

# *Stay by CuteMommias*

momma2fan

<http://storymaster.the-code-monkey.com/> (2015)

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Tags: StoryMaster, FanFiction.Net

O/S written with toocute24 for Breath-of-Twilight's Countdown to C-mas. When Edward enlisted, he never expected to meet the woman of his dreams right before he deployed. In order to save her from the heartache of losing him, Bella receives a letter from Edward, telling her not to wait and to find love... (More Inside). AH M for lemons and language.

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**Produced By: <http://storymaster.the-code-monkey.com>**

**On: 8/31/2015**

**Retrieved For: [momma2fan@gmail.com](mailto:momma2fan@gmail.com)**

**Story URL: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/8974252/>**

A/N — This O/S is a collaboration between [momma2fan](#) and [toocute24](#). POVs will alternate between Edward and Bella. EPOV is written by [momma2fan](#), and BPOV is written by [toocute24](#). Thanks for reading!

Disclaimer: We own nothing but the plot.

Entry for Countdown to Christmas 2012 — a Lyrical Melody

Rating: M

Pairing: E/B

Author's name: [CuteMommas](#) ([momma2fan](#) and [toocute24](#))

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Title: [Stay](#)

Summary: When Edward enlisted, he never expected to meet the woman of his dreams right before he deployed. In order to save her from the heartache of losing him, Bella receives a letter from Edward, telling her not to wait and to find love. Never one to give up, Bella vows that when Edward returns home, hers will be the first face he sees. After an injury that almost claims his life, Edward returns home, only to find himself on her porch, praying for the nerve to knock when the door swings open...

~~Stay~~

Dear Isabella,

As I write this to you, I can hardly believe my own words. I never expected to find you, or to fall for you so quickly and so close to my deployment.

I looked, but never found the one person that knows me like you seem to. Before I had ever even spoken a word, your eyes met mine and I felt like you could see inside my soul.

I want you to let me go, my sweet girl. It's not fair of me to expect someone as young and as vibrant as you, to stifle her light and wait on a man that may never come home. I would rather break my own heart than to leave yours bleeding if I were to die. You deserve the world, and that's something I can't give you right now.

Never forget that I do love you. You showed me more love in the last month than I've known in several years. Goodbye, Beautiful. I won't write to you again.

Love Forever,

Edward

I read over my words one last time before I sealed it up and added it to the rest of the outgoing mail from my platoon. I'm sure that the other men thought I was weak since I had tears in my eyes — a few even managing to escape — but I didn't

care. I had just let go of my heart, to fight in a war that no one wanted to be in.

~~Stay~~

It had been three weeks since he left. Three weeks of constantly checking the mailbox for a letter from him. Three long weeks of disappointment when each day, the mailbox would hold nothing but junk mail or bills. Tanya and Angela, my two best friends, had been trying to get me to go out with them the entire time, but I just couldn't. I wouldn't have been any fun anyway, because I'd be lost in my thoughts, thinking about the soldier I gave my heart to — the soldier that was now half a world away, fighting for his life and our country.

I didn't expect today to be any different. When I got off work, I went home to my little, two bedroom house, grabbed the mail, and headed inside. I didn't look through the stack right away, afraid of my neighbors seeing me break down again when there was no letter from my soldier. Once I was in my small living room, I slipped my shoes off and curled up on the couch to look through the mail.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw the envelope nestled in with all the junk. I had finally received my first letter, and I couldn't wait to read what he wrote. Without even hesitating, I tossed the rest of the mail to the side and slid my finger into the envelope to gently pry it open. I know most women would have just torn the envelope apart, but that wasn't me. I would cherish his letter always, including the envelope he sent it in.

When I finally read his words, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. How could he do this to me? How could he ask me to let him go and move on? I couldn't do that — I wouldn't! I'd only known Edward for about two months, and we'd been apart for almost half of that, but I knew he was my one — the person I was destined to spend my life with. He was my soulmate.

It wasn't until I looked at his letter more closely that I saw the runs in the ink — runs that were obviously caused by Edward's tears. Writing this letter hurt him probably almost as much as it hurt me to read it. From the moment I saw him, I loved him. Our connection was instant and unbreakable, and I wasn't going to let anything change that.

Edward may have wanted me to move on, but that was the last thing I wanted to do. I wasn't going to give up on something that was meant to be. I wasn't going to throw away true love because he was afraid I would get hurt, and I wasn't going to let him throw it away either. He may refuse to write me, and it was obvious he didn't want me writing him, but that didn't mean I was going to give up. It was then that I promised myself I would be there when he came home. It was then that I vowed to be the first face he saw when he exited that plane.

~~Stay~~

"Cullen, get your ass in gear and pay attention!"

"Sir, yes, Sir!"

I really needed to start concentrating or I was going to wind up dead. I was finding it extremely difficult, though. Every time I looked through my scope to take a shot, I saw Bella's face.

I could still clearly see how beautiful she was on the night that we met.

I took a pull from my beer and scanned the bar. It was the usual scene: officers and privates out to relax before the week began again. I was on my third pass when she walked in the door.

I slapped my hand on my buddy, Garrett's shoulder. "Dude! Check them out!"

"Damn, jackpot! Hey, Ben!" he shouted.

Ben sauntered over to us, leaving the blonde that he had snagged at the bar. "'Sup?"

Garrett and I pointed, and then watched as the three beauties glided past our table. I got a whiff of strawberries, and wondered which one it was coming from.

Ben's loud laughter brought me back from the heavenly sight. "You are on your own this time. Do you not know who that is?"

I shook my head and took another pull from my beer. "No. Who?"

Ben chuckled and shook his head. "The one with the reddish

hair is Tanya Denali. The shorter brunette is Angela Webber — Chaplain Webber's daughter. And the one in the middle is Isabella 'Bella' Swan."

Hearing that name caused me to spew my beer across the table. "As is General Swan's daughter?"

Ben nodded and I knew then that I was in deep shit.

"Cullen! Get your gear and get off my range! Don't come back until you have your shit together!"

"Yes, Sir!" I gathered my gun and stalked off, back toward our base camp. It had been over two months since I had sent that letter to Bella. Two months with no word from her. I knew that I shouldn't have expected her to write me, but a part of me was hoping that even though I let her go, that she wasn't letting me go. I guess I had hurt her too much.

