



## Under the tree

“Mamaw!” Jasper said excitedly when we walked into the den. There was a tiny old woman with a puff of cotton white hair around her head. She must have been nearly ninety. He instantly went to her and hugged her tightly. The woman embraced him back, disappearing in his grip.

“How you are doing, baby?” She asked in a voice so rough that it was evident that she smoked for years.

“Fantastic!” He beamed. Pulling back while he had one arm around her, he smiled at me cheerfully. “Mamaw, this is my girlfriend, Bella.”

She looked me over in curiosity, patting her grandson’s back as she did. “Hello! Nice to meet you, sweetheart.”

“Nice to meet you too,” I responded a little shyly.

The woman let go of Jasper, coming over to give me a quick hug. It was apparent that she went outside to smoke a cigarette. It lingered in her hair despite the perfume. “I’m April. I was starting to wonder if you were a figment of Caroline’s imagination.”

“Rose has met her too!” Jasper laughed.

“You know that your sister would agree with her just to shut her up,” she quipped, pulling away from me to go back to Jasper. April put her arm around his waist, looking up at him. He was trying not to laugh at her sassiness.

“That’s true,” he whispered to her, making her snort. “But no, Bella is very real and very wonderful.”

She turned to look at me again. “I’ve read your books. I liked them just fine. But I prefer trashy romance.”

The unexpectedness of her words made me cackle in surprise. Both of my hands flew to my mouth to hide it.

“Mamaw!” He chided her in a laugh.

April made a face at him like he was being stupid. “What? Like you don’t enjoy porn. You were in the military and have lived on the road for years, for God’s sake.”

“Mom!” Justin said in surprise. “Don’t- I- You-” He stuttered. “I don’t want to think about that.”

“I love this family so much,” Emmett laughed, plopping down on the floor next to the Christmas tree.

I was trying to hide my amused grin by biting my lip, but I couldn’t. I snorted quietly, covering my mouth with my hand. “Oh, god.”

“You, of all people, shouldn’t laugh at this,” Jasper pouted, bright red from being teased by his grandma.

She just kept patting his back, unfazed. “Honey, do you think that she doesn’t know that you do? Bella, you know that he looks at porn, don’t you?”

“Mamaw, why are you doing this to me?” He whispered to the little woman.

“You haven’t called me since Thanksgiving,” she replied as she went to go sit in the chair that her son had been sitting in before. He was now seated on the couch. Rosalie came in from the kitchen and handed her husband a mug of something steaming.

Jasper took my hand and led me over to the loveseat. “I sent you a postcard, though!” He complained as he plopped down. I sat beside him, leaning into his side.

“And it was very lovely, baby. But I know how to text, and you could call me more,” she explained, almost blandly. It made me snicker. Mamaw was a savage.

“Two,” he whispered in my ear. It just made me laugh harder. “Three.”

I snuggled into him. “Worth it,” I breathed as I tried to control it.

Caroline finally came rushing in, putting something under the tree before going to the couch to plop down beside her husband. She beamed at him proudly. “Okay. Ready.”

Emmett began to pass things to his wife while he still sat on the floor. She walked around and handed them to each person. Nobody began opening anything, though, until everyone had theirs.

There were three bags, two big and one small, and a small box sitting in front of me. There was also a bright red Christmas card. Jasper leaned down and put the little box in my lap.

“This one first,” he said before leaning down to open one from his parents. It was some new art supplies.

Carefully, I removed the bright blue paper. It was heavy and expensive. Inside was a small Tiffany’s box. I bit my lip as I opened it. It was a tiny rose gold padlock pendant on a long thin, delicate chain. I traced it with my finger.

“I love it,” I whispered. “Thank you.”

“Turn it over.” IMS was inscribed on the other side. I leaned into him again, smiling. I instantly removed it from the box and began to put it on. Jasper took over for me, and I lifted my hair off of my shoulders to make it easier for him. He kissed right behind my ear. “Perfect.”

It fell right above my breasts. It stood out prettily against my black dress. Once again, I traced it with my fingers.

“You’ll have to get her the key next time!” Justin teased.

I giggled. “I’d love that, actually. I adore this kind of stuff.”

“Isn’t it nice when they tell you what to buy them next?” Emmett smirked, looking up at Rosalie.

“It does make it easier,” he agreed in a chuckle. “Bella doesn’t usually like it when I spend money on her, though.”

