm sorry," I murmured contritely. "I was teasing. I didn't mean to bring that to mind or infer that you would ever..."

"Never!" Edward pulled back and eyed me intently. "I could never harm you, Bella, or ill-treat you in any way. You are my life, now."

"As you are mine, my love," I assured him, gently soothing the furrows from his brow.

Edward's eyes skittered away, his voice ragged with pain. "When I think of how I treated you when I thought you were a commoner, barely giving you a choice because I wanted you so badly. I'm no better than..."

"Stop!" I commanded, drawing his face back to me and meeting his anguished gaze. While I wasn't overly surprised that the topic had arisen once more, as I knew

that Edward still struggled with his conscience over his previous actions, I couldn't bear for him to compare his behaviour with Lord Hunter's. "You are nothing like him...*nothing*. What we shared at Worthington was born of our love for one another, nothing less. Please...let's not sully those memories with shame or remorse."

He nodded, but his eyes were still clouded, and my own insecurities rose to the fore.

"Of course, a part of me wishes that I was coming to you this night as a virgin," I added tremulously.

"No, Bella, please..." Edward murmured, reaching to stroke his hand lovingly down the side of my face before cupping my cheek. "When you let me make love to you, you gave me the most precious gift I've ever received...until today, when you granted me the promise of a lifetime at your side. You are right; our memories, what we've shared, make us who we are and only strengthen our love and commitment to one another."

"So, no regrets?" I chewed anxiously on my lower lip, and Edward reached to release it from between my teeth, soothing it with a gentle stroke of his thumb.

"No regrets," he insisted, leaning in to capture my mouth with his in a tender kiss. I responded eagerly, relieved to have the matter behind us...hopefully once and for all. It was time for us to move on, and I let Edward know exactly how I felt by opening my mouth beneath his and deepening the kiss. Without hesitation, his tongue brushed my lips before delving into my mouth with soft, questing strokes, his delicious taste flooding my senses and causing me to whimper with need.

"You taste amazing," he whispered between hungry, open-mouthed kisses, echoing my thoughts as he pulled me even more tightly against him. My hip pressed against the distinctive evidence of his desire, and I chuckled softly.

"What is it, my love?" he whispered hoarsely against my mouth, and I wiggled against him, eliciting a rumbling groan from deep within his chest.

"I'm just relieved to know that's *not* a pistol," I explained, and he raised his head to study me from beneath desire-hooded lids.

"Definitely not," he agreed, groaning again when the carriage came to a halt. I went to move from his lap and was struck by a wave of *déjà vu* when he cautioned me to stay still.

"Darling, I don't think that waiting a few moments is going to relieve your condition this time," I murmured, feeling him twitch beneath me.

He smiled ruefully, a sensual quirk of his reddened lips that did delightful things to the secret areas of my body no matter how many times I witnessed it.

"Neither do I," he agreed huskily. "But since I have no intention of consummating our nuptials in the back of this carriage, I will just have to suffer for a while longer."

"Not too much longer, I hope," I breathed, my mind flooding with wonderfully erotic images of the two of us becoming one flesh.

Edward's eyes darkened almost to black, but then he gave a decisive shake of his head and lifted me from his lap.

"I'll have to hide behind your skirts, as I'm eager to show you your wedding present...and for us to retire to a more conducive location to continue what we've begun."

"My wedding present? But you've already given me so much!"

"Consider this the modified fulfilment of an earlier promise," he explained, an excited grin giving a boyish cast to his handsome features. After assisting me from the carriage, he made sure to stand close enough to my voluminous skirt and cape so that his still highly aroused state was not obvious for all to see. There was nothing to be done to hide his flushed cheeks, swollen lips, and bright eyes—or mine for that matter—but the light was dim, it *was* our wedding night, and I couldn't bring myself to care regardless of who our witnesses might be.

"So...where are we?" I queried, turning from his mesmerising gaze to look upon our destination: an elegant and quite splendid four-storey home set back behind a high wrought iron fence. It was not as overwhelming as Cullen House but extraordinarily appealing with its cream walls, marble portico, and abundance of roses and other blooms that I could see illuminated by both lamp and gentle moonlight.

"Oh, how lovely," I murmured. "Whose place is this?"

"Yours," Edward declared, and I looked up at him, nonplussed.

"Mine? Whatever do you mean?"

"I promised you a home of your own, one that couldn't be taken from you if anything were to happen to me...and this is it. Well, one of them, as I also plan to have transferred into your name a lovely country home and acreage that isn't part of the official estate."

My mouth opened and closed several times before I could utter a sound.

"But, Edward, that isn't necessary now that I'm your wife. That was only for if I agreed to be your..." my words trailed away as I became aware of our audience: the staff standing neatly to attention in two straight lines leading from the carriage to the front entrance.

Clearly not as concerned about our witnesses as I was, Edward drew me into his embrace and gently cupped my face with his hands.

"It is necessary, Bella, as I have no intention of you being left vulnerable ever again. I realise that your mother's jewels have given you a certain degree of financial independence, but I want you to be free to use that for your charitable pursuits or whatever else you desire. Of course, this home is in a considerably more salubrious location than I'd originally planned, not far from Cullen House or the palace. It is *yours*," he declared with emphasis, "and cannot be taken from you regardless of what happens to me or the estate in future."

"But nothing must happen to you," I cried, reaching to grasp the lapels of his coat. "I couldn't bear to be without you!"

"Nor I you." He leaned down to kiss me softly. "But you have no need to worry, as I have no intention of going anywhere without you, not until we're both so far into our dotage that we're happy to take our final journey together. At that point, you may leave this and however many other homes and properties I am able to afford you to our daughters and granddaughters so that they, too, can have the security of financial independence."

"And our second and third *sons*?" I queried cheekily, fluttering my eyelashes at him and enjoying the direction of his thoughts. "Shall they be taken care of so generously also?"

"Of course, that goes without saying," he said with mock affront, before turning to guide me towards our staff waiting patiently for an introduction...though, to my delight, some were known to me already.

The butler and housekeeper reminded me a great deal of Henson and Mrs. Cope.

Jenks, Edward's valet, seemed suitably presentable and whilst reserved, quite pleased to make my official acquaintance...I *had* shared numerous meals and more than one conversation with him during my time working as a servant at Worthington Hall, after all. Angela, my dear friend and lady's maid, allowed me the joy of embracing her and welcomed me to my new home with a wide smile. Ben, now officially her fiancé, had driven us over from Cullen House and was busy tending to the horses. But the biggest surprise of all was our new cook, Chef Louis, my childhood friend and kitchen collaborator.

"Chef Louis?" I stared at him in confusion. "What are you doing here? Won't Papa be lost without you?" I added with sudden concern.

"Don't be worrying about your father, dear girl. He's planning on spending the rest of the season in town to be near his Lady Penelope, and since she has an excellent chef—not as good as me, of course, but quite adequate—he was happy to let me come and cook for you and your new husband. A familiar face, as it were." I smiled at Louis' words and French accent, both surprised and delighted by this turn of events.

The rest of the introductions were promptly made, and then Edward insisted on carrying me over the threshold into our new home. I blushed with embarrassment at his committing such a forward display in front of the entire household staff, but their expressions were devoid of censure, showing only pleasure in their new master's and mistress's happiness.

Declining supper or a nightcap on both our behalves, Edward escorted me up the sweeping stairway and along the wide hallway to our rooms.

"I hope you don't think it terribly presumptuous of me," he murmured, his lips brushing my ear with his words. "But I've only arranged for the master bedroom to be prepared as I have no desire for us to sleep apart."

"How unfashionable of you." I smiled coyly, my eyes peering up at him from beneath my lashes as he showed me through to my new sitting and dressing rooms. "And how wise, as I have no intention of sleeping apart from you either...now or ever."

"Thank God!" Edward drew me into a fierce embrace and kissed me soundly, totally ignoring Angela, who was waiting to assist me with undressing.

He groaned when I broke the kiss, reluctant to release me, but I was keen to take things further which required a certain degree of privacy.

"I'll join you shortly, my love," I murmured, reaching to caress the angled line of his tightly clenched jaw.

Edward drew a ragged breath before departing for his own dressing room on the far side of the adjoining master suite, closing the door behind him. Angela's giggle caught my attention, and I turned to see her cover her mouth, clearly mortified to have made such a slip. I didn't mind in the least, expressing my glee with a girlish squeal of my own.

"Ooh, m'lady, it's a wonder to see how much he loves ye," she marvelled. "Now let's get ye ready as ye don't want to keep him waiting."

"No...I certainly don't," I whispered softly and turned to give her access to the more than one hundred satin-covered buttons that ran down the back of my beautiful gown.

EPOV

The blood pounded so loudly in my ears while I awaited Bella's arrival that I worried I wouldn't hear her if she chose to knock on the door before entering.

Should I open the door in anticipation, or would that appear gauche and overeager?

Oh, who was I kidding? I couldn't have been more eager if I was a lad in short breeches awaiting the arrival of Christmas!

Bella was finally mine, for now and for always, to have and to hold.

The words of our wedding vows played through my mind, but far from picturing the solemnity of the occasion or even my beloved new wife in all her bridal glory, all I could think was that I would soon have my Bella in my arms...and this time, I would not be forced to hold back from expressing my love and passion or release her before we were both completely and utterly sated in every conceivable way. My only concern was that it had been more than two months since that memorable night by the fire in my room at Worthington when we'd loved each other without inhibition or restraint, and I worried that I would not have the self-control I required to make this, our first time as husband and wife, equally memorable.

I would just have to make sure to bring her pleasure before I joined our bodies, since sheathing my overheated and extremely eager flesh into her already pulsing, tight, silken core would undoubtedly trigger my own desperately sought-after

release far too quickly.

Reaching to accommodate my aching member, I shrugged my shoulders at the thought that I might not last very long.

There was always the second time... or third...or fourth.

A slight movement caught my attention, and I ceased my pacing to spin and face the doorway to Bella's suite. The vision of loveliness that appeared as the door swung slowly open was so beguiling, so enchanting, that what little blood was still keeping my brain functioning moved to the lower regions of my body, and I feared I would make a complete and utter fool of myself by fainting.

"Bella," I breathed, swaying a little on my feet before collecting myself and striding across the room to greet her properly. Halting in front of her, I took her cool hand in mine and bowed respectfully whilst kissing the back of her trembling fingers.

She was as nervous as I was, and the realisation brought a reassuring smile to my lips.

"You look absolutely divine," I offered, her blush intensifying at my words and spreading in a tantalising flush across her décolletage before disappearing beneath her gown. She was dressed in a silk and lace negligee and robe of palest gold, the sheer, shimmering fabric complimenting her creamy flesh and hinting at the treasures that lay beneath.

"So do you," she murmured in reply and then ducked her head. "I mean, you look handsome...wonderfully handsome."

Her lashes fluttered, and she looked up at me in that way that dried my mouth and made me feel like an untried, tongue-tied youth. But then I took note of her words and smiled with relief, eternally grateful that she believed me so. I'd always known that women found me attractive, but Bella's was the only opinion that had ever counted...or would ever count.

I'd dressed simply for our first night together as husband and wife. My royal blue silk pyjama pants hung low on my hips, and I'd not bothered to button the matching shirt...not out of disrespect but because I did not expect to remain clothed for very long.

Gently clasping her hand, I drew her to come stand with me in the middle of the

candlelit room. Standing facing her with mere inches between our bodies, I reached to brush a lock of hair back from her cheek, gently tucking it beside her ear. Bella trembled at my touch, my body responding with an answering shudder.

"Oh, Edward," she breathed, looking up at me with such longing that I wasted no time in wrapping my arms around her and bringing our lips together in a kiss of both love and desire. Surrounded by her warmth and softness, I inhaled her floral fragrance and relished the taste that was...Bella.

"My wife...my beloved wife," I murmured against her lips as our kisses became more heated, my hands eagerly exploring her sweet, supple, silk-covered flesh.

"My husband," Bella responded, reaching up on her tiptoes to press herself tightly against me and then rub her belly against my throbbing arousal. Her hands tangled in my hair, tugging lightly in a way that made my manhood tighten with pleasure. Lowering of their own accord, my hands cupped the lovely globes of her bottom, pulling her higher and harder against me. Matching my ardent response, she whimpered with desire. Then, surprising me, she pulled out of my embrace and stepped back. I murmured my discontent only to realise that she was doing me a favour. With a shrug of her slender shoulders, she removed her robe, letting it pool in a silken cloud around her feet and leaving her wearing only the sheer negligee that revealed as much as it covered...teasing...enticing...and driving my senses wild.

"Take me to bed, my darling, and make us one," she pleaded, and I gladly obliged. Lifting her in my arms, I carried her to the king-sized bed and laid her carefully upon the warmed sheets, her head resting gently on the plump pillows as her long, brown hair fanned out around her. For a moment, all I could do was stand and stare in awe at her perfection, but then she reached for me, and I quickly discarded my shirt before coming to lie beside her.

Gone was the experienced tutor that had instructed her in the art of lovemaking, answering her sweet, naïve questions and alleviating her fears so that he could have his way with her and assuage his formidable lust. In his place was a man undone by love, or should I say remade? Bella had transformed me, opening my mind to an endless array of possibilities I'd not previously considered, my body to the wonders of true passion, and my heart to the depth of love a man could feel for his beloved, his wife, his soul-mate.

Lying on my side, I reached to brush a stray lock of hair from her face before trailing my fingers down her flushed cheek. Taking my time, I traced the elegant line of her jaw before teasing the sensitive skin below her ear—making her shiver. My fingers continued on their slow, sensual path along the smooth ridge of her

collarbone and then down the middle of her chest, pausing in the vee between her gently curving breasts.

My eyes rose to hers, silently requesting permission, and she nodded. Her panted "Yes, please..." was like music to my ears.

Ignoring my aching member, I moved my fingers slowly, as if I had all the time in the world to pleasure the beautiful woman laid out in all her sensual glory before me. Gently cupping one of her breasts in my hand, I ran my thumb in teasing circles around the already peaked nipple that strained against its lace covering. At the same time as I lowered my head to kiss her other breast, I tweaked her nipple with my thumb and forefinger, revelling in her cry of delight and the way her body arched off the bed. Moving to cover her silk-clad legs with one of my own, I rocked against her, seeking some small relief from the urgent throbbing of my straining manhood as my mouth and fingers made love to her breasts... kissing... suckling... tonguing... caressing.

With increasingly desperate movements, Bella writhed beneath me, and I gladly reached to slip her gown from her shoulders, lowering it to her waist and revealing her cream and pink flesh to my ravenous gaze.

"My God, you're beautiful," I breathed, drinking her in with my eyes, intensely relieved to know I'd never be denied the sight of her beauty again.

Lowering my head again, I took her bare flesh into my mouth, swirling my tongue around her areola and then pressing the tight bud against the roof of my mouth. Encouraged by her whimpers and cries, I laved the sweet nub with my tongue over and over while my hands stroked and massaged the delicious mounds.

Bella trembled beneath me, moaning with pleasure even as her hands alternated between tangling in my hair and roaming over my arms, shoulders and back...as if she couldn't get enough of touching me. Her legs twined with mine, and she made no secret of the enjoyment she received from pressing ardently against my eager, pulsing desire.

"Oh...please, Edward, please," she begged for more...for release, and I moved quickly to do her bidding, pushing her skirt up and out of the way so that my hands could slide over the smooth skin of her thighs. We both shuddered when I found the soft curls covering her sex, and my fingers slid lovingly between her slick folds. While my mouth continued to minister to her luscious breasts, tugging and teasing her nipples in turn and suckling her swollen flesh into my mouth, I slowly traced the opening to her body with my fingers. Feeling her creamy wet and wanting beneath

my touch, I gently penetrated her velvety softness with first one finger...and then two. Sliding slowly in and out, my fingers, mimicked the movements my member would make when I filled and stretched and pumped inside her tight sheath.

With her body trembling with need, I wasted no time in setting up a rhythm of slow, sliding penetrating strokes while my thumb swirled in sensual circles around the ecstasy-inducing bud hidden at the apex of her curls.

Bella's moans filled the air, her hips rising in counterpoint to the movements of my quickening fingers. Her passion and rising pleasure was more than evident in the racing pulse fluttering at the base of her neck and the warm, rosy flush that spread across her chest.

"Oh, Edward...yes," she cried, her hands tangling in my hair as I curled the desire-slicked fingers that thrust inside her and pressed firmly against the little bud beneath my thumb.

With a gasp, her body stilled, and her inner walls clamped down on my probing fingers as she reached her peak. Groaning, I suckled hard on the nipple she pressed against my mouth and milked her sweet sex as she arched against me, her incoherent cries keeping time with the pulses of pleasure that racked her delicate frame. Only when her body relaxed in repletion did I cease my efforts and move slowly up her body, kissing a path to her mouth where I tenderly caressed her lips.

"Oh, Edward," she repeated her earlier words, this time with a whispered sigh.