I sighed and threw my shit in my barracks, then hit the showers, thinking of my brown-eyed beauty and the heartbreak I had caused. I could only pray that she was moving on and would be happy.

~~Stay~~

Three and a half months. That's how long it had been since I'd gotten Edward's letter — since he'd told me to move on with my life and let him go. Three and a half months of pulling every string I could to try to get some information on him...his whereabouts, or how he was doing. Three and a half months,



and I had turned up nothing. I was no closer to finding Edward than I was to winning a Nobel Peace Prize.

That was the reason I was sitting in the Starbucks just off base, waiting for my dad to meet me. My dad — General Charles Swan. The one man who could get me the answers I was so desperately looking for.

"Daddy!" I greeted him when he walked into the small coffee shop wearing his dress greens. He looked intimidating to the average person, but to me, he was a big teddy bear. I had always been a daddy's girl, and I planned to use that to my advantage.

"Hey, Bells!" he returned with a smile as he took his seat across from me. "I was surprised to hear from you this morning. What's going on?"

I smiled sweetly at him while batting my eyelashes. "Can't a girl call her dad and invite him to coffee without having an ulterior motive?"

Just then, the barista came up to the table and greeted my dad. "Good afternoon, Sir. What can I get you today?"

"Just a coffee, black," he answered dismissively. I had to stifle my laughter because Charlie Swan would never change. There we were, in the middle of a coffee shop that had who knows how many types and blends of coffee, and he ordered it as simple as he could. He was a creature of habit, and would never deviate from what he knew.

The barista left to get his drink after making sure I was still okay with mine. "Well, Bells, where were we? Oh, yes...I suppose you could call and invite me out without an ulterior motive, but hell would have to freeze over first." He laughed heartily at his own joke.

"Ha ha, Dad. Very funny," I deadpanned, but couldn't help the slight smirk on my face. "If you must know, I called because I need your help locating a soldier overseas."

His face got serious quickly. "Now, Princess, you know that would be abusing my authority. Who is it that you're trying to find?"

I fought back my tears as I looked at my father. "Edward," I admitted brokenly. My dad had met him once before he deployed, and didn't like him because of the fact he was in the army. I thought he was a hypocrite for feeling that way. After all, my dad was a General in the same army for Christ's sake.

Dad shook his head and looked at me with pity in his eyes. "How long ago did he deploy? Three or four months? Have you heard from him?"

"He's been gone since the end of January — just over four months. He sent me one letter that I got right after Valentine's Day," I explained.

He nodded and looked somewhat thoughtful. "And what did the letter say? Didn't he tell you where he was?"

I couldn't hold my tears any longer, and left unchecked, they started flowing down my cheeks. "He told me he wanted me to let him go, and that he wouldn't write me again. True to his word, I haven't heard from him since."

"Bells, honey, maybe he was trying to let you down easy. Maybe this is a good thing. You're a beautiful young lady and you have your whole life ahead of you. Why waste it on a soldier?"

"Because I love him, Daddy, and I want to spend the rest of my life with him!"

He started shaking his head in denial. "Bella, you hardly know him. You dated for what — a month before he was deployed? How do you know he isn't married and was just trying to get you in bed? How—"

"Daddy, stop! He loves me, too! He was trying to do what was best for me, but I'm not giving up on him. I refuse. With or without your help, I will find him!" I shouted.

"I'm sorry, Bells. You're going to have to do it without my help. Like I said, it would be an abuse of my authority and I just can't do it. Besides, I will not sit back and watch you get your heart broken when he doesn't come home, or worse, when he comes home to someone else. You're my daughter, Bella, and you deserve better than that."

I couldn't believe what he was saying. "How can you say that, Dad? How can I deserve better than someone who loves me

and makes me happy? Listen, I've got to go. I'll call you when I can." With that, I stood up and moved toward the door.

"I love you, Bells. Please understand that I'm doing this for you."

"Yeah, if you say so, Dad. I'll see you later."

I didn't give him a chance to respond that time, jetting out the door as quickly as possible. I knew if I stayed any longer, I'd make a bigger scene than I already had, and I didn't want to embarrass my dad, even if he had let me down.

I made my way to my house, pulled out some paper, and curled up on my bed to write.

Dear Edward,

I talked to my dad today. I asked him to help me find you, or at least tell me how you were doing, but he refused. He tried to tell me you didn't love me, and that I deserved better. He told me he didn't want to see my heart break if you didn't come home. He said some other things too, but I don't want to talk about it. I'm so angry right now that I can barely see straight. Why can't he see how happy you make me? Why can't he see that I love you and nothing is going to change that?

I'm so tired of writing letters that I can't send, but I'm not going to give up. I will continue to write them until the day I see you again, because Edward, I will see you again. I'm not

giving up even though you asked me to. I'm not moving on.

I miss you, Edward. So much it hurts. I feel like my heart has been ripped out of my chest and all I'm left with is a big, gaping hole. The only way it can ever be filled again is if you come home. Please. I need you to be safe, and to come home to me, where you belong. I love you, Edward, and I'm waiting for you. I'll wait forever if I have to, I promise.

Love Always,

Bella

~~Stay~~

I lay on my bunk and thought about Bella. I wondered what she was doing. It was summer now, and I couldn't help but picture her in a bikini, having fun on the beach with Tanya and Angela. It had been a little over five months since I had sent that letter — a letter that I would never have sent had it not been for her meddling father.

I frowned, thinking about the day that General Swan had found me on the PT course, running through some drills. It was a conversation that had replayed in my head a million times, and the catalyst to the life changing letter.

I ran the track while Ben clocked my time. I was trying to beat my record, and knew that I could do it as long as I concentrated on where I was running. I wasn't prepared to fall on my ass halfway around.

I looked up from my place in the dirt and found myself looking into the brown eyes of General Swan.

"Cullen?" he questioned.

I stood quickly and saluted my commanding officer. "Yes, Sir."

"You look different out of uniform. I almost didn't recognize you. At ease, Soldier," he saluted.

I put my arm down and faced the father of the woman I was falling in love with.

"Walk with me, Son." He turned and walked away. I looked back and waved at Ben, letting him know that I was fine.

"What can I do for you, Sir?" I asked with trepidation.

"You can stay away from my daughter."

I stopped in my tracks. "I'm sorry, Sir?" I wasn't sure that I heard correctly.

General Swan turned and looked me in the eye. "I think you heard me. I want you to stop seeing Bella. She deserves more in life than to get trapped in a relationship with a soldier. I want more for her than this."