His sister snorted. “Oh, I ain’t got that problem.”

I quickly shook my head. “I don’t hate it. I just wish it wasn’t so much and that you’d let me treat you sometimes, too.”

“I think that we’ve already spoken about manners today. I think you know that I am too much of a gentleman for that,” he stated sarcastically. I laughed at his attitude. “If I want to eat at the nicest steakhouse in town, I’m going to pay for it if I’m inviting you. As friends, as a couple. It doesn’t matter.”

“So, if I invite you, I can pay?”

He narrowed his eyes at me playfully, then sighed. “We’ll discuss this later.” I giggled, leaning in to kiss his cheek. Jasper brought his hand up to my hair, running his fingers through it.

The first gift that he opened from me was a lovely blue silk tie. He smirked a little. “I thought it would be a nice color on you,” I said innocently. This one wasn’t for tying me up with, but he would look damn sexy when he wore it for me. In the black suit with the vest, plus the leather gloves.

“I agree,” Caroline grinned. “Bella, open another gift!” She encouraged. She was mainly watching her family. Everyone else was busily working away at their pile. Jasper and I were going very slowly and primarily paying attention to each other.

I brought up the biggest of the bags. It was also from Jasper. First, I pulled out a very nice set of watercolors, brushes, and all the little accessories that went along with it. “Oh! I haven’t painted in forever. Thank you!” Then I pulled out the big watercolors pad that took up most of the space in the sack. I opened it up to feel the weight and texture of the paper. When I realized what was inside, I gasped.

Jasper had beautifully drawn in pencil. There were different things on every single page. Flowers, trees, mountains, food, still-lives, animals, random abstract designs. I loved every one of them.

Tears stung my nose. Quickly, I tried to blink them away. I hugged it to my chest. "You remembered."

He brought his hand to my hair again and brushed it away from my face. "Of course, I did. I've been working on that for months," he admitted. "Since before..." Jasper trailed off, shaking his head. "Would you paint me something for my new apartment?"

"What?" Caroline asked in surprise. "You're getting an apartment?"

Nodding, he ducked his head as he rubbed the back of his neck. Jasper cleared his throat. "Yes, ma'am. In January. I got a promotion. I will be the second in command of the behavioral analyst unit here out of Dallas. Mostly, I will be working cases on a state level, so I'll be in town."

"Are you serious?" Rosalie asked in surprised. "No more traveling?"

"A little," he admitted. "Nothing like before. I'll be working a lot out of Dallas and Fort Worth. The bigger cities. But I'll be in one spot a hell of a lot more. I need to settle down a bit because this is going to kill me."

"Good!" His mother happily gushed. "That is the best Christmas present that you could have given me."

"Congratulations, son," Justin interjected. "Does this promotion come with a pay raise or just more work?"

Jasper grinned proudly. "It comes with another thirty thousand and an extra two weeks of paid vacation days. So, I get almost eight weeks a year now. And they roll over annually, so I never lose them. Plus, I get more put into my retirement fund."

"Very nice," he nodded in approval. "Let me know when you're ready to get a car. I'll help you out. If you're settling down, you'll need one."

"Yes, sir. I might get a truck, actually. I need something I can use for work, I think. Perhaps an SUV. Nothing huge."

"You'll want good gas mileage since you'll be driving around a lot-" Rosalie began, but their mother stopped her.

“No cars! No work today!” She huffed.

Rosalie rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “Fine,” she pouted before looking at me. “Thank you for the chocolates, Bella.”

“You’re welcome!” I replied pleasantly, still hugging my watercolor pad to my chest. I turned to look at Jasper. “Okay, you need to open another one of mine. It’s killing me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh?” I leaned down and picked up the biggest of the bags from me and put it in his lap. “It’s heavy, whatever it is.”

First, he pulled out the red pens and looked at them curiously, then the highlighters. Finally, he removed the binder. There was nothing on the front to show what it was, so he opened it. Jasper instantly closed it and looked at me with wide eyes.

“Is this what I think it is?”

“What do you think it is?” I slyly asked in return.

“Did you finish it?” He exclaimed with absolute joy, his beautiful blue eyes shining. I nodded in response.

“Well,” I smiled a little, ducking my head. “I finished the first draft. I wanted your opinion on some things before I started the second.”