Our eyes met, hers slumberous and temporarily satiated and mine dark with yet-to-be-satisfied desire.

"Your turn," she breathed, reaching to run her fingers through my hair and drawing me down for a kiss that began as a soft nuzzling of lips and gentle brush of noses, but soon became heated and hungry once more.

Pushing back on my shoulders, Bella began to tug at the gown that was bunched around her waist, and I quickly aided her in removing it from her body. While I froze at the stunning sight of her completely naked form, her agile fingers tugged at the waistband of my pants. Unable to push them out of the way without my assistance, she slid a hand beneath the dark silk and stroked my aching shaft.

"Bella," I half-groaned, half-cried, stilling her hand even as she encircled me with her fingers and squeezed my swollen flesh.

"Slowly, or I'll be finished before we begin," I explained hoarsely at her curious glance. In hindsight, I should have rethought my decision not to take matters into hand myself the night before our wedding, but I'd been determined to honour Bella's request that we wait to find our pleasure together. Understanding dawned on her face, and she went to remove her hand. But I held it in place wrapped tightly around my throbbing member, relishing the feel as I acclimatised myself to her touch...if such a thing were possible.

When I was confident that I wasn't about to lose immediate control, I lifted my hips, and between us, Bella and I slid my pants down far enough for me to kick them off. Then I rolled over her lush body to nestle between her thighs, as my mouth kissed her hungrily and my hands explored and caressed her beautifully bare flesh.

My efforts were not in vain, as Bella's breathing came in quickening pants, her desire quickly rekindled. With her hands stroking my back, she spread her legs wide and raised her creamy thighs to hug my hips...opening herself and welcoming me in. It was the action of a woman confident in her body, sensual and experienced, but I recognised a fleeting glimpse of shyness in her eyes as she realised what she'd done. For a fraction of a second, she froze, her muscles tensing, and I could practically see the self-doubt and wariness rising within her.

"Bella," I breathed, surging forward and filling her in one, smooth movement, reassuring her the only way I knew how in this instance...by making us one. "Oh, how I love you," I moaned at the feel of her silk and velvet sheath squeezing me so tightly.

The sensation was overwhelming, and it was my turn to freeze, my motivation altogether different to Bella's. Panting, I rested on my elbows to keep my weight from pressing too heavily on her slender frame, my eyes intent upon hers as I strove for control. The anxiety was gone from her shining eyes as she gazed up at me with unbridled longing.

"I love you, too," she murmured and rocked her hips against me. "You feel so good inside of me. It doesn't matter if you don't last very long the first time...we've got all night."

Pleasure swamped me at her words and amazement that I had the love and understanding of such an astonishing woman. Our mouths met in a heated, open-mouthed kiss, and I began to move inside her, sliding slowly in and out, penetrating deeper as her swollen flesh gradually opened to me. Her hands and thighs hugged me tightly as she drew me inside the secret recesses of her body, until I was thrusting urgently and groaning with pleasure.

While I'd taken the time to ensure her satisfaction before seeking my own, my enjoyment increased tenfold to feel Bella's pleasure matching mine as we quickly ascended the heights of rapture together. The feel of her soft, curvaceous body moving beneath me and her warm, silky skin sliding against my own was an exquisite form of torture. Tingling shocks of pleasure raced down my spine, settling low in my groin in anticipation of the explosion to come, and I knew I couldn't hold back much longer. But to my relief, I felt Bella's inner walls squeezing my manhood impossibly tightly as she reached her peak once more. Arching beneath me, she cried my name, a look of indescribable joy sweeping across her delicate features...and I let myself go.

"Bella!" I shouted hoarsely, overwhelmed with pure, unadulterated pleasure as I released inside of her. My climax was almost painful in its intensity, my body shuddering with exquisite sensation. Finally spent, I collapsed atop my precious bride...maintaining just enough presence of mind to remember to keep most of my weight on my elbows. To my astonishment, Bella's body continued to respond long after my own was replete, my slightest movement or caress or brush of my lips triggering another round of pulses to contract deep within her core as she gasped and whimpered with pleasure.

"You astonish and overwhelm and amaze me," I whispered when she finally lay still beneath me. "I cannot begin to quantify my love for you or the depth of my adoration."

Smiling up at me, doe-eyed and equally adoring, Bella confused me by pushing on my shoulders. But then I realised my error, that my weight must be too great for her to bear, and so I went to pull away.

"No...take me with you," she instructed shyly, squeezing her thighs tightly closed so that my still rock-hard member stayed buried within her as I rolled us onto our sides. The new position was both intimate and comfortable, but she continued to push on my shoulders, and I quizzed my brow.

"I want to be on top," she explained, biting uncertainly on her lip. I was more than happy to oblige her and rolled onto my back, settling us with her lithe body sprawled atop me, her legs tangling with my own as she slid her delicate feet gently up and down my shins.

"Better?" I murmured, curious as to her intentions, and she nodded though her expression was still a little uncertain.

"What is it, my darling?" I whispered, reaching to stroke a lock of her hair back

from her face, securing it behind her ear. "You can tell me anything."

She eyed me for a moment but did not reply with words, instead moving to sit up so that she was mounted astride my hips. Wiggling a little to seat my rigid member more deeply inside, her actions elicited a rumbling growl from my throat. Smiling coyly down at me, she released her lip from between her teeth to stroke it with her tongue...triggering another groan of rising lust from my own lips as I fought not to grasp her hips and thrust into her.

What this woman did to me was enough to rob me of all sense and reason.

"You love me," she stated soberly, gaining my instant and undivided attention. I nodded in agreement, otherwise lost for words at the stunning sight of her sitting naked above me. "You love *all* of me and you want me to be...*unguarded* when we are intimate?"

Her voice rose questioningly, and I finally understood the nature of her uncertainty.

"Yes, my love, a thousand times, yes," I declared emphatically, reaching to capture her hands and draw her forward so that I could gently kiss the backs of her fingers. "I adore everything about you, and I want you to feel completely free to express your love and passion howsoever you desire."

"Good," she breathed with a sultry smile, and with her hands resting gently on my heated flesh, she began to ride me. Her hair fell around us like a silken shawl, and I shuddered at the sensual pleasure as it brushed against my skin. Her creamy thighs hugged my sides whilst her curvaceous bottom pressed delightfully against my groin with each rise and fall of her hips.

I thrust up to meet her downward strokes, my hands reaching eagerly to cup her lovely breasts and tease the nipples to impossibly hard peaks with my thumbs. Moaning and writhing, she arched her back, pressing against my hands and silently begging for more. Eager to please her, I lifted my torso off the mattress and reached to capture a swaying breast with my lips, suckling the nipple firmly against the roof of my mouth.

"Oh, yes... yes..." Bella cried while I tasted and teased the sensitive bud with my lips and teeth and tongue. My hands alternated between cupping her breasts, gently squeezing and massaging them, paying the same attention to the lavish curves of her bottom, and stroking and guiding her perfectly rounded hips...not that she needed my direction. Innately sensual, she rode me relentlessly, in turn slow and

erotic in her movements as she squeezed her inner muscles until the intensity of the sensations her actions created threatened to overwhelm me...then fast and hard as she cried out for more, and I thrust upward to meet her hungry demands.

Driven almost wild with desire, and just when I thought I couldn't take any more, Bella threw her head back and cried out in ecstasy, her orgasm tearing through her with violent shudders and deep, pulsing ripples of rapture. Holding ruthlessly to the remnants of my control, I made sure to continue pleasuring her with my hands and mouth, moving rhythmically until her body was milked of every last drop of joy. Then and only then did I surrender to my own release, and with a prolonged shout of triumph I collapsed back on the bed as my body continued to spasm for seemingly endless, pleasure-soaked minutes .

Cradling Bella's replete, exhausted, and oh, so precious form in my arms, I ran my hands soothingly over her satiny skin, cuddling her close as emotion welled within me. The passion and pleasure written on her delicate features as she rode my manhood, her high, round breasts bouncing in time with her thrusts, was an image burned into my consciousness and sure to discompose me whenever the erotic memory surfaced...not that I was complaining.

Bella was beyond beautiful and the most stunningly sensual and responsive woman a man could ever hope to have for his wife...and I was without doubt the luckiest man alive.

~AFL~

Sigh...

Lordward and Naivella have come such a long way, and I am really going to miss them. I'm so glad Edward appreciates how truly wonderful Bella is. I can't see him ever taking her for granted, and we all know how much she adores him. ;)

Next up we've got a little bit more honeymoon loving (I know...I know...enough with the lemons already, but there's a scene with the two of them in a big bathtub that I've been dying to write, and this is my last chance!) and then I'm hoping you're all as keen as I am to take a peek into the future to see what life has in store for our devoted Marquess and his kind-hearted Marchioness.

I can't tell you how much the amazing support and love you guys have given this story means to me. 10 000 reviews...oh my! Thank You So Much!

xxx *TL*Sue

Joy Filled

Stephanie Meyer owns Twilight. I have a story that has received over ten thousand reviews! To all my readers, reviewers: regular, occasional, lurkers and those who only speak up to voice a complaint, tweeters, those who've recommended this story on facebook or through various Twilight Fanfiction sights, and anyone who has encouraged me to keep writing...thank you from the bottom of my heart. 3

Special thanks to Nanstew for taking the time to review every chapter - wow, that is an epic undertaking - and for giving A Forbidden Love its 10 000th review.

Thank you also to beckaboo924 and Ro Nordstrom for making amazing banners for AFL, those who've sent in fantastic pictures, and Rebadam for her amazing poem. If I ever have the time (I'm just too busy writing!) and miraculously develop the skills, I will try to compile it all into a blog one day. In the meantime, I've posted most of the links on my profile page.

Last but never least, thank you to my wonderful betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro, for helping make sense of all the comma splices, rogue apostrophes, UK/US spelling differences, problems with tenses, and general grammar issues that arise with frustrating regularity each chapter. You both deserve medals for your patience and unfailing encouragement.

Updated: Sunday, 24th June, 2012

Words: 4872

AFL Ch 69

Joy-Filled

BPOV

Waking safe and satiated in the circle of my husband's arms after a night of passionate lovemaking was the truest joy I'd ever known. My head rested comfortably on his shoulder, my fingers tangled in the soft curls that formed a delectable triangle across his chest, and I had one leg thrown over his muscular thigh. Shivers tingled down my spine at the soft strokes of his fingers against my

bare skin, and I sighed contentedly, cuddling closer.

"Sorry," he whispered, his lips nuzzling my brow. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You're forgiven," I murmured, moving to lie on top of him so that our bodies aligned and I was looking down into his sleepily satisfied expression. "As long as you promise to awaken me the same way every morning."

"Hmmm...I'm surprised that this is your first choice." He ran his hands boldly up and down my body, mapping my curves while his lips curled into a sultry smirk. "You wouldn't prefer I woke you in the manner I used earlier?"

Despite the intimacy of our position and the uninhibited way in which I had responded to him throughout the night, I felt a blush warm my cheeks at the memory of the events he was alluding to. We'd stayed awake until the early hours with only short rests in between our bouts of lovemaking, spending the time murmuring endearments and desultorily discussing the momentous events of the day. Eventually needing to rest and recoup my strength, I'd fallen asleep with Edward's body spooned around me, only to be woken some time later to feel his hand at my breast and his apparently never-sated member slowly entering me from behind, the memory one of many I would treasure.

"Should I leave you to sleep?" he breathed next to my ear, his body tensing in anticipation of me rejecting his highly intimate advances.

He needn't have worried.

My answer was to moan with pleasure, arch my back, and press my bottom against his groin until he was buried deep inside me.

With a responding moan, Edward flexed his hips and began to thrust, his slow, steady strokes causing me to whimper and writhe as the expectation of ecstasy curled within me.

"I'll take that as a no," he groaned.

"A definite no," I agreed, my body moving in rhythm with his as I reached to stroke his flexing hip with my hand, encouraging him to penetrate me deeply. Nuzzling my neck with his mouth, he massaged my breast, tweaking the nipple until it peaked into an aching bud. My breath came in quickening pants, Edward's touch, both inside and out, a slow, smouldering fire in my veins, causing my desire to rise unbearably. While thoroughly enjoying the journey, I became increasingly desperate

to reach the blissful destination that awaited me, but I was not quite able to in this position. Whimpering in frustration, I moved against him more urgently.

"I know, sweetheart," he murmured, his lips vibrating against my sensitised flesh. His hand trailed slowly from where it cupped my breast, teasing and tantalizing in a path across my belly. I was eager for him to find the little nub hidden amongst the curls at the juncture of my thighs, but instead, he reached for my hand that rested on his hip and guided it between my legs so that I could feel where he entered me. Gasping, I hesitated for a moment before tentatively stroking his flesh at the place where our bodies joined.

"Wrap your fingers around me," he instructed hoarsely, and I shyly obliged, intrigued by the feel of his hard, slippery flesh, sliding against my palm.

"Oh, my," I murmured, and he chuckled against my shoulder, continuing to slowly thrust inside me while he sought my secret nub and teased it with his thumb.

"Oh, yes," I moaned, squeezing and stroking his shaft as it slid between my fingers, causing him to groan and shudder against me.

The pressure built, and I pushed back against him as pleasure began to pulse low in my belly, sending sparks of desire racing across my skin.

"That's it, my darling," he encouraged, his voice a husky rasp. "Let yourself go."

I was happy to oblige him, the combination of his fingers working their magic and his quickening thrusts more than enough to send me soaring. Overwhelmed with rapture, Edward's name was torn from my lips followed by incoherent cries of rapture as he continued to pump inside me.

It was no surprise to me when Edward did not immediately join me, as I'd discovered my husband was intent on me finding my release at least two times to his one...or three times...or four. He assured me that he shared my pleasure and that my experiencing enjoyment and satisfaction multiple times heightened his own release.

Who was I to criticise his methods?

My body squeezed Edward's steely length tightly for some time, the sensation eventually subsiding along with the speed of my panted breaths. Only then did he gently roll me onto my stomach, lifting my hips so that he could place a pillow beneath them before rising up onto his knees so that he could enter me from behind.

"Is that good, sweetheart?" he murmured, leaning forward to trail kisses down my spine.

"Oh, yes..." I whimpered, pushing back against him, enjoying the feel of his hips and thighs pressing firmly and rhythmically against my bottom.

"Do you want me to get up onto my knees?" I offered breathlessly after he'd kept up a fast pace for long, delicious minutes and sent me quickly soaring and spiralling into blissful abandon again and again.

"Not this time," he growled, lying down and stretching his powerful legs along the outside of mine, pinning me in place. The position squeezed my legs close together, and I gasped at the feel of his thick erection sliding between my thighs each time he thrust in and out of my body. His hands captured mine, our fingers entwining, and he nuzzled my neck, kissing and teasing the sensitive skin with his lips and teeth and tongue. My whimpers and cries grew in intensity at the delicious feel of his body both driving deep inside me and pressing me into the mattress, his groans vibrating in my ear until we both cried out in ecstasy.

My body responded to the exquisite memory of the last time Edward had awakened me from sleep, and I shivered from head to toe before fluttering my eyelashes coquettishly.

"Well, now that you mention it, I suppose there are any number of ways you could choose to awaken me that I would find acceptable," I informed him, my tone purposefully prim.

In a flash, Edward rolled us over so that I was beneath him, my hands pinned above my head.

"Acceptable?" he growled, a glint in his sparkling emerald eyes. "You dare to call my passionate and highly skilled lovemaking merely acceptable?"

"Oh, quite admirably so," I assured him earnestly, giggling uncontrollably when he teased my neck with his lips.

I mock-struggled in vain against his clearly superior strength, his answering grin as foolish as my own. But then he released my hands and gently stroked my cheek, his expression sobering and his eyes taking on an unmistakeable sheen. His sudden change in mood was not inexplicable as I also felt the rise of bittersweet emotion, my own eyes welling with tears.

"I love you," he murmured, and I nodded, my voice too tight for words. I reached to brush his hair back from his forehead, and he turned to tenderly kiss my palm.

"When I think of everything you endured, of the events that brought us together and how I almost lost you just a few days ago after..." His voice broke, and I could see the effort he was exerting to maintain control in the rigid line of his jaw.

"But you didn't lose me." I blinked to stop my own tears from flowing while stroking his back soothingly. "And now we never have to be parted again."

"*Never*," he declared before leaning down to kiss me passionately.

Imbuing my return kiss with the many feelings overflowing my heart, I caressed and stroked him, holding him close. Love, longing and reassurance soon turned to passion, but when I moaned and widened my legs, expecting Edward to surge forward and fill me with his hardened length, he surprised me by pulling back.

"Darling?" I murmured with curiosity, as there was no mistaking the fact that his body was more than ready for us to continue what we'd begun.

Smiling ruefully, he shook his head. "Less than twenty-four hours ago, I vowed to love, cherish and take very, very good care of you, and I'm not about to break my promise."

"Oh?" I murmured, wiggling beneath him. "I thought you were doing an excellent job of taking care of me. There's no need to stop."