"I would think that would be up to her, Sir." I was trying to be respectful, but he was pissing me off.

"My daughter is young and doesn't know what she wants. She

has been around the army her whole life and she deserves better. I want more for her than to resent the man she falls in love with, because I can guarantee you that's what will happen if you continue this relationship. She'll resent you for putting the army before her. She'll resent you for holding her back. She'll resent you for so much, and it will cost you both everything."

I knew that was why Bella's mother had left. I also knew that Bella resented her mother for leaving her and her father. I wish I knew that the General was wrong, but I didn't know for certain.

"I appreciate your concern, Sir, but I think that I will let Bella decide whether or not she wants me in or out of her life. With all due respect, it is up to us, not you." I felt brave for standing up to this man, but at the same time, somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind, I wondered if he was right.

I was still plagued by those thoughts when I picked Bella up later that night.

I got up to join my unit, still wondering if the General's visit wasn't to blame for my lack of faith in Bella's feelings for me. I was so caught up in my thoughts and memories that I never saw the sniper until I felt the bullet rip through my body. My last thought before I lost consciousness was of brown eyes, filled with pain and tears.

~~Stay~~

It had been about three weeks since I talked to my dad. He called me several times, but I didn't really feel like talking to him, so I ignored the calls. I was so mad that I didn't know if our relationship would ever be the same again.

What my dad didn't realize was that by telling me no, he only made my resolve to find Edward that much stronger. More than anything, I wanted to prove my father wrong. I knew why he thought the way he did; he didn't want things to end up like they had with Mom.

My mother left us when I was only five years old. She told my dad that she was tired of him putting the Army first, and that she knew he would never change. She was a callous bitch who walked away from us both because she was selfish. She wanted to live her life without being tied down by a husband or child. She resented my dad for getting her pregnant when she was so young. She resented him for not letting her get an abortion when she wanted to. She hated him for so many things, and she finally broke down and left, leaving me with him.

I would never do that though. I grew up in the Army, and I knew what I was getting myself into when I started dating Edward. I knew he felt an obligation to serve his country and I respected that, just like I respected my father for his service. I could never resent a man who chose to serve in the military. I wasn't my mother and never would be.

I spent the three weeks exhausting all my options when it came to finding Edward. I had friends, who were serving, and



they asked around, but no one had any luck. It appeared that maybe my father had spread the word not to help me, and that only served to piss me off more.

Angela and Tanya had stopped by earlier and demanded that I go out with them tonight. They told me I would be joining them for dinner whether I wanted to or not; I guess it was an intervention of sorts. They were tired of me moping around all the time and needed to see me smile again. I knew they only wanted what was best for me, so I begrudgingly agreed to go out with them.

At six o'clock, they both showed up at my door to pick me up for the night. We weren't doing anything too crazy, luckily — just going out to get dinner and to have a few drinks at the local Chili's.

We got to the restaurant and grabbed a booth in the bar. While we were perusing the menu, Angela's cell phone rang. Her eyes lit up when she looked at the caller ID, and she answered quickly.

"Ben! I'm so glad you called! How are things going over there?" she questioned the caller. Ben had been one of Edward's friends, and my ears immediately perked up. Angela and Ben had started casually seeing each other just before he shipped out with Edward. Why hadn't I thought about tracking him down? Maybe he knew where Edward was.

I tugged on my friend's hand, trying to pull her attention away from the man on the phone for a moment. When she looked at

me, I mouthed Edward's name to her and raised my eyebrows, silently asking her to question Ben about him. She could see the hope in my eyes, so with a heavy sigh, she nodded her head.

I listened as they talked for a few minutes before she asked the question I had been waiting for. "Ben, how's Edward doing?"

It didn't take long before her eyes grew wide and she responded to whatever it was that he said. "What the hell do you mean he was shot? Is he okay? When?"

Tears filled my eyes as an image of Edward lying alone in an Army hospital bed filled my mind. Tanya must have noticed, because the next thing I knew, she was pulling me out of the booth and into the restroom. Once the door closed behind us, I dropped to my knees and sobbed. Edward was hurt, and I didn't even know how bad it was. Even worse, I wanted to be there for him and I couldn't be because I didn't know where he was stationed or what hospital he was in.

Tanya pulled me to my feet and wrapped her arms around me, letting me cry into her shoulder for a good five minutes. She kept telling me it was going to be okay — that Edward was going to be okay — but I didn't know if I could believe her. She hadn't talked to Ben, so how would she know? What if he didn't make it? What if he never came home?

Those thoughts brought on another round of tears, so Tanya continued to hug me tightly as I ruined her shirt. Angela joined

us a few minutes later, and soon her arms were wrapped around both of us. When I finally pulled myself together, I asked the one question I needed an answer to. "Is he going to be okay, Ang?"

She pulled back and looked me in the eyes. "He lost a lot of blood, so it was touch-and-go for a while, but they think he's going to be fine. He's already showing improvement."

"How does Ben know so much, Ang?" I asked, only just realizing that he would have to be somewhere close to Edward to have all that information.

"I think we need to go back and sit down to have this conversation," she told me. "A drink or two might be helpful, too."

~XOXOX~

"Is my dad in?" I asked Sue. She had been Charlie's secretary for about eight years, and was all smiles in a dreary world.

"Yes, Dear. Is he expecting you?"

Instead of answering her, I walked to his door and let myself in. My conversation with Angela the night before had thrown me for a loop. She admitted to me that Ben was in Edward's unit and that she had known the whole time. She didn't say anything to me about it because Ben had asked her not to.

The most disturbing part of the conversation was when she admitted the reason Ben asked her not to talk. He told her that my dad had approached Edward before they deployed, demanding that Edward stay away from me — telling him that I would grow to resent him for being in the Army, and my dad didn't want that for me.

I was so pissed at her admission that I went home and tore my house apart in a blind rage. He had no right to intervene in my relationship! I was going to date and love who I wanted, and he had absolutely no say in that. Edward had sent that letter because of what my dad said to him, and I didn't know if I would ever be able to forgive my father for that.

"Bella? What are you doing here?" my dad asked, definitely shocked to see me.

Without answering him, I walked up to him and smacked him across the face as hard as I could. "How dare you! You had no right!" I screamed at him. I moved to hit him again, but he caught my wrist and held it tightly.