Jasper actually began to tear up a little. He sniffled deeply to control it. “Really?” I nodded again, smiling at his reaction. It was better than I could have ever expected. He quickly grabbed my face and pulled me to him for a deep but swift kiss. “Thank you so much. This is incredible. I am so honored.” I giggled as he kissed me again.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad that you like it. Wait to read it first before you call it incredible, though.”

“No, I love it already,” he laughed. “I love you,” Jasper declared loudly before he kissed me again.

All noises in the room stopped as all eyes turned to us. “Oh, you said that out loud,” I mumbled in a low, teasing whisper as I hid my face in his neck. He began to chuckle, rubbing my back. “I don’t think that you meant to do that.” He shook his head, still silently and almost anxiously laughing.

“You’re in love!” His mother said excitedly. Jasper was beet red, his skin actually hot. I could feel him nod in response. I wasn’t ready to look at them yet.

“You know, this is why I never brought anyone home,” he whispered to me. I could feel her eyes on my back.

“Do you love him, too?!” She asked boisterously, obviously very excited by the prospect. Actually, that’s why he didn’t bring anyone home.

“Mama!” The twins whined at the same time. Emmett was laughing. Justin said, ‘Caroline’ as well. April was just watching the whole thing with interest. She had opened the box of chocolate that I had gotten her and was already eating them.

I laughed into his neck. Finally, I pulled away. “Yes, ma’am. I do. Very much so.”

“Oh, good! You had me worried there for a second,” she remarked, putting her hand on her heart as she smiled. “That wasn’t the first time that you’ve said it, was it?” Caroline inquired expectantly with her big blue eyes looking at her son.

“You are the nosiest woman on the planet,” Jasper mumbled to her seriously as he shook his head. “No. It wasn’t. Why don’t you open the present Bella got you, huh?”

She put her hand on her chest again. “Aw, baby! You didn’t have to get me a gift! Thank you!”

Justin opened his wordlessly, just kind of shaking his head at everything that was going on. He was much quieter than his wife. “I don’t know, she can get me stuff. I like what she got me. Thanks, honey.”

“You’re welcome! I like that kind, too,” I replied with a smile.

“I’ll put some in the fridge, and we can share later.”

“I’d like that.”

Caroline giggled happily, putting the two big bottles on her lap. “Aw, they’re my favorite! Thank you. Here. Open your card.”

It was what she rushed to put under the tree. I opened it and went to read the message when I realized that there were three, very crisp one hundred dollar bills inside. I closed it with a snap, my eyes wide. I opened it again and showed it to Jasper, shaking my head.

"I can't- I can't-" I began to stutter. "I can't accept this. This is very generous, I can't," I shook my head wildly.

His mother didn't look fazed. "That's the least I spent on anyone else and the easiest shopping that I did all year!"

Covering my mouth, I looked over at Jasper. He just shrugged. I shook my head again, and he shrugged once more. "She ain't taking it back. Just say 'thank you.' It's easier."

I looked over at Caroline, my mouth kind of hanging open. "Thank you."

His brother-in-law chuckled warmly. "I remember the first time that I had Christmas with y'all," Emmett began fondly, sipping from his mug. "I was just a kid, and you bought me so much shit. You got me my first DVD. It was Monster's Inc."

"We grew up together," Jasper explained to me. "We've known each other since we were really little. His family celebrates on Christmas Eve, usually."

Something dinged loudly in the kitchen, and Rosalie and Caroline popped up at the same time. "The sides!"

April sighed and pushed herself up slowly. "Guess I better go supervise." We watched them all leave. Justin continued to open his gifts. Emmett had opened their chocolates and was snacking on them and something else that appeared to be pretzels from another box.

I giggled. "I understand so much about you now," I said in a low whisper.

"What is that supposed to mean?" He jokingly questioned. I shook my head, looking away from him. Jasper poked my side.

"She's saying that you may be quiet, like me, but you got your pushy attitude from the women in your life," Justin smirked a little as he took the ornament that I had gotten him out of the package. He walked it over to the tree and hung it up with a smile.

Nodding, I smirked up at my boyfriend. "Yeah, pretty much. It's cute, though. I like it."

He chuckled, finally opening the binder again to look at the contents and sighed. "Well, as long as you like it."

I kissed his cheek lightly. "By the way, I love you, too. Thank you for my gifts."

"You have some more to open, you know," he said with a small bashful smile.

“So, do you.”