"Temptress," he scolded, leaning down to kiss my pouting lips before rolling onto his side. "We need to eat," he insisted, my shamefully indiscreet digestion growling in response to his words, rendering the objection I'd been about to voice obsolete. I blushed, but then Edward's stomach echoed mine.

"Breaking our fast does sound like a sensible idea, as it would seem that we have both worked up quite an appetite," I demurred, and he chuckled in response. "And then I think a bath might be in order as I have to admit to feeling rather, er..."

"Sticky?" Edward finished for me when I was unable to find a...*delicate*...term for my current state. "No need to be embarrassed," he continued, gently stroking my flushed cheek. "It's a natural part of the process and by far more my fault than yours."

I was still accustoming myself to the frank and open conversation that Edward

seemed intent on encouraging between us...not that I disapproved. My fear that my transition from the role of mistress to wife would stifle the freedoms we'd previously shared was thankfully proving to be unfounded. With very few opportunities for us to speak privately during our betrothal, I'd been unsure of where we stood. Until, that is, Edward had requested permission for us to take an unescorted walk in the gardens the day before our marriage with the purpose of our discussing matters of a highly intimate nature...not that he'd disclosed his motives to Papa, of course.

After the awful débâcle with Lord Hunter, I'd found myself feeling somewhat anxious when separated from Edward for any reason, so I'd been more than happy for us to spend some time alone. What I hadn't expected was for him to broach the rather delicate subject of fertility.

"Under more conventional circumstances, I doubt I would be enquiring of my fiancée's opinion on this subject," he admitted, his tone gentle and without judgement. "But considering our previous, er...experience, I deemed it wise to include you in the decision making."

"Thank you," I murmured, grateful indeed to have my opinion taken into account. There was no need for me to enquire as to whether or not Edward wanted children. He not only needed an heir for his title and estates, he'd already expressed his desire to have a baby with me, regardless of our state of wedlock.

"I'm assuming you are speaking of our regulating the timing of the event?" I enquired, suppressing the innate shyness that had resurfaced with my return to socially acceptable behaviour and constraints.

"Yes, exactly, the timing," he agreed, seeming relieved by my insight and quite possibly by my calm and reasoned response to a subject that would have undoubtedly triggered a bout of vapours in many unmarried girls of my station.

"You want us to prevent conception for a while?"

"That is my preference," he stated seriously, halting our perambulation in the shade and privacy of a large fig tree at the bottom of Cullen House's extensive gardens. Taking both my hands in his, he studied me intently. "You are not yet eighteen years of age, Bella, though I am aware that your birthday rapidly approaches."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at the smile that sparked in his and the knowledge that he no doubt planned to spoil me dreadfully on that occasion. Despite my insistence that I had no need for such attentions—his presence in my life the

greatest gift I would ever receive—so far, he'd ignored my objections and taken every opportunity to shower me with riches.

Returning to the subject at hand, his next words caused both our expressions to sober.

"While society considers young women of your age perfectly ready for marriage, you are very slender and I fear have not yet reached your full, physical maturity."

My eyebrows rose at his personal observation though it wasn't difficult for me to discern what had triggered Edward's fear. A visiting doctor to the charity home had expressed his concern about the number of unnecessary deaths amongst young girls forced to endure the rigours of childbirth before their bodies were fully formed. The doctor's belief was that eighteen or nineteen years of age should be the absolute minimum for childbearing, and the deciding factor was the mother-to-be's measurements. While my breasts had rounded pleasantly over the previous year, and I could no longer be accused of having a boyish figure, there was no denying that my hips were still unfashionably slight.

"How long do you want us to wait?" I asked, worrying at my lower lip. I felt as if I was letting Edward down...that I had been found wanting.

"A year or maybe two," he offered, his tone hopeful. "Enough time for your body to reach full maturity if it hasn't already..."

His voice trailed away at my downcast look.

"What is it, my love?" he asked, ignoring the risk of our being seen and drawing me into his embrace. "Would you rather we try for a baby straight away?"

"No, I don't mind waiting," I assured him. "Though you do realise that society and the press will have a field day if I'm not with child by Christmas?"

He grimaced but dismissed this concern with an indifferent shrug.

"I just feel bad for making you wait," I admitted wanly, barely able to meet his worried gaze. "For not being what you need."

"Bella!" he rebuked, his tone gentle but insistent. "You are what I need, both now and forever, whether we're blessed with children or not! I'm only asking this because I couldn't bear to lose you, especially in a manner that could have been prevented by the exercise of a modicum of patience. The other alternative is a

protracted engagement, which I would gladly endure to guarantee your safety."

"Oh, Edward," I murmured, warmed and reassured by the sincerity of his words. "Surely you must realise that there are no guarantees in this life, but if you want us to wait, I am more than agreeable...to have a baby, not to be wed, that is," I added firmly, and we shared a rueful smile.

Waiting really wasn't an option in that regard as the wedding plans were made and finalised, and the limits of our resolve to maintain our self-control around one another well and truly met.

"It would be pleasant to have some time together, just the two of us, before our lives are turned upside down by the arrival of our first-born," I mused, and sighing with relief, Edward drew me into a close but necessarily brief hug.

"My thoughts exactly," he agreed. "Though I want you to know that whatever comes our way is absolutely fine by me...as long as I have you at my side and we share it together."

The end result of our irregular discussion had been the determination that our wedding night and the next few days would fall into the window of opportunity that *should* be safe in regards to avoiding conception. Edward had agreed that there were no guarantees, but he was also reasonably confident that if we were careful to utilise his store of French Letters or the small, vinegar-soaked sponge that he'd procured for me when we were at Worthington on the unsafe days, of which there were many, that we should hopefully have a say in the spacing of our children. Consequently, our first night of wedded bliss was delightfully unencumbered by prophylactics, but we were required to deal with the natural consequences of our extremely pleasurable and highly enthusiastic endeavours...the stickiness to which Edward referred.

"Breakfast and then a bath sounds wonderful," I mused, sighing and stretching under my husband's watchful and darkening gaze. While still affected by occasional bouts of modesty, I was coming to understand how much he enjoyed viewing my naked form. Since I had no intention of being denied the opportunity to appreciate his truly amazing physique, it seemed only fair to allow him the same privilege.

"Right...breakfast," he agreed huskily, his eyes travelling over me like a like a lingering caress. Reluctantly rising from the bed, he walked across to his dressing room wearing nothing but an incredibly alluring smile. I ogled him shamelessly, sighing with disappointment when he returned clad in a soft, quilted robe.

"Breakfast will be served shortly," he murmured, leaning down to press his lips to my eagerly upturned mouth before handing me a garment that matched his own. "And as much as I am thoroughly enjoying the show, I'd prefer the staff didn't get to see my beautiful new wife in such a complete state of dishabille."

"If you insist," I grumbled good-humouredly, pushing my arms through the sleeves of the robe and wrapping the soft fabric around me.

Breakfast was served in bed, brought to us on two stylishly presented silver trays by the butler to whom I'd been introduced just the evening before. His expression remained stoically neutral, but he couldn't hide the hint of a smile around his eyes...not that I blamed him. I knew from personal experience that a household's staff were highly invested in the well-being of their master and mistress, and if the contented and loving expressions on Edward's and my faces were anything to go by, this particular household had every reason to be well-pleased.

After being hand-fed by my husband in a decidedly enjoyable fashion, one that had us intermittently giggling like nursery children at play and sobering enough to share both sweet and tender kisses, I lay back replete while Edward removed our trays.

"I'll be back in just a minute, sweetheart," he murmured, returning after a short delay from an adjoining room to inform me that our bath was full.

"Ours?" I asked, intrigued by his words and automatically aroused by the devilish glint in his eyes. "The bath is big enough for the two of us?"

"More than big enough," he assured me, leading me through to a well-appointed bathing room containing the largest bathtub I'd ever seen. It was three-quarters full of steaming water, covered by a blanket of bubbles, and it drew me towards it with the strength of a siren call.

~AFL~

EPOV

The robe slipped from Bella's shoulders to pool around her feet, and I stared in awe at the stunning sight before me. Somehow, I didn't think I would ever tire of seeing her naked form. The morning light softly caressed her creamy skin, imbuing it with a pearl-like sheen, and I marvelled anew at her inherent beauty and grace. Despite the fact that we'd loved each other so well and so thoroughly throughout the night, desire pooled low in my belly, and a low groan escaped my lips.

"Bella," I breathed, my voice a husky rasp, and she looked over her shoulder to see me gazing upon her unabashedly. A blush of colour stained her cheeks, and she smiled shyly. But she did not try hide herself from me while catching her hair in a twist and pinning it atop her head before climbing the steps that led up to the bath.

"Here, let me help you." I rushed forward, the realisation that she could slip and fall quelling my passion as I was momentarily flooded with panic. Placing her small hand in mine, she smiled her thanks and stepped down into the enormous bath as gracefully as if she were exiting a carriage. I continued to hold her hand while she lowered herself into the bath, mesmerised by the sight of her beautiful body sinking into the steaming water. Her skin quickly took on a rosy glow and bubbles clung to the curves of her breasts where they bobbed enticingly just above the water-line. A long, low moan of pleasure escaped her lips, and I swallowed hard as my desire for her returned with a vengeance, causing my quickly hardening member to twitch against the satin robe. Bella's eyes were drawn to the movement, and she slowly licked her lips.

"Aren't you going to join me?" she whispered huskily, and I quickly disrobed and climbed into the bath. Positioning myself behind her, I drew her against my chest with my legs stretched along the outside of hers and my arms encircling her waist.

"Oh...this is lovely," she murmured and rested her head on my shoulder while her hands came to rest on my legs. We sat that way for a long moment, her fingers tracing patterns in the hair on my upraised thighs where they were visible above the bubbles while my erection pressed against her lower back. Despite the intensity of my arousal, I was in no hurry to take things further, content to have Bella relaxing in my arms. We'd already made love several times during the night, and I worried she might be tender. The bath was to soothe any aching muscles she might have rather than a deliberate instrument of seduction...not that I was opposed to that particular outcome if Bella should so desire.

"I love you," I murmured close to her ear before lowering my mouth to trail a path of gentle nips and kisses along the curve of her neck. My heart felt full to overflowing, and I rested my head against her shoulder.

"I love you, too," she softly sighed in response, reaching a hand to cup my face as she nuzzled her cheek against my hair.

"I love the way you love me," I added, and she chuckled, causing her delightful curves to bounce against me, her bottom pressing back against my groin. I squeezed her gently for a moment but did not take advantage, instead turning her to face me, intent on convincing her of my sincerity. Noting my serious expression, hers

sobered, and she moved to straddle my thighs, her hands resting on my shoulders. Refusing to be distracted by the stunning view of her wet, glistening breasts, I sat up a little so as to lower her body into the water lest she become cold.

"I *do* love the way you love me," I insisted, reaching to caress her cheek with the back of my fingers. "I love that you are without artifice in your affections and that you do not hide your enjoyment of our lovemaking."

Her warm, brown eyes darkened at my words, her nipples peaking without a touch.

"I love that you wanted me when you thought I was just a maid and then a lowly member of the gentry," she whispered breathily. "That you were willing to give up everything for us to be together."

"I love your bravery and compassion." My thumb moved to stroke softly over her plump, lower lip. "Your determination and courage inspire me to be a better man."

"I love that I feel safe with you." She rose up on her knees and smoothed my hair back from my forehead, her beautiful breasts brushing against my chest. "I know that you will do your utmost to protect me...and our children."

"Always," I promised, capturing her mouth with mine. Surrendering to her wishes, I guided her hips as she slowly lowered herself onto my straining length.

"I love everything about you," I panted at the feel of her silken sheath squeezing me tightly. "Everything."

"I love everything about you, too," she moaned, raising and lowering herself in a slow, steady and overwhelmingly sensual rhythm.

Words of love gave way to moans of pleasure as our bodies moved together in the steamy water, tenderness and passion soon combining to create a private world of bliss.

We made love in the huge bath until the bubbles had dissipated, the water cooled, and our skin began to wrinkle, revisiting it numerous times over the next few dream-like days. The soothing warmth and spaciousness of the over-sized bath, not to mention the increased flexibility it's floatation properties allowed for, provided us with seemingly endless possibilities as we continued to explore and delight in one another's bodies. When the time came for us to embark on our trip to France, we were both quite reluctant to leave our new home, in particular the shared bed where

we'd loved one another with exquisite thoroughness. But we needn't have feared.

Every aspect of our honeymoon exceeded our expectations...from the carriage journey, during which we finally got to fulfil the sensual fantasy that our previous encounters had inspired, a surprisingly light-hearted experience where we'd teased one another about the remote but dreadful possibility of an accident leading to our discovery whilst fumbling beneath our clothing to find a way to come together with the least amount of discomfort; the boat crossing when, thankfully, neither one of us suffered from *mal de mer*, and we slept little but made the very most of the night spent in the gently rocking bed of our sumptuous stateroom; our leisurely journey across the French countryside, enjoying the sights, indulging in the delightful cuisine, and staying in comfortable inns and grand manors; to days spent exploring the sights, sounds and treasures of Paris and nights confirming the capital's reputation as the city of love.

Relaxed, contented, and with a smile permanently etched on my face, I'd never known such happiness. My wife's serene demeanour and perpetually doe-eyed expression assured me that she was similarly affected, her need to be in almost constant contact with my person mirroring my own desires perfectly. Whether by the linking of our arms or the subtle press of her hand against mine when we were in public; the positioning of her body close to mine so that our thighs brushed against one another when walking, dancing or seated; or the undisguised love, longing, and desire that shone from her eyes and drew me to her with an invisible yet tangible connection...we were as one.

The undeniable physical compatibility that we'd first discovered during the initial, illicit days of our relationship continued unabated, our passion for one another without parallel, not that my attraction to Bella was limited to her gentle beauty and sensual nature alone. To my intense satisfaction, my young wife and I enjoyed a true meeting of minds. She was my partner in every sense of the word...my help-meet...my heart.

We finished the season in town, revelling in our newlywed status and the indulgences it allowed and celebrating her father's marriage to my aunt, and my sister's betrothal to my closest friend. They and the rest of our extended family group—my father, step-mother, cousin and his notably improved wife—would be joining us in a few weeks' time for an extended house party at Masen Park. Our plan was to enjoy one another's company without the stresses of the city and ever-present press, and for our guests to assist me in presenting Bella to the local society. But first I intended to introduce my wife to her new home, our staff—many of whom she was already acquainted with and had travelled on ahead of us from London—and to enjoy the absolute pleasure of her uninterrupted company.

Topping the rise that brought Masen Park into sight, my eyes fixed on my bride as I nervously awaited her response to my country estate...the home where we would raise a family together.

"Oh, Edward," she gasped, lifting up from her seat beside me in the open landau to gain a better view. "It's so lovely."

"Not as grand as Worthington Hall, of course," I acknowledged.

"Which is a *good* thing," she stated wryly, her gaze taking in the sweeping drive, manicured lakes and gardens, carriage house, expansive stables, and the elegant three storey cream stone and marble mansion that sat proudly overlooking the estate. "It's *perfect*," she whispered, and my smile broadened.

"As are you," I murmured, drawing her back down beside me and into my waiting arms.

Turning to grace me with one of her stunning smiles, she captured my waiting lips. Unperturbed by the fact that our public display of affection was witnessed, not only by our driver and footman but by the sundry gardeners, farmworkers and tenants who'd come to view our arrival, we shared a tender kiss as our carriage continued on its way towards our new home and the joy-filled future that awaited us.

~AFL~

Oh, I'm going to miss these two. I have to admit that I didn't want Lordward's and Adorabella's honeymoon to end, but next up we get to view their Happily Ever After with lots of glimpses into their future together. If there are any particular scenes that you'd like included, let me know, and I'll see what I can do. ;)

xxx TLSue

Freedom

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I just can't seem to let go of the characters in this story!

Thank you so much for letting me know the various scenes you'd like to see. There were so many excellent ideas, and because I can't quite bring myself to say goodbye to this story just yet, I've decided to write a few more chapters to cover everything...and no, they won't all be lemons!

Thanks Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro for beta'ing so well and so quickly! You are both just wonderful. :D

Disclaimer: Just a reminder that this story is set well before women's liberation and the Feminist movement, so please don't be too hard on Bella's approach to resolving marital conflict. Open communication and assertiveness are all very well, but feminine wiles are pretty effective, too!

Updated: Sunday, July 1st, 2012

Words: 3499

AFL Ch 70

Freedom

BPOV

For someone who had not originally placed much importance in the keeping of his wedding vows, Edward proved determined to honour both the letter and the spirit of the promises he'd made. I wasn't sure if it was due to the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that we'd been required to overcome to reach this point in our lives, or if he was motivated to make up for his initially less—than—respectable intentions. But our marriage revealed a side to his character that was both admirably steadfast and intensely considered.