"What the hell are you talking about, Bella?" he snapped as I struggled to get free.

I stopped struggling and looked him in the eye, tears running down my face. "You told Edward to stay away from me. You put enough doubt in his mind about me that he wrote that letter. It's your fault that I haven't spoken to him in months. You're the reason he asked me to move on."

I watched as my dad's face paled when I called him out. He obviously didn't expect me to ever find out about his conversation with Edward. "Bells, I—"

"No, Dad. You don't get to try to explain it away. I know all about what you said to him. Did you hear that he got shot? Did you keep that from me, too?" I asked, watching him closely.

This time, he actually looked shocked. "No, Bells. I had no idea he had been shot. I would never keep something like that from you."

I laughed humorlessly. "No, you would just keep the love of my life from me. Isn't that right?"

"I've always done what I thought was best for you, Bella, and I will continue to do so until the day I die. You may not agree with me, and you don't have to, but that doesn't mean I am wrong or that I'll apologize for my actions."

I looked at him and shook my head. "You're right, Dad. You don't have to apologize, just like I don't have to forgive you. I hope losing your only daughter was worth it." With that, I turned around and left his office, needing some time alone to think things through.

~~Stay~~

All I could feel was pain, radiating from my shoulder down to my hand. I could also feel someone holding me down. I

thrashed against them and screamed in agony.

"Edward, calm down, Man. Let the medics do their jobs."

I tried to focus on Ben's voice, but the pain was too much. I felt a prick and pinch in my arm, followed immediately by warmth. Soon, the pain was beginning to numb. I could make out voices talking to me, but I couldn't understand the words.

"He's losing too much blood. We need to transfuse him!"

I felt more poking and prodding, but stopped fighting and gave over to the darkness that wanted to claim me.

~XOXOX~

When I woke, I heard the mumble of voices and an annoying beeping sound coming from my left. I groaned and rolled my head in the direction of the sounds. I slowly blinked my eyes open and tried to focus on the person beside me.

"I gotta go, Esme, he's coming around. I'll call you back as soon as I can."

I licked my dry lips and tried to speak. "Ben?"

"Hey, Man. You scared the shit out of me. We almost lost you, Dude; you were losing way too much blood."

I nodded slowly, trying to get the room to stop spinning.

"Water?"

Ben stood and I watched him pour water into a glass, stick a straw in it, and then hold it up to my mouth. I sucked it down and sighed in relief. "Thanks. How long was I out? What are the doctors saying?"

"You've been unconscious for several days. As long as you don't get an infection, you should be stateside in a few weeks. I called your parents; they are gonna pick you up in Seattle."

I watched Ben run his hand through his hair like he wanted to tell me something but wasn't sure how. "What is it, Ben?"

"Um, Bella knows what happened."

I groaned and laid my head back on the pillow roughly. "How?"

"I called Angela...we've...uh, kinda been dating. Anyway, I called her and she was with Bella and Tanya. I guess Bella has been doing everything she can to find you. She was pretty hysterical when she found out you were injured."

He stopped talking, but from the look on his face I knew that he wasn't done. "What else?"

"She wants to write you."

"No!" I shook my head. "No, please don't tell her how. She needs to move on. I'm no good for her."

"Man, you are letting him win."

"Who?" I muttered.

"General Swan. You're letting him dictate yours and Bella's relationship. I never took you for a coward, Edward."

"I am not!"

"Yes, you are. You need to think about this, Edward. You let Charlie Swan decide for you, but did you ever stop to actually think? Don't you think that Bella just might know what she was getting herself into? I think you took the coward's way out, and look where you are now...pining away for a girl that wants nothing more than to be with you."

"Just go away, Ben. I've made my decision." I turned my head away from my friend and stared at the wall. I heard him sigh and then the door shutting, indicating he had gone.

I stared at the wall and wondered if Ben was right. Was I a coward? I thought about it and realized that everything Ben said was true; I had let Charlie Swan decide the fate of my relationship. I had let that smug son-of-a-bitch get into my head and cloud me with doubt.

"Dammit!" I slammed my hand onto my bed, which caused a sharp pain to shoot through my upper body. I ignored it and looked around my room to find my cell phone lying beside me. I picked it up and dialed the number before I could talk myself out of it.

"Hello?"



I lost my nerve the minute her voice came on the line. I could feel my heart pounding and I wanted desperately to say something, but it was as if my throat was closed.

"Edward? Please, say something!"

The pleading in her voice was gut wrenching. I felt a sob building in my throat and I knew that I was gonna hang up.

"I love you."

I snapped my phone closed and let the tears fall. I was a coward.

~XOXOX~

The plane touched down on American soil a month later, and I cringed at the twinge I felt in my shoulder. I wasn't looking forward to physical therapy or the interrogation I was sure that I was gonna get from my mother.

As I disembarked and followed the flow of passengers off the plane, I thought about the fact that I was now on American soil...with Bella. Granted, there were 2200 miles between us, but at least we were on the same continent.

"Edward!"

I turned and saw my parents waiting for me. I walked toward them and pasted a smile on my face.

"Oh, Edward! My baby!" My Mom, Esme, wrapped her arms

around my waist and hugged me tightly.

"Mom, stop. I'm home and I am fine," I said as I hugged her back.

She pulled back and looked into my eyes. "You look tired and sad. Let's go home and we'll talk. I want you to tell me all about her."

I looked at my mother and wondered how she knew. Must have been mother's intuition.

I followed my parents out to their awaiting vehicle that had my big brother sitting behind the wheel.

"Eddie!"

I cringed at the sound of my hated nickname. "Emmy, I have asked you not to call me that!"

"Sorry, Eduardo," Emmett guffawed from his seat.

I shook my head and climbed in beside my father, who let my Mom sit up front. I knew that I was in for a long drive and an even longer interrogation.

~~Stay~~

I sat in my living room and stared out my window, a pad of paper and a pen on my lap. It had been six months since Edward had been shot and I still hadn't heard anything from him. Through Angela, I learned that he had been sent

stateside in July, but she wouldn't tell me where he'd gone. She told me that Ben talked to Edward once he woke up, explaining to him that I wanted to write, but apparently Edward had asked him not to tell me how. I cried myself to sleep that night, knowing that he was hurting but refusing to let me be there for him.