The hallowed description of love that had been read from Corinthians at our nuptials was not empty words to Edward. Patience, kindness and forbearance were virtues he expressed towards me on a daily basis.

My hand and heart were well and truly won, but his courtship of me continued unabated. Showered with flowers, gifts and words of affirmation, along with his undivided and most attentive presence, I felt saturated by love...overwhelmed by affection. My heart was continually full, and honouring my vows to love, cherish, respect and in all ways consider my husband's wellbeing above my own were welcome tasks that I applied myself to with vigour.

Not that he didn't occasionally drive me to distraction.

A wonderful, handsome, passionate man whom I adored beyond reason, Edward did, however, have the tendency to be just a tad controlling.

His protectiveness was understandable considering how close he'd come to my loss, not to mention how fiercely he loved me...his heart practically beating in time with mine. But it could be somewhat stifling, especially when I wanted to do something as simple as see to our tenants' welfare, or attend an appointment at the parish to discuss the plans we had for opening another charitable home, and Edward acted as if I were planning a foray into enemy territory. My excursions into the local community were prepared for with the same attention to detail as a military exercise, so insistent was my husband that I be adequately protected. And a visit to the markets wasn't to be considered under any circumstances without his personal escort...not that I could blame him in that particular regard.

On the bright side, it did mean that I was regularly afforded the pleasure of his company, as he was loathe to delegate my protection to others.

I mostly found his vigilance endearing; the way he watched me unfalteringly when other gentlemen were present, his eyes guarding me from a distance. But there was no disguising the flame of jealousy that would flare in his eyes if I was paid too much attention by a member of the opposite sex whom he deemed untrustworthy, which unfortunately appeared to include any gentleman outside of our immediate circle of family and friends. He had no cause to doubt the strength of my devotion, and to my relief, his concern was never in regard to my faithfulness.

"You've nothing to worry about, my love," I'd assured him after his fierce glower had thoroughly intimidated a few of our younger male neighbours at the first party we threw to introduce me to the local society as his wife . "I only have eyes for you."

"It's not *your* eyes I'm worried about," he'd growled, tugging me to him and claiming my mouth with his lips in a kiss designed to brand...and reassure. I'd rolled my eyes in exasperation but foregone with arguing the point at the time, too intent on enjoying his attention.

Later...*much* later...I broached the subject again.

"Edward, you *do* know that you have no cause to doubt the strength of my devotion?" I murmured as we lay entangled in one another's arms. "You do *trust* me, don't you?"

Rolling to face me, he gently cupped my cheek. "Of *course* I trust you," he declared. "My concern is never in regard to your faithfulness, it's just..." Groaning, he reached to tug his hair with his hand.

"It's just everyone else you don't trust me with," I muttered wryly.

"Ahhh...Bella, I'm trying not to make you feel smothered, to give you the freedom and space you need especially when you're here at home. But I almost lost you, and I know I wouldn't survive if anything were to happen to you."

My expression softened at his impassioned words. "Sweetheart, there are no guarantees in this life, but I can assure you, I'm perfectly safe now that I am your wife. The locals adore you. You're their hero...improving work conditions in the mines, factories farms, creating work opportunities, including them in the decision making. There's not a one of them that would harm a hair on my head."

"Sweetheart, you are the entire *nations* hero," he retorted. "Cousin to the King, your virtual rags-to-riches story, not to mention your charitable work." He counted on his fingers. "But that doesn't mean there aren't those who would do you harm or try to take advantage of your connections...and champions."

Sighing, I reached to brush his crazily tousled hair back from his forehead, realising there would be no softening of his resolve.

"You're not going to relent on this one, are you," I murmured, and he shrugged.

I considered arguing further, but, in truth, I could not fault his motivation...or his logic. His actions were but a part of his possessive, protective and highly passionate nature...not that his sometimes overbearing ways weren't a source of considerable frustration to me in the early days of our marriage.

Stubbornness, I'd been reliably informed by both Esme, Penelope, and virtually every wise and experienced lady whose opinion I'd heard expressed on the topic, was an unavoidable male trait, and Edward could in no way be found lacking. Fortunately, his tendency to blindly assume that he knew best in all matters, solely by virtue of his gender, was counterbalanced by his desire to please me...and his

susceptibility to my wiles.

Of course, my intention was not to undermine his authority as head of our household, but we were not many months into our marriage when I discovered that a well-placed hand on his arm, the slight tilt of my head so that my eyes viewed his through a veil of lashes, and a sweetly spoken entreaty invariably brought about a softening of his occasionally militant stance.

Who was I to ignore such an advantage?

"Let me think about it," he would murmur, his tone mellowing from his previously harshly worded command, and quite magically, his emphatic rejection of my suggestion would transform into a "yes" or at the very least an acknowledgement that my opinion had merit and was worthy of consideration.

Consequently, when it came to resolving conflict with my husband, my greatest concern was hiding my smile at the success of my subtle manipulations...

...or possibly not so subtle, as there *were* a number of occasions when Edward would whisk me into his arms, call me a "Minx," and then exact retribution for my impudence in a most satisfying manner.

To our neighbours, tenants, workers and staff, Edward epitomised all that was to be admired in a noble lord: exemplary character, sober judgement, and uncommon sense. If overprotective of his young bride, and somewhat effusive in his displays of affection, these were considered minor flaws that could be excused in a newly married gentleman, in no way detracting from his personification of propriety.

While I didn't disagree with this assessment, to my profound gratitude, there was another side to Edward that he kept solely for my enjoyment. What those outside our inner circle were unaware of, and those within only in part, was that the man who had thrown caution, respectability, and nigh on sanity to the wind to secure my position in his life was still very much in evidence.

Edward might have learned the error of his ways in regard to the sensitivities of the feminine gender and the true value of fidelity, his compassionate and loving nature by no means feigned, but there was no denying that a decidedly virile and dominant male resided beneath his respectable exterior.

I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Edward assured me that he felt the same about me, rejoicing that the passionate

and highly responsive woman he'd chosen for his mistress was as much a part of my disposition as the decorous young bride endeavouring with all earnestness to become a marchioness of whom her husband could be proud.

Marriage to Edward suited me on numerous levels. I basked in his affection, blossomed under the mantle of his unstinting praise, and relished the exceptional freedoms I was allowed: whether to pursue my art in the sunlit studio he had commissioned for my use, to ignore society's strictures and indulge my passion for baking alongside my dear friend and family retainer, Chef Louis, or to befriend those I genuinely cared for regardless of their class.

Angela was far more friend to me than servant, and I preferred her company to almost all of the young society ladies to whom I'd been introduced. Sadly, there were limits to which events I could include her...not that she ever seemed to mind.

Such a variety of activity filled my days. We entertained our family and friends during the extended house parties for which we became famous—our hospitality and the eclectic grouping of guests we chose to invite, focusing more on what an individual had to offer by way of intellect, creativity, or social conscience than mere birthright setting us well apart from the norm.

Engaging in and improving our local community, working to improve our estates and the lot of those for whom we were responsible, and advancing the political and social causes we supported were duties important to both of us. Of course, we devoted time to more personal matters, visiting with our family and friends, travelling abroad—something for which we both developed quite a passion—and indulging in more leisurely pursuits...Edward with his horse-breeding programme and gardening, me with my art and cooking, and both of us with our reading and oft-times heated discussions.

Our days were coloured with warmth and purpose, but the gold thread that wound its way through the rich tapestry of our lives was the deep and abiding affection that we could not help but express for one another...and the joy we found in each other's arms.

If I'd harboured any fears that the man I'd first fallen in love with—the one who set my heart racing with his commanding presence—had somehow been muted by the respectability of wedlock they were quickly dispelled. One particular event set the tone for the rest of our marriage, a memory I cherished...

On the second day of our honeymoon, we luxuriated once more in the truly decadent bathtub of our new home. Taking turns, we soaped and rinsed each other

clean, a playful endeavour that caused laughter to fill the air. But then the tenor of our touches changed from teasing to intimate, our exclamations of joy quieting and intensifying to those of shared passion and pleasure. With my arms resting on the wide rim of the bath, Edward took me lovingly from behind, his hands holding my hips and pulling my body back onto his with slow, sensual movements aided by the buoyancy of the water.

To say that I enjoyed making love to my husband was a considerable understatement. Whether performed with loving tenderness, surprisingly playful enthusiasm, or almost ferocious eroticism, the variety of positions he introduced me to were a cause for perpetual delight.

But this was a definite favourite.

His body surrounded me, his hands alternating between cupping and caressing my breasts, teasing the nipples to taut peaks so that I moaned and pressed against him, and reaching down between my thighs to help bring me to shuddering completion with his talented fingers, my cries and Edward's groans sounding loudly in the tiled room.

Edward's assurance that he'd ordered the staff to stay well away from our wing of the house unless specifically summoned was a considerable relief, as I seriously doubted our ability to stifle the noises our lovemaking elicited.

After gently drying one another off, my shaking legs causing me to appreciate the strength of Edward's steadying hands, we lay sprawled atop the bed in naked abandon. Cuddled close, we were both utterly spent...for now. In time, my mind wandered to a particular lovemaking technique that Edward had employed on occasion when we were at Worthington Hall, to great satisfaction on my behalf and a surprising degree of obvious enjoyment on his...considering the method.

"Edward?" I queried cautiously, rising to sit beside him with only long locks of my steam-dampened hair for modesty.

"Yes, my love," he murmured, peering up at me from beneath dark, heavy lashes, his fingers continuing to trail softly up and down my arm despite my change of position.

I hesitated to continue, and Edward was soon distracted by the sight of my bare breasts, his free hand rising to cup one creamy orb as he rose up on his elbow to bring his mouth within reach of the rapidly peaking bud. Leisurely he laved his tongue around the aureole for several enticing swirls before drawing the nipple

between his lips to suckle against the roof his mouth. Moaning, I reached to stroke my fingers through his hair, holding him in place as he continued his expert ministrations, my breath coming in quickening pants.

When after a few long and lovely moments, Edward withdrew and lay his head back upon the pillow, eyeing me questioningly, it took me a moment to recall what I'd been about to ask him.

When I did, I blushed, an altogether incongruous response considering our current occupation.

"You were going to ask me something?" he whispered, reaching to capture the hand that plucked nervously at the sheet and entwining our fingers together. Raising our joined hands to his lips, he kissed my knuckles one by one, gently suckling before moving on to the next.

My moan turned to a chuckle, and his eyebrows rose.

"You keep distracting me, so I can't think straight," I chastised.

"And the topic is...*sensitive*?" he intuited correctly.

I nodded, my eyes skittering nervously away from his sea-green gaze and momentarily landing on the source of my curiosity. His member twitched, immediately beginning to lengthen and harden under my perusal, a process I found both fascinating and intensely arousing. Squirming a little at the pulsing warmth that flooded my lower body, I slowly returned my eyes to his.

"You know you can ask me anything," he murmured huskily.

Taking a deep breath, I summoned my courage, though my voice was decidedly tremulous when I spoke. "Do you remember the times when you...when you put your mouth on me?"

His eyes widened, and his chest rose as he drew in a sharp breath. "Of course I remember," he breathed, rising up on his elbow again to draw me closer. "I've been remiss in offering that service, but it can be quickly rectified...if you so desire." He finished a little uncertainly, his brow furrowing as his eyes dropped to where I'd pulled my lower lip between my teeth.

"That's not what I was going to ask," I whispered.

"I thought you liked it when I did that?"

"Oh, I did," I assured him earnestly. "And you have my permission to do so again whenever you desire, but..."

"But?" he prompted.

I couldn't keep his gaze and ask my question, so I reached to run my hands through the light coating of soft curls on his chest and studied my fingers.

"I was wondering if *that* is something a man would enjoy having a woman do to him." My eyes rose tentatively to view his shocked expression. I almost retracted my words, but then I noted how his eyes had darkened almost to black, his nostrils flared and his jaw tightened as he swallowed repeatedly. "Is that something that you would like me to do to you?" I breathed, my voice the barest of whispers.

"You would be willing?" His voice rumbled from low in his chest, his quickening breaths matching my own pants.

"Very willing." I nodded, my eyes slowly trailing over his beautiful, masculine form until they reached his now fully aroused member before quickly returning to his eyes. "But only if you want me to, and only if you won't think badly of me because of it. I am in no doubt that it is not something a lady of my station would normally do for her husband, but I'm more than willing to do whatever would bring you pleasure..."

"Would it?" I breathed.

Edward's eyes rolled back a little in his head, and groaning loudly, he pulled me down to lay across his body. Grasping my hand in his, he moved it so that I could encircle his throbbing length.

"I'll take that as a yes," I chuckled softly, and his chest shook with his own laughter.

"It would give me indescribable pleasure," he murmured, rolling us to our sides so that both our heads rested on the pillow. "And I can assure you, I would not now or ever think badly of you for doing that for me, or anything else that we might do together...but only if you are willing."

"I don't actually know what to do," I admitted shyly, blushing anew.

"I could guide you?" he offered, his expression as hopeful as a schoolboy sniffing around for treats in a kitchen.

"Well, we both know that I'm a very quick learner." I smiled, stroking his length with my hand from the thick base to the now rather wet tip. "And I'm willing to apply myself quite assiduously to my studies."

Edward swallowed hard but appeared lost for words. Encouraged, I sat up once more, kneeling beside him and applying myself to the issue at hand. First tucking my hair out of the way, I took the initiative to lean down and kiss the tip of Edward's member, running my tongue over the broad, smooth head before suckling it ever so gently.

His taste hit my mouth, salty and more than a little bitter, and I sat back, licking my lips and considering my opinion of it. It wasn't *terrible*, but I wasn't certain how I would feel about having my mouth filled with the unusual tasting fluid. Deciding that if I swallowed quickly it shouldn't be a problem, I turned to Edward and smiled, looking for further instruction.

His mouth opened and closed several times, but all that he managed to utter was a garbled groan. Taking his response as confirmation that the job had been well begun, I returned to the task at hand...and mouth.

With my hand grasping his shaft, squeezing firmly in upward strokes to meet the downward bobs of my mouth, I closed my lips over his sculptured head and suckled it into my mouth as far as it would go. Running my tongue around the soft rim and in particular up and down the exceedingly sensitive opening proved quite a success, and Edward moaned loudly, his hips bucking beneath me.

I smiled and sucked him deeper into my mouth, swirling my tongue and swallowing around him. He began to thrust upwards, ever so gently, so with my hands keeping rhythm with his movements, and my lips and tongue working to bring him pleasure, I made love to Edward with my mouth.

"Bella...Bella...Bella..." he panted over and over again, his hands alternating between clutching at the bedclothes and stroking my hair, and back and arm...anywhere he could reach. Just when I thought he was close to his peak, he tangled his hands in my hair and gently urged me to lift my head.

"Don't you want to finish in my mouth?" I asked, eagerly aroused and surprisingly close to my own release. "I don't mind," I assured him, more than a little curious to experience such a thing.

Shaking his head, he quickly lay me back on the bed, spreading my legs with his thighs and thrusting inside me with both practised ease and urgency.

"Not this time," he breathed harshly against my ear as he began to move insistently inside me. "I need to be inside you...like this."

I wrapped my legs around his waist and urged him higher. "Whatever pleases you," I cried, tilting my hips and arching my back in time with his thrusts.

"You please me, Bella," he moaned, his breath coming in gasps. "Only you...always you."

Pleasure pulsed through us like a living, breathing entity—the embodiment of the love and desire we felt for one another—and we reached the peak together, crying out as bliss overwhelmed us both.

While I doubted I would ever completely eradicate my temerity, Edward's encouraging response to this most intimate of acts caused my confidence to grow immeasurably. Not only was it a truly wonderful experience, but it heralded for me—for *us*—the beginning of a new and lasting freedom in our relationship...the freedom to be who we were with one another without fear of scorn or censure and the sure knowledge that we truly were one in spirit, soul, and body.

~AFL~

Sigh...such lemony fluff, or should I say bubbly lemons? Some drama, resolutions, family time and even alternative POVs ahead...and at least one more lemon. Carriage ride anyone?

xxx TLSue

PS: Lots of people have been asking if I plan to write a sequel for A Forbidden Love or Once Bitten, my vamp tale which is also coming to an end, but I'm afraid the answer is no. My plan is to tie up all the loose ends and give us a look at some of the highlights of the coming years, but I won't be jumping too far ahead. I personally don't like seeing couples I've come to care about going through ageing, illness, death and loss. Argh! I've got enough of that to deal with in my own life! I want to remember them blissfully enjoying their HEA in their gloriously good-looking prime.

Besides, I've got a couple of other stories keeping me awake nights in their eagerness to be told...

Appreciation

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have merely attempted to pay homage to her lovely characters, swooning repeatedly in the process.

I have a scary/marvellous announcement to make.

This week I was contacted by an editor from a real live publishing company, asking me if I would be interested in submitting an original story for possible publication as a book and e-book for international marketing and distribution. To say that I was gob-smacked is a considerable understatement! They like my stories, and they think that I could potentially do well in the mainstream market writing historical and/or paranormal romantic erotica- which freaked me out a little bit. I didn't realise that's what I was writing, and I don't think I'll mention that part to hubby!

The down side to their exciting offer is that they would prefer I didn't post the story as a fan-fiction first. Apparently it takes a lot to 'de-Twilight' a story, and there are legal implications. Plus, I am aware that some readers get very upset when a story is 'pulled for publication'. Their suggestion is that I write both FF and for potential submission until I see how I go. I'm happy to do that, but I did find it difficult to keep up with writing two stories this last year. In fact I promised, vowed and had tattooed on the inside of my eyelids that I would never attempt something so foolish again!

However...I have written well over 500K words in the last year (no wonder I nearly burned out - the entire Twilight book series is only about 590K!) and they only want me to write 100K max for submission. So, I should still be able to manage both. My plan after A Forbidden Love and Once Bitten are both completed in the next couple of weeks is to post a couple of shorter stories I've been working on (one is a vamp/AU that I began for a competition and have expanded, the other is Rose's and Emmett's story), so I promise not to abandon you guys. I'd love to hear what you think of this development. Sorry for the long AN.

Thanks, as always, to my lovely betas, Chloe Cougar and Squeaky Zorro.

Updated: Saturday, July 7th, 2012

Words: 3665

Appreciation

EPOV

There was something about a long carriage ride that inspired my wife to heights of ingenuity. Ever since I'd admitted to her that my mind had been filled with lascivious thoughts the night after I'd rescued her in the markets of Worthy, we'd not managed a journey of any great distance without her finding her way onto my lap.

Admittedly...that was usually my doing.

The night of the King's ball, when Bella had been introduced to society as both the Sovereign's relative and my fiancée, the hoops and petticoats beneath her stunning gold gown had effectively prevented our taking things beyond a few tender kisses...that and the knowledge that our time was short, and her father would soon be re-joining us.

On the first leg of our honeymoon journey, we'd finally managed to take things further. But, while enjoyable, it had been a somewhat awkward and decidedly light-hearted affair—traditional fashions not particularly suited for the occasion. Reaching the conclusion that some ideas were better left to the realm of the imagination, we'd resigned ourselves to finding other ways to pass the time whilst travelling...at least, I had.

My highly creative wife was not so easily defeated and had applied her considerable intellect to solving our dilemma. On the journey to spend our first combined Christmas with our newly extended family, she put her plan into action.

After exhausting all the travel games she'd acquired for the purpose and having read to one another until our voices were weary, I assumed we would spend the rest of the journey to the inn where we would spend the night in desultory conversation...but Bella had other ideas.

Leaving her place at my side, she first double checked that the door was locked and then lowered the curtains over the windows.

"Bella?" I quirked a brow, puzzled by her actions. She didn't normally worry about darkening the carriage when taking a nap.

Taking a seat on the bench opposite me, she reached down to untie and remove her short travelling boots, and realisation dawned that she had something other than an afternoon rest in mind. She would normally just lean her head against my shoulder.

My eyes fixed on her plump lower lip which glistened from where she'd slowly swiped it with her tongue, then they followed the movement of her fingers as they released the buttons fastening her pelisse one...by...one... With a shrug, the garment slid from her shoulders to reveal a gown styled in a manner I'd not seen before.

Loose and flowing, with a low-cut bodice that gathered below her breasts, it did not pull in tightly around her waist in the usual fashion nor appear to be dependent on layered petticoats or constricting corsetry to give it shape.

"Bella?" I repeated, my voice rasping hoarsely when she slid the gown's puffed sleeves off her shoulders, leaving them beautifully bare. "Won't you become chilled without your coat?"

"Not if you keep me warm?" she replied, a question in her soft and sultry voice.

"Of course." I nodded, my breath coming in quickening pants when she came to stand in between my thighs.

"And I can do the same for you if you'd like to remove your own coat. It is rather...restrictive." She raised one of her beautifully sculptured eyebrows, and I swallowed hard. Even in the faint light, I could see the blush that stained her cheeks, reminding me of the innate innocence and vulnerability her deliciously bold actions sought to mask. Determined to convince her of my appreciation for her efforts—and reward her courage—I moved as swiftly as the fashionable cut of my coat allowed, struggling out of it and then reaching to grasp Bella's hips with my hands, drawing her closer.

The fabric of her gown slid easily over her silky skin, and my fingers pressed into her flesh unhindered.

"You're not wearing any petticoats?" I murmured, my eyes shooting to her face. "Or corset?" I added, my hands moving higher to circle her waist.

"Or chemise...or drawers for that matter," she whispered, leaning forward and exposing her lovely cleavage to my avid gaze.

"Hell and damnation," I muttered, and Bella giggled, her blush deepening.

"Forgive me," I spluttered, feeling both discomposd and aroused by the idea that my typically decorous young wife had the temerity to embark upon our journey wearing nothing more than a glorified negligee and winter coat for modesty.

"Alice has been eager to try the new fashions and urged me to support her in doing so. It's very comfortable," she murmured, placing her hands on my shoulders to balance herself as she climbed up onto the padded, leather bench seat and straddled my lap.

"Won't you get cold wearing such a flimsy gown?" I mumbled, knowing it was my duty to protect her in all ways, including from the elements, though thoroughly delighted by the feel of her barely covered body beneath my hands.

"One is supposed to wear a flesh-coloured stocking suit beneath the lightweight gown to keep from freezing," she explained absently. Her focus was on removing my cravat, a deed she accomplished with little expertise but considerable tenacity. "The fashion is reminiscent of the Grecian style of dress but taking our less clement, English weather into account."

"Oh," I muttered dumbly as she applied herself to unbuttoning and removing my vest and opening my shirt. Her sweet warmth pressed against my groin as she wiggled and squirmed with her efforts.

"Oh," she echoed upon baring my chest to her appreciative gaze.

Embarking on a gentle exploration, her hands brushed over my skin, their touch feather-soft at first but becoming firmer as she stroked and caressed my quickly warming flesh.

My groan was low and guttural.

"You like that?" she murmured, as her fingers traced patterns in the fine hair upon my chest and then trailed a path down to the waistband of my breeches. "My hands on your bare skin?"

"You know I do..." I gasped.

"I'd like it, too," she breathed and reached to undo the ties that held the front of her gown closed, the ribbon loosening and the silky fabric slowly parting to reveal her bare breasts.

I stared, enthralled.

"Touch me," she pleaded, and I gladly obliged.

My hands rose to cup the creamy globes and tease the pert, pink buds with my forefinger and thumb, squeezing and tweaking until she moaned and arched against me.

"You do like that, sweetheart, don't you?" I whispered against her lips before trailing kisses on a steadfast path down the sweep of her neck to the valley between her breasts.

I took first one and then the other sweet nipple into my mouth, suckling until she cried out in pleasure, her hands cradling my head and holding me in place.

In response, she unfastened the buttons on my breeches, releasing and stroking my achingly hard length until my groans threatened to drown out her cries.

Sliding my hands from her breasts to her waist, then down over her hips and thighs, I found my way under her gown. Continuing on the journey, I pushed the material out of the way with my thumbs, exposing her damp curls. Teasing them for a time with my fingers, I softly stroked the hidden nub until she gasped and writhed against me.

"Edward," she panted and then rose up on her knees before aligning her slick entrance with the head of my throbbing length. With my hands cupping the soft, round curves of her bottom to guide her movements, she lowered herself onto me, joining us intimately.

Groaning, I held her body still, needing a moment to regain my control. Her expression filled with understanding, she leaned in to place a tender kiss on my lips, her beautiful breasts brushing my chest and sending a shudder right through me.

"How I love you," I murmured, staring deeply into her desire-darkened gaze. "You are everything to me, Bella, everything."

"As are you to me," she breathed, her voice a husky whisper.

"Thank God for that," I declared with feeling, and she chuckled softly, the movement sending delicious ripples through us both.

"Ride me?" I encouraged, my words more plea than command.

"Oh, yes," she sighed, and with her hands on my shoulders, she obliged, rising and

lowering herself on my aching length, her silken sheath squeezing me tightly. I stared in awe of her beauty, but then she whimpered in need, arching towards me, snapping me from my passion-induced daze. With a groan, I captured one of her swaying nipples with my mouth, sucking and teasing the tender bud before worshipping at first one breast and then the other.

I lost all awareness of time as she rode me in rhythm with the rocking of the carriage, her wondrous cries sounding sweetly in my ears.

The enormous Christmas tree at Worthington Hall blazed with the light of a myriad candles, their golden glow reminding me of the way the flame from our carriages' brazier had illuminated the red in Bella's long, brown hair. My eager hands had dislodged the pins that held it artfully in place, causing the curls to tumble around her in disarray...something for which she'd scolded me in earnest when it came time to reorder our attire and exit the carriage. But it had been worth it.

Lost in the sweet memory, my eyes were captivated by the crystal globes that adorned the tree, their pearlescent sheen bringing to mind the way Bella's skin had shimmered in the firelight while she'd taken me on a long, slow ride to ecstasy.

"Round, soft, and perfect," I murmured, momentarily forgetting time and place, my mind filled with the recent memory of Bella's beautiful breasts in my hands...and mouth.

"Do we want to know what that comment is in regard to, or do we risk your formidable wrath by inquiring?"

I startled, the burn in my cheeks alerting me to the inconvenient blush that Jasper's words had triggered. The growl that erupted from my throat was an altogether automatic response as there was no cause for alarm or retaliation. Both Jasper and Emmett knew better than to disrespect my wife...and I had come to trust that their regard towards her was genuine.

"Ah, don't tease him, Jazz," Emmett defended with a grin. "He's merely ruminating on the considerable joys of matrimony...or reminiscing over that rather remarkable soufflé Uncle's chef conjured up for dessert. Not only was he completely lost in thought when we approached, he was practically salivating. "

"Well, it was a very tasty soufflé," I admitted dryly. "Though I'm fairly certain the credit for its creation should rightly go to Bella and not Chef Peters. She disappeared into the kitchens almost as soon as we arrived this afternoon and

returned smelling of sugar and lemons."

Jasper chortled. "So I take it that she was the inspiration for your comment, one way or another?"

My laughter joined theirs, and then as one, our eyes sought and fixed upon our respective wives.

Beauteous creatures, all three, in their jewel-coloured taffeta gowns, they sensed our eyes upon them and turned to meet our admiring gazes.

While my primary focus was my beloved girl's loving recognition of my attention, peripherally, I took note of the bright smile Alice bestowed upon Jasper, her husband of three months. They'd married at the end of the season in an extravagant affair that *almost* overshadowed Bella's and my own nuptials. While I struggled to accept that the young sister I had felt responsible for and worried over from the time I was just a lad was now a married woman, with all that entailed, I did my best to hold my hypocrisy, tongue, and reactions in check. It was necessary for my peace of mind, however, to avoid contemplating the reason Alice now glowed with the same happiness and contentment that shone from Bella's face and simply be grateful that she was undoubtedly enjoying her role as Jasper's wife.

Still a little disbelieving of the almost miraculous change that had been wrought in my cousin's wife, I could not deny that Rose's eyes were not only trained on her husband, but they were also entirely devoid of spite, disdain or disinterest. The transformation that had occurred in her demeanour during the time she and Emmett were at his estate in Scotland had been decisive, the change in her attitude and manner quite astonishing. While I doubted the acerbic edge to her nature would ever be entirely eradicated, gone were the bitter jibes and cruelly cutting tone that had characterised her previous interactions. For the first time since I'd known her, other than during the short period when she'd acted to secure Emmett's attention, she treated her husband with respect and what appeared to be genuine affection.

Unable to restrain our curiosity, Jasper and I had broached the subject with Emmett, eager to know the methods he'd employed to bring about such a remarkable improvement. Unsurprisingly, Emmett had remained quite tight-lipped on the subject, merely stating that he and his wife had come to an understanding. Servant's gossip, relayed to me by my equally intrigued wife, had revealed that a shared bed was part of their new arrangement, and while puzzled as to how he'd accomplished this turn of events, I couldn't have been happier for my cousin.

I had great admiration for Emmett's tenacity and strength of character. He'd

never lost heart, never wavered in his feeling for and devotion to his wife no matter how ill she'd treated him or how soundly she'd rejected his advances. Yet now that he was no longer the passive recipient of Rosalie's disdain, he did not exploit the change in dynamic to take revenge or umbrage. As ever, his tone and manner towards his wife was unfailingly kind, but there was no mistaking his rediscovered air of confidence and authority.

While not one to gush or simper, I noted with satisfaction on my cousin's behalf the times when Rosalie instigated contact with him and the way she eyed her husband with both respect and admiration.

On the odd occasion when Rose reverted to her previous rude or cutting manner, rather than publicly shame her, Emmett would request a private audience, leading to the return of a chastened but unbroken Rosalie, her manner pleasingly modified. I'd even heard rumour that she had apologised to a staff member, admitting to having overreacted in her response to what was a minor mistake, though that was something I would probably need to see with my own eyes to believe.

"Well, I think it's wonderful," Bella informed me after Rosalie offered a far more heartfelt and seemingly sincere apology upon than the one she'd given prior to our wedding not long after our arrival at Worthington. Immediately setting aside her wariness, Bella had been eager to encourage a friendship with the woman who had previously tormented her.

"You really are the most forgiving creature," I murmured while nuzzling her ear. "But do be cautious. Only time will tell if the change in Rosalie's demeanour is lasting or merely some sophisticated ruse whose purpose is yet to be revealed."

"Oh, you," Bella harrumphed indelicately. "You're such a cynic, too often believing the worst of people," she'd accused, and I'd laughed aloud, pulling her with me to lay sprawled across *our* shared bed.

We'd begun quite a trend, with Angela informing Bella that half of every suite of rooms at Worthington Hall was unoccupied, both of our fathers, Jasper, and Emmett having made the same request as I had upon our arrival...for only the master bedroom to be made up.

"I'd say it's because I am a good judge of character," I offered, rolling to pin her giggling form beneath me, "but it is difficult for me to defend that position when I was so easily fooled into believing that you were a mere servant. Though I do think the accusation of cynicism is a tad harsh, considering I was willing to do whatever it took to have you in my life."

Bella's laughter faded at my words, and all thoughts other than pleasing one another fled from our minds.

"Time to open our gifts," Alice chimed, drawing me from my pleasant reverie. I strode to where Bella was standing, her eyes having darkened at the look I'd given her while caught up in the memory. Ignoring propriety, I drew her against my side and nuzzled her throat just above where the Masen rubies nestled around her neck.

"Edward," she murmured, her words more sigh than rebuke. "You keep me under a perpetual blush with your improper attentions."

Glancing around, I was unsurprised to see four other couples engaged in similarly inappropriate displays of public affection, so rather than relenting, I took the opportunity to steal a quick but tender kiss.

"You are my life, and I love you, which is just as it should be," I whispered into her ear, and she melted against me, willingly taking a seat exceedingly close to my side while Alice distributed the gifts.

The other couples seated themselves similarly, with Aunt Penelope's two boys seated eagerly at hers and Sir Charles' feet. They'd been given permission to remain with the adults past their bedtime and to receive one gift each before their nanny would be taking them up to bed.

Whether expensive jewels and gold or silver accoutrements, or simpler gifts of hand-knitted scarves and caps, lace shawls, books and trinkets, the presents that were exchanged were all given with forethought and from the heart.

Bella smiled indulgently at the sapphire necklace, bracelet, and earrings I gave her, refraining from mentioning that she already owned more jewels than she could possibly wear in one lifetime...her words, not mine. The matching gold cuff-links, tie-pin, and fob-watch she gave me were as equally unnecessary but as graciously received.

It was only when the grander gifts had been exchanged, the boys had been bidden goodnight, and the other couples were reminiscing over glasses of eggnog, that I quietly handed Bella my main gift. Worth far less than the jewels I'd had personally commissioned, its value was in the sentiment.

"What's this?" she murmured when I passed the plainly wrapped parcel to her. "Another book?" she laughed, her eyes flittering to the collection that had piled up at her side, her love of reading well known amongst the family.

"Take a look," I replied, the huskiness of my voice giving away the gift's importance.

Bella's smile faded, and she eyed me curiously before carefully removing the string and paper to reveal a leather-bound, professionally printed journal. Her eyebrows rose in surprise, but then she read the gold-embossed lettering on the front, and a soft gasp escaped her lips.

French Cuisine, adapted and illustrated by Isabella Swan, it read, with the year printed beneath.

"Oh, it can't be," Bella breathed, reverently turning the pages. "All the recipes from the journal...the ones I translated into English. You've had it made into a recipe book!"

Opening the pages, her eyes widened further to see many of the sketches she'd drawn in the margins of her translated recipes illustrating the pages, along with her own words, explanations and additions. I'd even managed to discover some original recipes of hers from Chef Luis and had included them in a special section towards the rear of the book.