Still, I held out hope that he would come to his senses. Every day, as the sun sunk low in the sky, I would sit on my couch and write him a letter that he would probably never read. I watched as summer turned to fall, the leaves changing from green to red, yellow, and orange. Fall shifted into winter as the leaves fell and the weather grew cold. I never gave up hope though, because doing so would mean giving up on my heart.

I had yet to talk to my father since walking out of his office that day in June. He called constantly at first, but those calls dwindled down to a few a week. He stopped by my house in September for my birthday, but I refused to open the door for him. I didn't have anything to say to him, and I didn't want to hear what he had to say to me.

November was an even harder month. Since my mom left, Thanksgiving was one of two holidays that Dad always made sure to have off so he could spend it with me. That, and Christmas. When I was old enough to cook, I took over the responsibilities for dinner and have done it ever since. This year, instead of spending it with my dad, I sat alone on my couch and wrote Edward another letter, tucking it safely away in my nightstand when I was finished with it.

It was now December, and Christmas would be here in a matter of weeks. That thought only served to depress me more, because there was only one thing I wanted. I wanted — no, I needed — Edward to come back to me. Not a day went by that he didn't cross my mind, and every time he did, I would feel my chest tighten painfully. I wasn't whole without him, and I knew I never would be.

With a deep sigh, I picked up my pen and began to write.

Edward,

I can't believe it's been almost a year since we first met and more than ten months since I've seen you. I miss you so much. I miss everything about you — your smile, your voice, your sparkling green eyes and messy, copper colored hair, your touch. God, I miss the feel of your lips on mine and your arms wrapped tightly around me. The truth is I just miss you!

I'm lost without you, Edward. I don't go out anymore — not even with Angela and Tanya. I tried, but I was just a Debbie Downer and pulled them with me. I haven't spoken to my father since I confronted him the day after I found out about his conversation with you. I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive him for what he did; especially if you never come back to me. I haven't been eating well, and I hardly sleep because I'm plagued with nightmares. I'm so scared of losing you forever. Maybe I already have, but I told you before that I'm not giving up. I love you too much to let you go.

Please come back to me soon.

I love you,

Bella

~~Stay~~

I sat on the porch swing at my parents' place and listened to the silence that surrounded me. I had grown used to the peace and serenity, but it had left me with entirely too much time to think. These last five months had been the hardest I've ever known. Between physical therapy — which was exhausting — and missing Bella, I was hanging by a thread.

My arm had healed nicely, and I was pretty sure that I was gonna be cleared for active duty after Christmas. I knew that I would be physically capable, but I wasn't sure if the emotional turmoil inside made me completely ready.

On a whim, a month after I had been home, I had requested a transfer to Joint Base Lewis-McChord. I sat with a letter from them in my hand, still unopened.

"You look like a man who is thinking heavy thoughts."

I turned and saw my sister-in-law, Rosalie, holding two steaming mugs of what smelled like coffee. I snorted. "Yeah, heavy..."

I watched as she stepped forward and handed me a steaming cup before sitting beside me on the swing. I took a sip of the warm brew and let its warmth spread through me.

"Wanna tell me about it?" Rose smiled softly.

"I miss her, Rose. I feel like a piece of me is missing," I confessed without looking at her.

"Then why don't you say anything when you call her? You know she could have you arrested for harassment."

I grinned. I had called Bella twice more since I came back, and each time I had just listened to her. She told me that she still loved me every time, and each time she said it, I hung up without saying a word.

"What's that?"

I looked at Rose and she nodded toward the envelope in my hand. "Oh, uh...I put in for a transfer."

"Wow...you're really gonna let him win, aren't you?" Rose accused.

My eyes snapped to hers. "What do you know about it?"

"I know more than you think. I was just like you."

All I could do was stare at her. How could she know what I was doing?

"You don't know my story, do you?" Rose questioned. I shook my head so she continued. "About two years before I met Emmett, I was attacked and brutally raped. It broke something in me that I thought would never heal. The day that

I met your brother, I was leaving another therapy session that I felt was useless. I wasn't watching where I was going and literally ran in to a wall. Only, the wall was a man...a beautiful man with kind eyes. I was afraid to say anything to him, so I ran in the opposite direction." She stopped and looked over at me. "Look, you don't need the rest of the details. Suffice it to say that had I not run in to Em that day, and had I not given him a chance, I would have been letting those men that attacked me win. Edward, you are doing the same with Bella's dad. You love her, so go get her." Having said that, Rosalie stood and went back inside.

I sat back on the swing and thought about what Rose said. I looked at the letter in my hand and decided that I didn't want to open it without Bella. I stood quickly and strolled into the house.

"Mom!"

~XOXOX~

I sat on the plane and looked out the window. After I had explained to my parents my plan, they had given me one of my Christmas gifts early...a plane ticket back to San Antonio. I got online, booked a rental car, and then set about packing my things. That was two days before Christmas, and the plane was scheduled to leave Christmas morning.

I heard the pilot announce that we would be landing soon and to buckle our seat belts. I felt the natural decent and sucked in a breath. I hated to fly, but I hated to land more.

Once I had disembarked, I headed straight for the baggage carousel. The airport was surprisingly busy, seeing as it was Christmas morning; I would have thought that these people would have been with their families. After I retrieved my bag, I headed to the rental place and procured my vehicle. Once I found the silver Volvo, I settled in for the drive back to base.

The drive was peaceful and there was no traffic so I made excellent time. When I turned on the street that Bella lived on, however, the nerves kicked in full force. Would she be happy to see me? Would she slam the door in my face? How was I gonna explain myself?

I didn't find the answers to these questions, but I had run out of time. I slowed the car to a stop in front of Bella's home and took a deep breath. I know it was cheesy, but I smashed a red bow on my chest, grabbed the unopened transfer letter, got out of the car, and then headed to her door.

I stopped on her front stoop and smiled at the wreath that adorned her door. I could hear low murmurs coming from inside and wondered if she was alone. I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans and then reached my shaking hand out and pressed the button of her doorbell.

~~Stay~~

It was Christmas morning, and even though I had planned to spend it alone, Angela and Tanya showed up on my doorstep with several wrapped presents. I couldn't really get in to the holiday spirit this year, so my decorations were minimal. I



hung a wreath on my door and put up a small tree, but that was it.

When Ang and Tan got here, we put the presents under the tree and then went to the kitchen to drink coffee and talk.

"What's up, guys? Don't you have somewhere more important to be on Christmas morning?" I asked. I knew why they were here. They were here to drag me out of the house and force me to talk to my dad. With Angela's father being a chaplain, family was important to her. She had told me on several occasions that I needed to sit down and talk to Charlie without getting upset, but that wasn't possible. What he did cut me deeply and I didn't know if I'd ever be able to recover.

"Bella, you've been holed up here for months. I know you're hurting, but we miss you, and so does Charlie," Angela said. At the mention of my father's name, my defenses went up, which Ang noticed. "He's a mess, Bella. My dad says that he goes about his day as if he's on autopilot. He's not acting like himself because he misses you so much."

If she thought I was going to be sympathetic to the fact my dad was hurting too, she had another thing coming. "Do you think I give a shit, Ang? He took away the one thing in this world that I love more than anything. He made Edward doubt me and our relationship. Edward left me because of what Charlie did. I can't just close my eyes and pretend that never happened!" I yelled as tears streamed down my face. It felt like someone was twisting a knife in my back every time I said Edward's name, and the hole in my chest ripped open more.

I couldn't sit here and let this happen today. It wasn't fair to them, and it wasn't fair to me, so after a few deep breaths, I started again. "Look, I know you guys are trying to help here, but I just need more time. I—"

The sound of the doorbell interrupted me, and I looked at my friends cautiously. "Please tell me you didn't," I whispered, feeling broken and defeated. I couldn't face my dad today, but I couldn't ignore him on Christmas, either. I rose from my chair and turned toward the door.

"Bella, I don't know who that is, but I promise that Charlie doesn't even know we're here," Tanya stated as I walked out of the kitchen.

If it's not my dad, who could it be? I asked myself as I grabbed the knob. I was too short to see through the peephole, so I didn't even bother trying. Instead, I opened the door and came face to face with Edward.

After all this time, I had finally lost it and was seeing things. He wasn't real — he couldn't be. I tried to reach out to him to be sure, but in that moment, everything went black and I felt myself begin to collapse.

When I came to, I was a bit disoriented. Somehow, the girls had managed to drag me to my couch, where I was currently laying while someone stroked my hair softly. I shifted slightly, and the hand froze. "Bella?"

It was a voice I had committed to memory because I never

thought I would hear it again. Edward was here...with me. I looked up, and when I met his piercing green eyes, I broke down and started crying. I had so many emotions running rampant in my body that I didn't know where to start.

Edward pulled me up into a sitting position and just held me tightly as I cried and tried to gather my thoughts. I was angry at him for leaving me without talking to me first. I was scared that he wouldn't stay. I was concerned about his wellbeing and curious to know if he had fully recovered from his bullet wound. Most of all, though, I was relieved that he was really and truly here after all this time. The ache in my chest was gone, and being in his arms again felt amazing. I felt at home for the first time in a year.

When I had finally calmed down enough to talk, I smacked his chest. "You left me," I whispered brokenly.

Edward pulled back and lifted my chin so that I would look him in the eye. "I know, Love, and it was the biggest mistake of my life. I'm so sorry for hurting you that way. Can you forgive me, or am I too late?"

He had tears running down his face, but he did nothing to try to stop them. It was obvious that he was hurting as much as I was. Instead of answering him, I stood and walked to my bedroom to grab his letters. There were close to two hundred by now, but I thought it was important for him to see that I never gave up, so I carried the stack of them with me back to my living room.

"Edward, I never gave up on you, even after all that time passed. When you left, you took a part of me with you. I'm not going to lie to you — you broke my heart when you told me you wanted me to move on. You didn't give me a choice in the matter, either.

"I had no way to write you to find out why, or to tell you that I would never move on, so instead, I wrote you these and kept them in my nightstand, hoping that one day I would be able to give them to you. I never stopped loving you, even when I hated you for doing what you did."

I handed him the letters but he just looked at me. When I motioned for him to look at what he held, his gaze moved down to his hands. "Should I..." he trailed off, but it was obvious what he was asking.

"Yes," I whispered as I took a seat beside him again.

Time seemed to stop as he read each of the letters out loud. His voice would break occasionally at something I wrote, and I could tell it was painful for him to read some of them.

After he read the last one, he placed them all on the coffee table in front of us. When he turned to me, his eyes were full of emotion. "Baby, I'm so sorry for letting your dad come between us. I should have talked to you, but I took the coward's way out. I want to give you the world if you'll let me." He took my face in his hands and brushed his thumbs over my cheeks to wipe away the moisture. "I love you, Bella. That hasn't changed and it never will."

"I love you, too, Edward. So much," I whispered to him as I leaned forward to press a soft kiss to his lips.

~~Stay~~

As our lips melded together, I couldn't help thinking that I was finally home. I swiped my tongue across her lower lip and was immediately granted entrance. Our tongues dueled for a few moments until oxygen became necessary. I placed soft pecks on her lips before finally pulling away completely.

Bella looked at me with eyes that were hooded with desire. I took a deep breath to calm my raging need and picked up the envelope that I had placed on the table.

"Bella, I need you to know something," I began. "After I was shot..."

"Tell me how you're doing, Edward."

"I'm fine, almost back to normal. Um...that's kinda what I want to talk to you about." I looked down at the envelope in my hands, at a loss for words.

When I didn't say anything else, Bella reached over and grasped my hand in hers. "Edward, whatever it is, just tell me."

"Bella, I...uh, I applied for a transfer to Joint Base Lewis-McChord near Tacoma." I handed her the envelope. "I received this the day that I decided to come back and see

you. I haven't opened it yet because it didn't feel right doing it without you."

Bella looked at the white paper in her hand and then back up at me. "Edward? I...I don't know what you are asking of me."

I moved from my position beside her and knelt in front of her. "Bella, I love you. I love you enough that I was willing to give you up because I want more for you than following me around the world, post to post. But for the first time since I was shot, I want to be selfish. I want you to come with me. You are my future, Bella."

Bella brought her hand up and cupped my cheek as I leaned into her touch. "Edward, I love you. Wherever you are, that's home to me."

She released my face and flipped the envelope over. She ripped it open and pulled out the sheet of paper that would change our fates. After a moment, she looked up at me and smiled. "Looks like I need to give my landlord notice."

I grinned and wrapped her up in my arms. "Thank you, Bella."

"You won't be thanking me when you find out who my landlord is," she giggled.

I leaned back and looked at her. "Your dad?" She nodded. "Good, call him up. I wouldn't mind saying a few things to him."