"This is just the first edition of a small run," I advised her quickly, addressing my fear that she might be secretly disappointed that I hadn't included her in the process. "You can rewrite, add illustrations and recipes, redo the whole thing if you like. But the publishers are convinced it will be a best seller. They suggested I use your maiden name so that the focus would be on the content and not your connections."

"Oh, Edward," she cried and threw herself into my arms, causing me to sigh with relief.

"You really like it?" I asked, unnecessarily, if the tears coursing down her cheeks and her incandescent smile were anything to go by.

"Like it? I love it!" she exclaimed, hugging me again and then eagerly showing it to the rest of the family. I'd kept it a secret, and they all expressed their approval and admiration, Sir Charles the most visibly affected.

"You do realise, you'll never get her out of the kitchen now," he offered gruffly to hide his surfeit of emotion.

"Excellent!" Emmett proclaimed. "I volunteer to be the taste tester."

"Emmett Cullen, if you develop a paunch I will be most displeased," Rosalie scolded, the laughter that filled the room tinged with relief that her words were said in jest and no little surprise at the degree of affection and intimacy they revealed.

Snaking an arm around his wife's waist, he pulled her to his side, his eyes shining with love. "Never fear, my dear," he assured her. "Your wish is my command."

"Oh, pfft," she harrumphed, her cheeks colouring with a highly uncharacteristic blush.

"Any requests for tomorrow's morning tea?" Bella interjected, eagerly flipping through the pages and continuing to ooh and ahh at each discovery.

"Sweetheart," I chuckled, and she looked up to eye me curiously. "I think the kitchen, and *you*, may be a little busy tomorrow."

Her brow furrowed for a moment.

"It's Christmas Day," I reminded her, and her blush rivalled Rosalie's as the room filled with good-natured laughter.

It was only later in the privacy of our room that I raised the issue of her delicious baking.

"Any guess what I'd like you to bake for me sometime *after* Christmas?" I murmured, nuzzling her neck.

"I have a fair idea." She snuggled closer, basking in the afterglow of our second bout of lovemaking since arriving earlier in the day.

"Chocolate croissants," we said in unison, sharing a smile at the memory and the knowledge of how far we'd come since the day I'd summoned the new pastry chef to my office to offer my appreciation for *his* talents.

~AFL~

le sigh...

Not long to go now. I'll try not to drag it out for too long, but I'd like to try and include all of your suggestions in regard to tying up loose ends and showing Edward's and Bella's future. I was going to include a peek into Emmett's and Rose's journey to Scotland and how they came to their

understanding in this chapter, but their story grabbed hold of me and kept getting longer and longer. I now plan on completing and posting it as a short story once AFL is finished. If there are any other AFL characters you'd like to hear more about, let me know and I'll see about writing them an outtake or even their own short story. I was thinking it might be nice to hear how Angela and Ben overcome their issues to find their own HEA (Happily Ever After).

Thank you so much for your continued and very much appreciated support for my stories. I'd love to hear what you think of my exciting/scary news.

xxx TLSue

Misbehaviour

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm a little giddy over sharing this silly, sexy chapter. I do hope you all enjoy!

Thank you so much for all the best wishes and encouragement everyone has sent me for my potential publishing endeavour. I won't be pulling either of my fanfics, and I do plan to keep posting on FFn and The Writer's Coffee Shop under the same pen-name - when I get my act together and get my stories posted over there! If the original manuscripts the publishers have asked me to write and submit are accepted (one a historical romance in the vein of A Forbidden Love and one based on an original paranormal romantic series I'm keen to explore) then it will still take at least a year to publish. So...I'll let you know how it all goes.

If you'd like to be kept up to date with other FF or any original fics I may get to publish, you might like to add me on twitter (at twiloversue) or add me to your Author Alert list. I don't get upset if people 'de-alert' me - LOL! - so you don't have to worry about that if you change your mind. :D

Phew...sorry for the long AN again.

Thanks to my wonderful betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for all their help and support.

Updated: Sunday, July 15th, 2012

Words: 5355

AFL Ch 72

Misbehaviour

BPOV

"Edward, do you have a moment?" I asked, interrupting him in his study at Masen Park. It seemed appropriate for me to share my wonderful news with him in this room, as I had good reason to believe that it was on the very desk where he now worked that this particular part of our journey together had begun.

"Of course, sweetheart." He put the estate papers he was perusing aside and turned to face me, drawing me to rest against his legs. "I have as many moments as you need. You know that."

Smiling at his declaration, I took a seat in my favourite place, on his lap. With his hands holding me around my waist, I linked my fingers behind his neck and gazed into his beautiful green eyes, instantly mesmerised. Even after a year and a half of marriage, I was still awed by this too handsome, too wonderful man...not to mention the astonishing fact that he was all mine.

Though I was going to have to learn to share.

Savouring the moment, I leaned forward at the same time that he did, our mouths brushing softly together for a tender kiss that sent a thrill coursing through me. I'd never seriously worried that I would grow tired of Edward's kisses or lovemaking, and so far, my confidence had proved well and truly justified. Sometimes it seemed as if I wanted him more each day, and thankfully, the feeling appeared to be mutual.

"There was something you wanted to tell me?" Edward murmured, nuzzling my neck with his lips.

"More in the way of an announcement," I admitted, and he stilled before pulling back to meet my nervous gaze.

"You saw the doctor?" he murmured hoarsely.

"And the midwife." I nodded, smiling. Edward had insisted I get more than one opinion, though I'd refrained from mentioning at breakfast that the two were visiting me this morning as I didn't want him to hover.

"And?"

"*And* you and I will be the proud parents of a hopefully healthy baby boy, or *girl*, in late spring, early summer of next year."

"Hopefully?" He pounced on the word as I knew he would, and I reached to gently stroke his cheek.

"Both the doctor and the midwife said they believe that the baby is fine," I assured him. "I'm just being cautious as it is still early. We do have seven more months to go."

Rosalie and Emmett had lost two babies early in her pregnancies before she was safely delivered of a beautiful blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl just two months earlier. If nothing else, their experience and life in general had taught me to be pragmatic.

"But the baby's fine; *you're* fine?" Edward persisted, shifting a hand to place it gently over my stomach.

"Yes, the baby and I are both fine," I declared firmly.

"And the delivery?" His eyes measured the distance between my hip bones just as they had multiple times a day since I'd missed my monthly courses some weeks prior. Thankfully, over the previous eighteen months, my figure had matured as Edward had hoped it would, my hip measurement growing by almost three inches and giving me a far more womanly shape. But Edward had wanted to wait a full two years after our marriage before trying for a baby, and he feared that our pre-empting the plan could lead to tragedy.

"I am a fit, healthy, and extremely well-cared for young woman, and neither the doctor nor midwife could see any reason why there would be complications," I paraphrased.

"Ye're not a verra robust lass, and I'd like to see a bit more meat on ye bones. But ye're sensible and, from what I've heard, not afraid of hard work, so I'm sure ye'll be birthing a bonny babe without too much fuss," were the Scottish mid-wife's exact words, but I hesitated to report them in full. The last thing I wanted was to give Edward an excuse to coddle me any more than he already did.

"We're going to have a baby," Edward whispered. Wonder filled his gaze, his expression awestruck. I smiled, eagerly anticipating his answering grin, but his brow suddenly furrowed, and my own face fell.

"We're going to be parents. *I'm* going to be a father." There was no mistaking the fear in his tone, and my heart melted.

"A *wonderful* father," I assured him. "Kind, caring, involved. Our child...our children will have parents who love them dearly."

"They won't be abandoned in the nursery, only brought out once or twice a week for a formal visit with their mother or left wondering if they've somehow displeased their father as he they see him so rarely," he added with vehemence, and my heart ached for the lonely little boy he must have been.

I hugged him tightly, pleased that we were on the same page when it came to the rearing of our children. We'd discussed it in detail, and once more, we would be going against convention. Edward was in full agreement with my plan to care for and nurse our baby in the same manner in which my parents had raised me.

Having essentially escaped from the strictures of formal court life to live amongst the peasant and working classes of rural France before meeting and marrying Papa, my mother knew which model she wanted to follow. Rather than situate it in the most remote location of the house, she had the nursery located next to hers and Papa's room. And while she wisely accepted assistance when required, she chose to nurse and mother me herself. Her actions were considered somewhat scandalous at the time, but she weathered the storm and lived her life true to her values and the desire of her heart.

I planned on following in her footsteps.

"You're really going to nurse our babe yourself?" Edward queried and not for the first time.

I nodded, and he let out the breath he'd been holding.

"That's something I should very much like to see," he murmured huskily, his eyes dropping to the bodice of my gown.

Rolling my eyes, I tilted his head back up with a finger under his chin so that our eyes could meet, mine rueful and his a tad chagrined.

"I would have thought you'd had your fill of gazing upon my naked breasts," I admonished him lightly, my tone decidedly teasing.

"Never," he countered. "Though my desire to see our babe at your breast is not entirely puerile," he defended. "There is something about the thought of *my* wife nursing *my* child that stirs very primitive instincts in me."

"Oh," I whispered, my heart melting at his words. "Considering that we were engaged in a rather primitive act when this particular babe was conceived, I suppose that is understandable."

"Since when have you considered our lovemaking primitive?" Edward's brow arched in query.

"Since I am fairly certain that I became with child the morning we were acting out

my rather base fantasy...that's when," I retorted, and Edward's eyes widened. A slight blush stained his cheek at the memory of an occasion that we'd both thoroughly enjoyed, even if our actions had been a tad shocking.

"Here...on my desk?" he rasped, and I nodded.

"Well either then or the night before when we were acting out *your* fantasy," I murmured. "I'd assumed it was the beginning of the safe time, but then my courses never came, and when I checked my diary, I realised I'd become muddled. You don't mind, do you?"

"Mind? I'm thrilled that you're going to have my child." Edward beamed, the grin I'd been waiting for finally appearing. "But I do own to feeling rather relieved it is not necessary for us to reveal the finer details of the babe's conception. It will be difficult enough explaining to our children the circumstances surrounding their parents' meeting!"

Cuddled close on Edward's lap, I luxuriated in our good fortune and allowed myself to revisit the memories of when we decided to enact the dreams we'd had before our wedding...memories I would have treasured regardless, but that now contained an added, precious depth.

Two months earlier...

"Darling?" Edward queried, coming to embrace me from behind when I was brushing my hair in the mirror. He'd joined me in my dressing room when I went up to change for dinner. "Would you do me a favour and wear a particular dress to dinner this evening?"

My eyes met his in the mirror, surprised. "Of course, but which dress and why?" I puzzled as this was not a typical request.

"The plain, dark blue one you wore to the village markets in Worthey." The low, husky tone of his voice sent shivers down my spine, his eyes darkening as he pulled me tighter against him.

"Why would you want me to wear that particular dress?" I murmured, knowing full well but wanting to hear him confirm that we were finally going to do something about fulfilling a fantasy of his that he'd mentioned to me on more than one occasion. Life had been wonderful but often terribly busy since we'd wed. Family, friends and our many commitments took up much of our time, not to mention the grand tour we'd taken across Europe this past summer with Jasper and Alice, with

other members of our family joining us for different legs of the journey.

It was lovely to be back at Masen Park, the busyness of the London Season and the somewhat disappointing parliament sitting—where the Lords had still refused to pass the anti-slavery laws we continued to lobby for—now behind us. With no visitors or major social engagements pending, we were looking forward to simply enjoying one another's company for a while.

"As far as I'm concerned, we're already living our dreams," Edward whispered close to my ear. "But there are a couple of specific ones I'd like to make a reality if you're agreeable?"

"More than agreeable." I snuggled back against him, wondering if we could skip dinner as my appetite for food had been supplanted by an altogether different hunger.

Chuckling, he nuzzled against my neck. "Excellent. Dinner will be served in our private sitting room in twenty minutes," he instructed and left me to my preparations.

A bemused Angela had clearly been let in on Edward's intention and had the blue gown pressed and ready for me to wear along with a familiar plain, golden yellow ribbon. Leaving my hair loose around my shoulders just as I had that day, I used the ribbon to tie two side pieces back from my face, surprised by how young and innocent the style made me appear.

"Have a lovely evening, Bella," Angela teased, and I rolled my eyes at her.

"Oh, I'm sure I will," I countered and we both burst out laughing. I was so glad I'd finally convinced her to call me by my first name rather than m'lady all the time, our friendship having gone from strength to strength since my marriage. Having her and Ben accompany Edward and me on our trip across Europe had cemented all our relationships. Though they both continued to be employed in our service, Ben having risen quickly to a position as senior horseman and Angela as my companion along with her duties as lady's maid, we had a lot in common with the young couple and were very glad of their friendship.

Unexpectedly nervous, I let myself into the sitting room to be met by a surprisingly accurate recreation of the private dining room from the inn at Worthey. The dream Edward had shared with me in the garden at Cullen House immediately came to mind, and my mouth went dry. Edward was waiting by the fire, and desire clenched pleasurably in my belly when he quickly crossed the room to escort me to

my seat at the candlelit table.

"M'lord," I greeted demurely, unsure how accurately Edward wanted to replay this scene.

"Bella," he replied, leaving me none the wiser. I knew how remorseful Edward was for taking advantage of me when I was both naive and in a vulnerable position. But while I knew my views would be considered shocking by many, I could not find it in my heart to regret the experience. Believing me to be a servant, Edward had taught me to love honestly and without inhibition, laying the foundation for the full and rewarding relationship we now shared.

Since this was just between the two of us, and I was equally eager to fulfil some of my own dreams and fantasies, I decided to confront the issue head on and attempt to steer the outcome in my preferred direction.

Fluttering my eyelashes, I looked up at him with my most doe-eyed expression. "M'lord, are you sure it is appropriate for us to be dining alone together like this, what with my being a humble servant?"

He blinked for a moment, appearing uncertain, but then he reached for my hand across the table. "Are you sure you're all right with this?" he asked in all seriousness. "I don't want you to think I am disrespecting you in any way."

"Why m'lord, I don't know what you mean," I murmured with mock shyness, my free hand fluttering in front of my chest. My hope was that staying in character would reassure him. "All I know is that if you hadn't come to my rescue today those horrid men would have treated me abominably. How can I ever repay you?"

Smirking slightly, Edward sat back, contemplating me from beneath hooded lids in a way that made my heart race.

"Why don't we enjoy our dinner, and then we can discuss my plans for you further. But rest assured, there are any number of ways in which you could express your gratitude."

"As you wish, m'lord" I answered demurely, and he rang the bell for our dinner to be served.

I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed when our butler did not try to emulate the character of the innkeeper but served our meal with his usual stoic reserve and exemplary manner.

Relieved, I decided with a quiet chuckle after giving it a moment's thought. It was bad enough that the staff talked amongst themselves about the fact that, even after a year and a half of marriage, Edward and I were still very much in the honeymoon phase. Fortunately, they were all staunchly loyal to us and willing to make allowances for our far from conventional and at times quite publicly affectionate manner.

Dinner was a slightly more haute cuisine interpretation of the plain fare we'd shared at the inn, and we savoured it while sharing a somewhat stilted conversation as I struggled to remain in character. Acting had never been my forte. I tried to recall the topics we had talked about *before* Edward discovered my true identity, and things flowed more smoothly when I turned the conversation to poetry and literature.

"You have a remarkably well-rounded education for one of your class, Bella," Edward complimented me, his tone wry.

"My father, the *innkeeper*, made sure I received the best tutoring money could buy, that I might make a good match," I teased, my tone gushing. "I'm sure he'd be thrilled to know I have gained the interest of a marquess!"

"I'll just bet he would," he groaned, and we both chuckled, falling out of character for a moment.

Once we'd eaten our dessert and the table was cleared, Edward instructed the staff that we wouldn't be needing them again for the evening. Instantly, the atmosphere changed, our expressions becoming serious. I wasn't sure if Edward would want to continue with the game we were playing, but once we were alone, he reached for my hand.

"When I think of what might have happened today." He closed his eyes, his expression as intense as it had been on the night we were re-enacting. "I can't lose you, Bella, and I can't stay away from you any longer."

"Then don't," I breathed, saying the words I'd wanted to say that night but hadn't dared.

With a gentle tug of his hand, Edward pulled me from my seat and towards him. I went willingly, coming to stand between his knees.

"I want you, Bella," he murmured hoarsely. "I've wanted you from the first moment I saw you staring down at me from the window at Worthington Hall."

"Then have me," I offered huskily.

"I'm not sure you understand what that entails," he answered darkly. "You're clearly an innocent."

"I trust you," I murmured, boldly placing my hands on his shoulders and leaning closer. "Whatever you want to do with me...or *to* me...is perfectly acceptable to me."

Groaning, Edward buried his face against my chest and hugged me close which seemed somewhat out of character for our little fantasy. But then he drew back, his features composed once more into the deliciously dark and dangerous expression that assured me the *game* would continue.

"What would you have me do, m'lord?" I breathed before deliberately moistening my lips with my tongue.

"Unbutton your dress," he ordered immediately, and I complied a little too confidently at first, then more tentatively when I recalled that I was *supposed* to be an innocent young maiden in the process of being seduced by an experienced and powerful man. A shiver ran through me at the thought, and I felt a flush of desire heat my blood.

"Anything else, m'lord?" I asked when my dress was completely unbuttoned and gaped to reveal my chemise.

"I'll take it from here," he answered, and proceeded to do so. Within moments, he'd pushed the dress and chemise off my shoulders to pool around my waist, my shoulders and breasts bared to his hungry gaze and hands and mouth.

If I *had* still been an innocent, Edward's passionate kisses and caresses would have given me quite the education...not to mention the surprise I would have received when a little later he urged me to stand so that he could divest me of both my dress, chemise and lacy bloomers. Just as in his dream, I was left wearing nothing but a pair of thigh high silk stockings and my slippers.

"Oh, Bella," he breathed, eyeing me hungrily before guiding me to straddle his lap.

His hands reached to fondle my breasts once more, cupping and caressing before he replaced his hands with his lips, urging me to rise higher so that he could kiss and suckle my naked flesh.

We both gladly gave up the pretence of my being an innocent when the time came for me to lower myself onto his waiting shaft as I seriously doubted that making love on a dining chair would have been the ideal initiation to the process. Our movements were a little awkward at first as gaining leverage was difficult in this position. But we managed, soon achieving a rhythm that was acceptable to us both. Panting with pleasure at the feel of his huge member moving deep inside me, his hands cupped my bottom to help lift and lower me as he thrust up to meet my downward strokes. With my hands tangled in his hair and holding his head in place, he took turns nuzzling and sucking first one breast and then the other until I cried out, coming undone around him and quickly enticing him to join me.

All in all, we thoroughly enjoyed our little re-enactment, gladly retiring to continue what we'd begun in our large and exceedingly comfortable marital bed.

The next morning, with my imagination—amongst other things—thoroughly aroused, I decided that I was in no hurry to see an end to our game-playing. As soon as Edward left for his morning ride, I hurried down to the kitchen and set about putting phase one of my plan into action. Once my deed was accomplished, I sought out Angela's company, to say hello and tease her a little about the events of the night before. She and Ben had finally announced their engagement after she'd begun opening up to me about the barriers that existed in her mind and heart when it came to physical intimacy. Letting her know that the physical side of a loving relationship could be fun had gone a long way to alleviating some of her fears.

"Do you still have one of your old maid's uniforms tucked away somewhere?" I queried, earning a startled look. I'd long since managed to convince her that, since she was primarily my companion, I would much prefer she dressed in everyday attire than a uniform. We were most conveniently of a similar size and build, and I'd gladly shared my ridiculously extensive wardrobe with her so that she had ample choice.

"Why do ye ask?" Thankfully, she sounded more curious than wary.

"Well..." I began slowly, not wanting to embarrass either of us with a too detailed explanation. "I'd like to borrow it, if I may, as I want to play a little umm...*game* with Edward that requires costuming." I finished on a brighter note, pleased with my inventiveness.

Angela's expression told me she wasn't fooled in the least, and this time, she was the one to roll her eyes.

"Please, don't tell me any more," she muttered, leaving me in my sitting room

while she went to fetch the uniform. "I really *don't* want to know!"

With my hair pinned up in a plain-looking bun, my uniform neatly buttoned, and short black boots on my feet, I looked the epitome of a modest young maid. The fact that I had chosen not to don a rather strategic piece of my intimate attire was neither here nor there...

Just before eleven I asked Angela to scout the hallways for me to make sure the coast was clear, and I made my way to Edward's study where I often joined him for morning tea. Once I'd snuck inside the door, I quickly locked it and slipped the key inside one of the ample pockets on my apron, before turning to face my, by now, bemused-looking husband to offer him a curtsy.

"Good morning, m'lord," I offered demurely, glancing to where the tea tray had already been delivered, my chocolate croissants clearly visible. My hope was that we could enjoy them together *after* my initial plan had been instigated.

"Please forgive me for being late. I know I promised that it wouldn't happen again, and you did say that I would be punished severely if I continued with my tardy ways. But please don't be *too* harsh on me, m'lord!"

Edward's eyes sparkled, and I could tell that he was forced to exert considerable effort to keep from laughing out loud at my outrageous over-acting.

"A prettily spoken apology, Miss Brown," he answered. "But it does not make up for the fact that you have kept me waiting...*again*."

I shivered at his deliciously severe tone and the hooded gaze he directed my way.

"I'll do anything to make it up to you, m'lord," I murmured, fluttering my eyelashes coquettishly.

A short bark of laughter escaped Edward's lips before he recovered his austere expression and beckoned me closer with a curl of his forefinger.

"That you will, Miss Brown," he promised. "But first, I'm afraid, must come the punishment I promised."

"Oh, m'lord," I cried, feigning tears. "Please don't chastise me more than I can bear."

Edward growled and reached for me, tugging me hard up against his chest.

"I warned you what would happen if you disobeyed me, so there's no point begging for mercy now."

His tone and expression were so severe that I felt a moment of apprehension. My heart raced as I became caught up in the game that was beginning to feel thrillingly and maybe a little frighteningly real.

"Umm...you wouldn't actually *hurt* me, would you?" I whispered, breaking character.

Edward's eyes widened. "How could you even ask such a thing?" he demanded, sounding more wounded than affronted. "I'd rather cut off my own arm that intentionally bring you harm. Surely you must know that by now?"

I felt a little foolish, and blushed brightly, something I'd been thankfully less prone to with the passing of time.

"Well, it's just that you are being so very convincing," I placated, and his expression lightened.

"I am?" he sounded pleased and waggled his eyebrows. "Well, maybe that's because I rather relish the idea of *chastising* the delectable Miss Brown on my desk, which is what I'm assuming you wanted?"

"Oh, yes please," I whispered, melting against him.

His face took on a sinister cast once more, his voice dropping impossibly deep. "Then stop interrupting me," he ordered.

I nodded dumbly, and in a flash, he'd spun me around so that my back was pressed against his front and the desk was before us. His hands moved to boldly cup my breasts through the thin material of my blouse and chemise, and his growing hardness pressed against me.

"You're in for it now, Miss Brown," he growled against my ear. "I will teach you to obey me if it is the last thing I do!"

"Oh, m'lord," I cried, thoroughly enjoying being dominated by my dark and dangerous lord. Pushing back to rub my bottom against his, by now, highly aroused member, I feigned ignorance of its import. "Are you sure it's safe to be carrying a weapon on your person at a time like this? It's not *loaded* is it?"

"Loaded and quite likely to fire prematurely if you keep that up, you little minx," he grumbled, and my body shook with suppressed laughter.

"How dare you laugh at me," he rebuked, capturing my hands and holding them together in front of me.

I instantly sobered. "Forgive me, m'lord," I whimpered, expecting and receiving no mercy.

"You shall receive my forgiveness when you have satisfied my desires, Miss Brown, and not before."

With one hand holding mine tightly, he used his other hand to roughly tug my blouse from the waistband of my skirt and slip his hand beneath. The chemise hindered him, and I was taken aback to hear the sound of the fine, silk fabric tearing as he fumbled to unlace it single-handedly.

"Damn," he muttered quietly. "I'll buy you a replacement."

"Think nothing of it," I whispered in return, gasping with pleasure when his hand slid through the hole he'd created in the fabric and reached my naked flesh. He fondled my breasts with bold and possessive strokes while his teeth nipped lightly at my neck and his erection pressed rhythmically against me.

If this was Edward's idea of chastisement, I'd have to displease him more often.

"You won't make me wait *too* long for my punishment will you, m'lord?" I whimpered with growing need as liquid heat pooled low in my belly. I was unsure if my question was in character or not, but quite frankly, at that point I didn't care.

"I wasn't planning on making you wait at all," he growled harshly in return, pushing me forward so that I was bent over the shiny surface of his desk, my weight resting on my elbows.

"Don't move," he ordered, removing his hands to tug at my skirts, lifting them high until my bare bottom was revealed to his gaze.

"Oh, Bella, you are a naughty girl," he murmured appreciatively. "And just begging to be chastised."

Laying a hand on each cheek of my bottom, he caressed them softly, cupping and moulding the soft globes beneath his fingers. Unable to resist, I moaned and

squirmed beneath his delightful ministrations.

But then he spanked me!

The tap was only light, with barely enough force to cause the mildest sting, but my shock was profound.

"Edward!" I exclaimed, looking over my shoulder.

"That's m'lord to you," he rebuked, his smirk unmistakeable. "Now hold still, or there will be more where that came from.

"But...but...you said you wouldn't *hurt* me," I cried indignantly.

"I didn't!" he rejoined, but then his brow furrowed and he stroked the place where he'd slapped soothingly. "Did I?"

"No, not really," I admitted. "You just gave me a fright."

"The look on your face is priceless," he chuckled, and it was my turn to scowl.

"Edward, you're spoiling the game," I hissed, and he quickly sobered.

"Silence, Miss Brown," he growled, holding me firmly with one hand at my bare hip while the other released his impressively aroused member from his breeches. With only the barest preparation—an intimate but almost perfunctory probe to ascertain my readiness—he parted my cheeks to expose my already pulsing sex, positioned the head of his erection at my entrance, and then thrust forward with almost aggressive determination.

I gasped, shocked by his sudden and remarkably deep penetration, but he gave me no time to adjust and quickly established a *punishing* pace.

"Oh...my..." I whimpered, my breath coming in quick pants as he thrust inside me repeatedly and with uncharacteristic force.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" he whispered leaning forward to cover my body with his, his mouth close to my ear as his hands captured mine.

"No...don't stop," I half-ordered, half-pleaded, falling out of character but too swept up in the pleasure of the extraordinary experience to particularly care.

Edward obeyed and continued to chastise me until my eyes rolled back in my head, and I was overcome with one of the most intense orgasms I'd ever experienced...and that was certainly saying something considering the heights of bliss my wonderfully attentive husband had brought me to on countless occasions. Continuing to move inside me until he'd milked my body of every last ounce of ecstasy, he held back from attaining his own release, apparently determined to *punish* me until I was reduced to a moaning, quivering bundle of satiation.

I vaguely recalled hearing his roar of satisfaction when he finally relented and allowed his body to seek its own pleasure, eventually coming back to reality to find myself being cuddled on his lap in his large, comfortable chair.

"So, Miss Brown," he murmured huskily when I blinked up at him, my dazed expression meeting his smug gaze. "Have you learned your lesson? Can I count on you to behave from now on?"

"Oh...quite to the contrary, m'lord," I sighed, snuggling against him. "I think you should be prepared for the fact that I intend to misbehave quite regularly in future."

two months later...

Finding myself in the virtually identical position after sharing with Edward our exciting news, I gazed up from my place on his lap to the portrait of the two of us that held pride of place over the fire. I'd painted it as a gift for his twenty-fifth birthday, the painting I'd given him for our second Christmas together having been such a wonderful success.

That particular portrait was a more formal piece of Edward alone, and he'd insisted on hanging it prominently in the grand entranceway where the portraits of his ancestors were displayed.

This painting of the two of us was of a slightly more relaxed composition than traditional—in keeping with our relationship in general—and showed me seated, with Edward standing behind me and to the left, one hand placed tenderly on my shoulder and a smile on both our faces. I'd left ample space around us for additions to our family as they arrived, the image my mind superimposed onto the painting of our as-yet-to-be-born baby resting in my lap one I looked forward to making a reality.

Scattered throughout the house were the paintings I'd done of other members of our families in their couples, or in the case of Papa, Penelope and the boys, family groupings. I smiled serenely at the thought of all the special people in our lives who

would love and welcome our child almost as much as Edward and me. Now all we had to do was wait and pray for his or her safe arrival.

~AFL~

I'd love to hear what you thought of Lordward's and Naughtybella's fantasy role-playing. Sorry I couldn't play it completely straight. Our adorable couple have come too far in their relationship to go to too dark a place, I'm afraid. ;)

xxx TLSue

PS - Only one more chapter to go (Yay! Daddyward ahead) and then I'll be taking a little break before posting the out-take/short stories featuring some of the peripheral characters.

PPS - Hey Katmom...Romantica enough for you?

Everlasting

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I have two completed fanfic tales under my belt, and a lump in my throat.

I can't believe I've finishes this tale...and on the same day that I finished my vamp story, Once Bitten. What are the odds?

Thank you so very, very much to my lovely betas, Squeaky Zorro and Chloe Cougar, for their amazing support and friendship. Thank you also to my wonderful readers, reviewers and supporters. Your encouragement throughout this long and at times angsty journey has been greatly appreciated.

Updated: Saturday, July 21st, 2012

Words: 3836

AFL Ch 73

Together

EPOV

"It's too quiet, damn it. I heard a few cries earlier, but now she's not making any noise. Why isn't she making any noise?"

"Would you rather she was screaming?" Jasper's tone might have been droll but the effect of his words was rather predictable considering the state of my nerves.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" I rounded on him, taking a break from my frantic pacing to stalk towards my best friend until he was backed up against the wall, his arms raised to ward me off.

"Nothing, Edward, nothing...now calm down." Jasper did his best to placate me, but I was beyond platitudes and virtually spoiling for a fight.

"I haven't seen my wife for a day and a half, and I'm bloody worried. Don't tell me to calm down!" I shouted before spinning to face the bedroom door when a flash of movement caught my eye.

"For heaven's sake, keep your voice down. You're upsetting Bella, and she has enough to deal with right now," Esme hissed, stepping through the door of *my* bedroom where *my* wife was currently labouring to bring *our* child into the world, a door that any number of people had entered and exited throughout the course of the day and well into the evening...everyone except for me, of course.

That assertion wasn't exactly fair, as other than the doctor, who had nothing more useful to say whenever I questioned him than that things were progressing normally, the only others allowed in to see Bella had been Esme, Penelope, and Alice for just a few moments. The latter had been visibly shaken when she'd last exited, which I attributed to her being four months pregnant herself and yet to experience childbirth firsthand.

Of course, I understood that a woman in labour had no desire to entertain male visitors, but I was her husband and the father of the baby being born. Surely that counted for something?

Groaning, I ran my fingers through my hair for the umpteenth time. Whoever had decided that a husband should be excluded from one of the most momentous events he and his wife could go through deserved to be shot, and then horsewhipped, and because he was no doubt long dead decades if not centuries prior, dug up, resurrected, and then killed again before being burned to ash once and for all, as far as I was concerned.

Spinning away from both Esme and Jasper, I stalked back to the stretch of carpet I'd claimed as my own and resumed my pacing. It was a pointless exercise, but I had no other way to expend the energy that hummed through my veins since a satisfying bout of fisticuffs had essentially been ruled out. If raised voices were enough to distress Bella—the very *last* thing I wanted to be party to—then an all-out brawl was undoubtedly out of the question.

"He's worried, and he can't understand why she isn't making more noise," Jasper offered by way of explanation when Esme asked what all the fuss was about.

"It's been almost twenty hours," I growled. "Most foals are born in less than an hour. If one of my mares is in labour for more than a few hours we know we're in trouble. You can hardly blame me for worrying. "

"Are you comparing Bella to one of your brood mares?" Esme demanded, her eyebrows raising archly.

"Of course he isn't." Carlisle came to my defence, having heard his wife's scolding

tone when he entered the room. He and Sir Charles had tried to encourage me to step out for some fresh air, but I wasn't and would *not* be going anywhere while there was the slightest chance my wife might need me.

"Just tell me how she is," I pleaded, turning to face the stepmother that I'd come to love and appreciate more than I could ever have imagined these past two years but could happily throttle at the moment for keeping me from my wife.

"She's mighty tired, m'lord," the midwife, a plump Scotswoman with an undeniable air of competence about her, admitted, poking her head around the door. "Yer wife's been working hard to bring yer bairn into the world, but first babes can take a long while, which means there's a lot more work ahead for the wee lass tonight. So if ye could stop distracting her with ye caterwaulin', it would be appreciated."

"Oh, God," I murmured, tears stinging the backs of my eyes as I was overwhelmed with remorse for my selfish actions and worry for Bella's well-being. "Please...just tell her that I love her, and I'm here for her if there's anything I can do to help...anything at all."

Sighing loudly, the midwife eyed me for a moment before looking back into the room, the partially open door effectively blocking my view. I heard quiet murmuring and then an announcement that I found myself acting upon before the words had even registered in my brain.

"Why don't ye come in and tell her yerself?" the midwife offered quietly. "She could do with some encouragement, but no fussin,' and no sayin' a word to upset her, do ye hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," I nodded dutifully, crossing the room in three long strides. But when it came time to walk through the door, I hesitated, needing to first wipe my sweaty palms on my thighs and swallow the lump in my throat.

"Edward?" I heard my beloved's voice calling me softly, and I was galvanised into action, quickly crossing the distance to kneel at the side of the bed.