"Neither would I," she commented as she headed toward the phone.

~~Stay~~

I came back with my cordless phone and started to sit down beside Edward again, but he pulled me in to his lap instead, wrapping his arms around me. I couldn't help but laugh as I leaned in to kiss him.

I started to dial Dad's number when an errant thought hit me. "Wait... Edward, where did Angela and Tanya go? They were here when you showed up but now they're not."

He met my curious gaze and chuckled. "They thought we would want some time alone to talk. Once I moved you to the couch and they were satisfied I would take care of you, Tanya threatened me. She said if I ever hurt you again, she was going to...um...cut off my balls and feed them to me for breakfast. Then she smiled at me like she didn't just threaten my manhood, and left without another word. It was really disturbing, actually." He shook his head as if to clear it before grinning at me.

I couldn't help but laugh and snuggle in closer to him. "I'm sorry she threatened you, Edward. She's just trying to look out for me."

His grip on me tightened and he kissed my lips sweetly. "I know, Love, and I'm glad. I just hate the fact that I gave her a reason to threaten me. I promise you, though, I will never put

you through that again."

I pressed my lips to his firmly before looking directly in to his eyes. "I know. I understand why you did it, but you still should have discussed it with me first. Let's not talk about that now, though. We'll have plenty of time later."

He nodded and watched as I dialed my dad's number and put it on speakerphone. It rang three times before he answered. "General Swan speaking."

"Hi, Daddy," I said quietly. I was still angry with him, but it was Christmas and I didn't want to lash out.

"Bells?"

"Yeah, Dad, it's me," I replied, rolling my eyes internally. I was his only daughter, so who else would be calling him Daddy?

He cleared his throat before speaking. "Merry Christmas, Bells. I didn't think you were going to call me today. Do you want to come over? I have some presents here for you." I could hear the hope in his voice as he asked.

"Actually, Daddy, I was calling to see if you would mind coming over here. We have quite a bit that we need to talk about. I know it's Christmas, and I don't want to fight, but we really need to talk." Part of me wanted to just give him my notice over the phone and be done with it, but the other part of me just couldn't do that. He was my father, and had been



there for me my entire life. I didn't owe him an explanation to his face, but I still felt that he deserved one.

"Um...sure, Bells. Is everything okay?" he asked, hesitancy the clear emotion in his voice.

I sighed as Edward squeezed me to him, offering his silent reassurance. "Everything is fine, Dad. We just need to talk." Short answers were the best if I was going to hold myself together until he got here.

"Alright, then. Let me finish my cup of coffee and then I'll be over. Do you have plans for dinner tonight? Maybe we could —"

"Dad, stop," I cut in. "Don't go making plans before we talk, okay? You might not like what I have to say."

With a huff, he reluctantly agreed and said he would be over in fifteen minutes.

While we waited for him to show up, Edward and I snuggled in on the couch and talked about what we would need to do. His transfer would take effect the second week in January, so we had roughly two weeks to get all my stuff packed up and moved. He would be required to live in the on-base housing, which I didn't have a problem with. I had lived on army bases most of my life, anyway.

"Edward, you realize that my dad is not going to take you being here well, right?" I asked after several minutes, dread

of him leaving me again heavy in my heart.

He pulled my face up so he could look into my eyes. "Baby, I know he won't like that I'm here, but that's not going to change anything. I was stupid to let him interfere before, and we lost nearly a year because of it. I won't lose you again. Baby, I'm yours as long as you'll have me," he whispered before kissing my lips sweetly.

His words were all the confirmation I needed. He wouldn't leave me again. He was here to stay, and I had never been happier. "I love you so much, Edward," I told him sincerely before pressing my lips to his again chastely. I wanted to do more — I wanted to give myself to him fully — but I knew that now wasn't the time. That would have to wait until after the conversation with my father.

Just as we broke apart, the doorbell rang, signaling Charlie's arrival. "Wait here, Edward. I'll be right back," I told him, kissing him once more before climbing off his lap to open the door for my dad.

"Hi, Dad," I greeted him with a forced smile. "Please, come in."

He could tell something was up and immediately started looking around. "Bella, are you going to tell me what's going on? And whose car is that out front? I thought you wanted to talk to me. How can we do that if someone else is here?"

Just then, I heard Edward get up from the couch and come

around the corner. "It's my car, General Swan, Sir," he said with a strong voice as he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me against his body.

My dad's eyes widened almost comically. "Bella, what the hell is going on?" he demanded.

I folded my hand over Edward's as I squared my shoulders. "I'm leaving, Dad. Edward was reassigned to Washington, and I'm going with him." My voice didn't waiver even though I was cringing internally. Until Edward came in to my life, I never stood up to my dad. I had no reason to. This was about my happiness, though, and I knew I couldn't be happy without Edward.

Edward squeezed me to him and then looked my dad straight in the eye. "Sir, would you please join us in the living room so we can talk about this?"

With a hard glare at the both of us, my dad stomped past, rounded the corner, and took a seat in the recliner while Edward and I sat side-by-side on the couch. I didn't want to lose my dad, but I refused to give Edward up. There was a lot riding on this conversation, and I hoped my dad would be flexible for once in his life.

~~Stay~~

One look at the General's face and I knew that Bella and I were in for a battle. What I didn't know was if I could let Bella choose me over her father or not. The short answer was that

I wouldn't make her choose. I wouldn't force her into the position to lose the only family she had left.

"Can I get you anything, Dad?" Bella offered a still silent General.

"You can get me an explanation as to what the hell is going on here!"

"General Swan, Sir, after my injury, I put in for a transfer. I knew that I couldn't come back here and not be with Bella. However, when the time came for me to come back, I knew that I couldn't leave without her. I love your daughter, Sir, and I let you tear us apart once. With all due respect, I won't let you do it again."

I watched as the General's face turned red. "Now you listen here, you little..."

"Daddy!" Bella interrupted. She waited until she had his attention, and for that I was relieved. "Daddy, do you love me?"

"Bella, what the hell kind of question is that?"

"It's a simple question that requires a simple answer." Bella met her father's stare.

I watched the interaction and wondered where Bella was going with this.

"Of course I love you. You're my daughter."

Bella smiled and cocked her head to the side. "Don't you want me to be happy then?"

"That's all I have ever wanted, Bella."

I watched as the General's shoulders slumped in defeat. Huh? I never thought I would see the day.