She did indeed look exhausted, her lovely face paler than I'd ever seen it and dark rings circling her eyes. Her hair, which had been plaited to keep it out of the way, was damp with perspiration, and her hand when she reached for me trembled noticeably.

"I'm here, my love," I murmured, and she grasped hold of my hand as if she had no

intention of letting go.

"I'm sorry it's taking so long, but I'm just so tired, and my back hurts so very much," she whispered hoarsely, and I gathered her against me, rocking her gently when she broke down and cried against my shoulder.

"There, there, sweetheart, everything's going to be all right. I'm sure it won't be much longer," I promised, doing my best to hide my panic and searching out the midwife's gaze over the top of Bella's head. I wanted to take comfort from her calm demeanour, but a flash of concern in the woman's eyes and the slight shake of her head dashed my hopes that Bella's ordeal would soon be over.

"Oh, here comes another one," Bella whimpered as her entire body tensed with the contraction that quickly overcame her. I could feel the surface of her distended belly rippling as her body worked to push our baby out into the world. Laying herself back down, she tried to push as the midwife instructed, her hand gripping mine so tightly I feared the circulation might never return to my fingers... a small price to pay for being able to offer her support and hopefully a little comfort with my presence. After what seemed like an interminable length of time, but was probably only about a minute and a half, she sagged against the pillow, panting with the effort she'd expended.

The doctor, who'd been sitting quietly in the corner, came over to ask the midwife a question before returning to his position, and my brows raised in query.

"The babe's ready to come, but yer wife's not makin' much headway with 'er pushes," the mid-wife explained, my concerns increasing dramatically with the tone of her pronouncement.

"How long has this been going on for?" I demanded, albeit softly, not wanting to distress Bella who appeared to have fallen into an exhausted slumber.

"She's been pushing for a couple of hours now, which is a wee bit too long, I'm afraid," the Scotswoman admitted, her expression dour.

"Isn't there anything we can do to help?" I pleaded, and the doctor shrugged.

"First time mothers often have a hard time of it, m'lord. The Marchioness is a strong young woman, though I have to admit it is dragging on a bit long for my liking also...but there's nothing to be done about it, I'm afraid."

The midwife made a harrumphing sound, and I looked to her, something about her

stance making me think she was holding back from speaking her mind.

"Tell me...what is it?" I insisted.

"Well, the *doctor* says the best way for a woman to give birth is laying flat on 'er back. Makes it easier for the doctor when 'e needs to examine 'er and when it comes time to catch the bairn." She grimaced in Bella's direction. "But I hold to the old ways, and I think if we can get 'er more upright, it will get things movin'."

The doctor began muttering about modern practises and old wives' tales, but a quick glance at Bella, who'd begun to whimper and moan as another contraction inexorably built, made me think there was something to the mid-wife's logic. It made sense that Bella's back would be hurting with all the pressure bearing down upon it, and how on earth she was supposed to push the baby out from that angle was beyond me.

"Help me sit her up," I requested, and Esme, who'd been standing quietly to the side of the room, moved quickly to my aide. Before the contraction had peaked, we helped Bella to a more upright position, kneeling beside her on the bed to support her back while she bent her legs and pushed.

"Och, that's much more the thing," the midwife pronounced from her position between Bella's legs, observing the proceedings from beneath the sheet that covered her for modesty's sake...not that I gave a damn about such things at present.

My wife was clearly in trouble, and I would do whatever it took to make sure she, and our baby, were safe.

"Scoot her down to the end of the bed, and she'll be able to get even more upright," the mid-wife directed, and I quickly obeyed, mindful of Bella's whimpers of pain at being manhandled.

"I'm so sorry, love," I crooned. "It will only take a moment."

"It's all right," she whispered weakly. "It makes sense, and that last pain wasn't anywhere near as bad. I actually felt like I might be getting somewhere."

"Aye, ye are, lass...I mean, m'lady," the mid-wife encouraged. "A few more like that last one, and we'll have this bairn brought into the world safe and sound."

"Well, if my advice is going to be ignored, I might as well be leaving," the doctor

grumbled, and I speared him with a look.

"Stay," I ordered gruffly. "Bella or the babe may still need you."

Muttering under his breath, the doctor retook his seat, but I had no time to worry about his offended sensibilities with Bella tensing in my arms, another contraction imminent.

"I've got you, sweetheart," I murmured, supporting her slight weight with my arm around her back. She glanced up at me and nodded, a look of determination replacing the despair and weariness of but a few moments earlier. Taking a deep breath, she worked with the contraction to push with all her might, her groans of effort sounding far more purposeful than the whimpers of pain from before.

"Aye...that's it lass, I can see the top of the bairn's head. A few more like that will make all the difference," the midwife exhorted as Bella fell back against me, the contraction over and her energy spent.

The midwife's "just a few more", turned into another forty minutes of strenuous effort, but Bella seemed to be working *with* her body now and not against it. I was exhausted just watching her, every muscle in my body tensed in support of my young wife's arduous labour.

No matter how things turned out, this was going to be our one and only babe, I vowed to myself with grim determination. If she was ever willing to let me touch her again, which I seriously doubted considering the ordeal she was enduring due to *my* actions, then I would take multiple precautions to ensure she never became with child again. If this babe was a girl, then Emmett could be my heir. And if Rosalie's second child was another girl, then the entire inheritance could pass to some distant cousin or another or even back to the crown for all I cared. I would never willingly inflict such suffering on my wife again.

Forcing my bleak thoughts aside, I refocused on Bella's efforts, encouraging her as best I could with soothing strokes of her lower back and softly spoken affirmations.

"That's it sweetheart, you can do it," I murmured, and with an almighty push and the scream I'd been expecting but had yet to hear, the baby's head emerged. Panting and moaning softly, Bella fell back against my chest.

"Just one more, lass. Yer bairn's nearly here," the mid-wife encouraged, and Bella mumbled incoherently, almost spent.

"You're doing wonderfully, love," I crooned close to her ear, stroking and soothing her with my hands. Esme was crying, and truth be told, I knew I would be soon enough, but first we needed to get this baby out into the world and my wife on the way to rest and recovery.

I sensed the contraction building even before Bella stirred, and working together with Esme, we sat her forward, supporting her with our strength and our words as she gave one last monumental push. Groaning and straining with all her might, I felt surely Bella would be torn into two but then the babe slipped from her body and into the waiting hands of the midwife. Crying and gasping, Bella collapsed against me once more, while the doctor went about the business of tying off and cutting the umbilical cord before checking over the baby.

My concern was mostly for Bella who appeared utterly exhausted, but her attention was completely focused on the wet, messy, slippery-looking babe that was being examined by the doctor, squawling indignantly at the shock of being born. When the doctor was satisfied, the midwife bundled the babe against the chill night air while the doctor made the pronouncement.

"M'lord, m'lady, you have a fine son," he declared over the sound of our baby boy's strident cries.

"A son...we have a son," I breathed, while Bella and I smiled at each other through our tears.

"Can I hold him?" Bella asked, her arms reaching for our babe for the very first time.

"Just for a moment and then we'll hand him over to his father," the midwife advised. "Ye've still got a wee bit of work to do, and then we need to get ye cleaned up."

Bella nodded, but I could tell she wasn't taking much notice, her rapt attention on the squirming bundle the midwife placed in her arms. Carefully unwrapping the swaddling, we did what parents have done since the beginning of time and counted ten tiny little fingers and ten tiny little toes, awestruck, overwhelmed, and utterly smitten with our perfect little man.

"He's got your hair," Bella whispered, fingering the damp locks that even in this muted light clearly held a hint of red.

"He's got your eyes, well...the shape. We won't know the colour for a while," I

murmured, gently stroking the silky soft skin of his flush cheek. His little mouth opened, and his head turned in the direction of my finger.

"Poor baby. He must be hungry," Bella murmured and quickly opened the front of her nightgown so that, together, we could bring our baby to her breast.

It took a moment for both mother and babe to determine the best angle, and my throat tightened at the sight of our son's hungry suckles when he finally latched on to her nipple and began to nurse.

"Are you sure about this, m'lady?" the doctor interrupted. "It's really not seemly for a woman of your station to be nursing a babe at her breast. There are wet nurses for that purpose. You'll be housebound for months if you take on this task and no doubt end up worn down before your time."

"That will be all, doctor," I silenced him with my icy tone, not that Bella seemed the least bothered by his negativity. She'd made her decision, and I supported her wholeheartedly. Of course, we had a wet nurse on standby in case there were any problems or Bella needed assistance.

"I won't be pleased if I hear any gossip about the unconventional nature of my son's birth, in particular my involvement," I instructed the doctor. "Is that understood?"

"Perfectly," the man bridled. "Your confidentiality is assured, m'lord."

"Good. You may wait downstairs. My butler will see to your needs until I am available to speak with you further."

The man nodded stiffly and then exited the room, leaving Bella and I to alternate between gazing adoringly at our son and lovingly at each other. Then Bella's smile faded as another, though thankfully not quite as powerful, contraction tightened her still swollen belly.

"Time for you to show our son off to the family, my love," she murmured, passing the baby into my arms.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" I asked, reluctant to leave her.

"No...you've done enough." She smiled up at me once the contraction had passed, her expression tired but serene. "Thank you for being here, Edward. I don't think I could have got through it without you."

"Thank you for bringing our beautiful boy into the world," I murmured, leaning down to softly kiss her lips.

"You're weren't *offended* by seeing me in such a manner?" Her eyes dropped, insecurity evident in her voice, and I reached to stroke her cheek until her gaze once more met mine.

"You have never been more beautiful to me," I declared while holding our son tucked between us. "And I love you more than I would have thought humanly possible."

"All right ye two, that's enough of that for now," the midwife chuckled, ushering me towards the door with my son cradled carefully in my arms. "We'll let ye know as soon as we're ready for ye to return."

With one last smile for my beautiful wife, I went to introduce my son and heir to his extended family members. My only concern was that our fathers might be offended that we hadn't chosen to use either of their first names for our son, a promise to Bella's cousin, the King, taking priority.

All the family were present at the christening of Lord Anthony Edward Arthur George Cullen, Viscount Matthews and future Marquis of Masen and Duke of Worthington, a reverent and yet joyous affair. After the sumptuous luncheon at Masen Park that followed the service in the village chapel, I had the joy of unveiling Bella's latest painting to the family. It was actually one they'd seen before, the portrait she'd painted of the two of us that held pride of place in my study, but with one very important addition...our son nestled in her lap, resplendent in the lace christening gown that had been worn by generations of Cullens.

Despite attempting to hold firm to my avowal that we would only be having the one child, my primary concern being Bella's safety, two and a half years later the family was reunited for the christening of our second son.

My wife was undoubtedly braver than I, and when I would not be swayed, boldly took matters into her own hands, taking advantage of me in a moment of weakness when I was half asleep. Thankfully, Lord David Charles Carlisle Edward Cullen came into the world after a blessedly short and far easier labour, or so Bella avowed. Six hours still seemed like an inordinately long time for her to endure such suffering, though she insisted that I had a harder time of it than she did. Continuing with our habit of breaking with tradition, I stayed with Bella to support her throughout the birth this time, as I did when our lovely twin girls were born four years later. While both our sons took after me in appearance, Renee and Elizabeth were the image of

their mother with warm brown hair, beautiful big brown eyes and smiles that had both me and their older brothers wrapped around their little fingers within weeks of their birth.

Baby number five came as somewhat of a surprise five years later.

"A gift," Bella insisted despite the fact that it was our getting completely carried away during a long carriage ride on one of the rare occasions we spent away from our noisy, growing brood, forgetting both timing and precautions, that precipitated the babe's arrival. Another beautiful little girl to complete our family and keep me on my toes, Belinda had her mother's nose and chin but my auburn hair and green eyes...to Bella's open and my secret delight.

Bella's and my love for each other flourished along with our family, my pride in my wife growing with her considerable accomplishments. Her paintings graced our home and those of our friends and family as she accepted the occasional commission to paint their portraits also. Her French, English, and Italian cookery books were an extraordinary success, the proceeds from their sales going to the charities we supported. Her work with the young girls rescued from the city's brothels inspired our peers to perform similar acts of charity, though we seemed no closer to changing the laws that would make prosecuting the perpetrators of such evil practises possible.

The anti-slavery laws were eventually passed, which gave us all cause for rejoicing, but whilst young girls continued to be forced into prostitution, our work was far from done. While some aspects of our involvement with rescuing and providing for the girls was sobering, there was much cause for joy when we saw the smiles return to their faces as their lives changed for the better.

Our friends and families prospered also with nieces, nephews, and second cousins aplenty to keep our own children company, not to mention a half-brother for Bella when Lady Penelope surprised and delighted Sir Charles by providing him with an heir. Christmases were noisy, hectic affairs when we all came together, and we admittedly spent an inordinate amount of time travelling between each other's estates to celebrate birthdays and for house parties, but it was worth it. Our family, though separated by distance when we weren't all together in London for the season, was of one accord in both heart and purpose...and closer than ever.

While we had our fair share of obstacles to overcome, the occasional disagreement, and blessedly few dark days to endure, Bella's and my life together was filled with family, friends, laughter and above all...love, once forbidden but now freely declared, the most precious gift of all.

The End

See...I promised you guys a Happily Ever After! Please let me know what you thought of my not-so-little tale now that it's over.

Thank you all for everything!

xxx TLSue

Request and Announcement

My Dear Fan Fiction Friends,

I'm sorry I didn't manage to write the outtakes/future takes for my stories as I'd hoped, but life has been very challenging since I finished posting *A Forbidden Love* and *Once Bitten*. Those of you who read my stories as WIPS might recall from my 'blog-like' Author notes (I deleted the more personal comments once the stories were finished) that I've been having some health problems. For two years I've been battling GERD (Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease) and was repeatedly told by my doctors I needed to reduce stress. Last October, breathless, exhausted, suffering severe chest pain and losing my voice, I begged him to do some tests. A couple of gastroscopies and numerous specialists later, I learned I have a GIST (Gastro Intestinal Stromal Tumour). It's an extremely rare form of cancer, but the doctors are hopeful they've caught it early enough not to be too big a problem.

I also have two different neurological disorders: Spasmodic Dysphonia which causes the voice box to spasm and makes speaking very difficult and painful and DES (Diffuse Esophageal Spasm) an *extremely* rare and excruciatingly painful condition that makes swallowing an adventure sport. Neither condition is curable, and the surgery they want me to have to remove the tumour, correct the GERD, and attempt to ease the spasms in my esophagus (it's like the darn things trying to tie itself in knots!) is daunting to say the least. On the bright side, the doctors are no longer blaming my symptoms on stress!

My wonderful husband of thirty years this year (we're still crazy in love so it *can* last!) is incredibly supportive. But I've had to give up the job I love as a counsellor, and life is looking very uncertain.

The reason I've decided to let everyone know about my health problems is that many of you prayed for me when I was posting my stories, and I wondered—for those so inclined—if you would pray for me again, in particular for my upcoming surgery and that the cancer doesn't metastasise? Now that I can no longer work or talk on the phone for more than a few minutes, I'm also feeling a bit isolated and would love to hear from any of my TwiFic friends who feel like a chat.

The other reason I'm writing this letter is one I'm nervous to admit to, but here goes...

Having to give up my career has been very difficult, and though it is probably akin

to winning lotto, I am hoping to eventually earn some money from my writing. I've just completed my first original novel, an historical romance called A Perfect Love, and am ready to submit it for hopeful publication.

So...to my announcement.

I know I said I wouldn't pull A Forbidden Love to publish (ducks for cover), but my change in circumstances have caused me to reconsider. I think it has potential as an original story and would love to see it reach a wider audience. I'm in the process of 'deTwilighting', addressing the character and plot flaws, of which there were quite a few, cutting the waffle and repetition, of which there was way too much, and am reducing it down from a mammoth 250 thousand words to a more manageable 150 thousand. I'm not sure what I'll do with it once it's reworked, but I'll be taking A Forbidden Love down from Fan Fiction Net two weeks from now on February 24th, so I wanted to give anyone still reading a chance to finish.

I've been warned there are some people in the fan fiction community who get extremely upset when writers 'pull to publish', but I'm hoping they won't be too hard on me given my crazy situation. My husband is working all hours to keep us afloat, and I desperately want to help with the only means I have left to me...my writing.

My apologies to those I've offended for this decision to take A Forbidden Love down and rework it for publishing. My hope is you'll be able to appreciate my difficult position and afford me some grace. I'd like to say a huge thank you to all my wonderful readers for your support and encouragement over the past two years. Your prayers or best wishes for my upcoming surgery would be *greatly* appreciated.

I look forward to hearing from some of you for a chat.

Sue xx

(TwiLoverSue :)

PS: My stories will be published under the pseudonym Elise de Sallier, a variation on my grandmother's maiden name. I'll let you know if and when they're available for purchase. In the mean time, I've set up a facebook account for Elise DeSallier if you'd like to see what I'm up to. :D