"Then why are you trying to prevent it? Daddy, Edward makes me happy. I love him and I want to be with him." Bella paused and I looked at her, wondering where she was going with this. "I'm not Mom."

I watched as the General snapped his head up and looked at her. "Bells...I never wanted you to have this life. Do you know what you are getting in to? Are you ready for the endless deployments, the constant moving, and never being around your family?"

"Wow! Is that what you think the army does? Jeez, you made a career out of it, and yet you're trying to convince your daughter that the life you chose is a miserable one? Bella was raised with a military father; she knows better than anyone what this life entails. Just because your ex-wife wasn't prepared, doesn't mean that Bella isn't. So let me ask you this, Sir, are you prepared to lose your daughter because of your hypocrisy?"

"Bella, I..." Charlie started.

"Dad, I don't want to choose, so please don't make me. You

might not like the answer."

I watched as the General sighed. "Alright, Bella, if Edward is your choice, then I will support you. You know that I wanted something more for you, but if you're happy, that's all that matters. Edward, I apologize for...well, everything."

Those were words that I never thought I would hear. "Thank you, Sir."

After we talked things through, Bella invited her father to stay for dinner. It was awkward at first, but finally, Charlie actually decided to get to know me. I wouldn't say that we were best buds or anything, but it was definitely a start. When he left later that evening, I turned to Bella and wrapped her in my arms.

"Merry Christmas, Baby. I love you." I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers. When I tried to deepen the kiss, Bella opened for me willingly and soon our tongues were dueling for dominance. I finally and reluctantly pulled away. "I have to go, Sweetheart. I need to check in on post." I didn't want to leave, but I knew that if I didn't, Bella and I would end up going to bed, and I wanted to make sure that she was ready for that. I needn't have worried, as Bella made the decision for both of us.

"Stay..."

~~Stay~~

I could tell Edward was struggling with something as we kissed, but I didn't know what. When he pulled away and said he had to go, the answer became obvious. He was worried about what we would end up doing if he stayed. He didn't need to be, though, and there was only one way for me to make that clear.

"Stay..." I whispered as I brought my hands up to his chest. I was ready to take our relationship to the next level, and he needed to know that, so I slowly began unbuttoning his shirt. When the last button was undone, I tiptoed up to kiss him again as I slid the shirt off his shoulders. I could feel a tremor pass through him as my fingers trailed down his arms and to his waist.

Our kissing became frantic as we undressed each other completely, and when we finally broke apart, we were both gasping for air. "You take my breath away, Bella. You are so beautiful," Edward whispered in awe as he took in my naked body. I couldn't help but shiver when he pulled me to his chest and tucked my head beneath his chin. "We don't have to do anything. You know that, right?" he asked after a moment of content silence.

"I know, Edward, but I want this...I want you." I pulled out of his arms and took his hand, leading him to my bedroom.

Edward finally lost his inhibitions when we were in my room, and he scooped me up and tossed me on the bed before jumping on top of me. It was enough to make me giggle, but he quickly silenced me with a heated kiss that took my breath

away.

When we both needed air, we broke the kiss, but Edward's lips never left my body. He left a fiery trail down my neck and collarbone, pausing just over my right breast. I could feel the warmth of his breath on the hardened peak and gasped loudly, arching my back off the bed when he sucked my nipple into his mouth.

Out of reflex, my fingers found his hair and gripped hard, holding him in place. "Oh god, Baby. That feels so good," I panted. I felt his lips curl into a grin just before he bit down gently, causing me to gasp again.

He brought his right hand to my hair, brushing it from my face before trailing his fingers down to my left nipple and pinching at the same time he bit the right one again. "Fuck!" I hissed at the sensation. It was a mix between pleasure and pain, and I could feel my arousal seep from the juncture between my thighs.

I needed some sort of friction or I was going to explode, so I bucked my hips up, meeting Edward's obvious erection. He moaned and started to grind against me as he continued his assault on my chest.

After a few minutes, he brought his left hand down between my legs, running his fingers through my slick folds. "Mmm, Bella, you are so damn wet right now," he said huskily in my ear as his finger swept through once again.



"Ungh, more, Edward...I need more," I moaned wantonly, desperate for friction — desperate for him.

Edward removed his hand from between us and nudged my thighs apart with his knees. "Tell me what you need, Love, and it's yours," he said before claiming my lips again in a frantic kiss.

"Mmm...you, Edward. I need to feel you — all of you," I responded when he broke away.

"Condom?" he asked, taking his cock in his hand and sliding it up and down my opening, coating it in my juices.

"I'm on depo, Edward, and I'm clean. I haven't been with anyone in nearly two years and was checked after the relationship ended," I explained, sucking in air as the head of his dick came in contact with my clit.

"I'm clean too, Baby. I was checked right before I deployed and haven't been with anyone since. Are you sure though? We don't have t—"

I crashed my lips to his to quiet his rambling. When I pulled back, I looked him directly in the eye. "I'm positive, Edward. I want to connect with you in every way possible. I'm tired of waiting." I thrust my hips up to make my point.

"I love you, Bella. Thank you for this. Thank you for loving me, for waiting for me, for...everything," he said as he slid into me, filling me completely. My eyes rolled back in my head as I

collapsed back on the pillow while Edward started thrusting into me. "So...good...Baby," he said between thrusts. "Feels...so...perfect — so...right!"

When he leaned forward and kissed me again, I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. The new position allowed him to thrust even deeper, hitting that one, perfect spot inside me that drove me to the brink. "Yes! Right there, Edward! Oh, God!" I screamed out just before falling over the precipice, my orgasm rocking my entire body.

Edward continued to thrust, drawing out my climax and making my toes curl and my muscles tighten. Several thrusts later, Edward screamed out my name before stilling inside me. When he finally pulled out and rolled on his side, he took me with him, cradling me in his arms.

"Baby, that was incredible," he said before kissing my forehead softly. "I love you so much."

I smiled into his chest, feeling completely content for the first time in a long time. "I love you, too, Edward — more than anything. Please don't ever leave me again, okay?" I asked, a slight tremor in my voice.

Edward's response was immediate. "Never again, Bella. I'll be with you as long as you want me to be, I promise."

"Forever. Stay with me forever," I whispered as my lips caressed his chest.

"Forever is a perfect place to start, my love."

**AN: Have a safe and happy holiday season!**