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Disclaimer: I don't own Twilight

Summary: Bella barely remembers her godparents, but after losing her mom and dad, she's shipped off to rainy Washington to live with the Cullens for her final semester in high school. On the outside, the Cullens are perfect. Behind closed doors is another matter.

Warning: This story deals with drug use, abuse—very adult themes.

Category: Angst/Hurt/Comfort

## ~Prologue~

### **EPOV**

"This is what you want?" she breathes out.

I swallow, preparing myself for another grand performance.

Her eyes well up.

And when she repeats her question, I know that I have to answer.

I clench my jaw. "Yes."

*Don't. Fucking. Crack.*

I can practically see her heart breaking. It's *gutting*.

The crease on her forehead, the one showing despair, turns me into a coward and I avert my eyes.

"You want me to...to..." She can't even say the word. A sob catches in her throat, and this is it. The proverbial nail in the coffin. After this, there will be *nothing* left.

Pushing down my self-hatred and nausea, I flash her a smirk.

"I'll pay for it, of course," I say, shrugging. "But..." I chuckle. "Did you really think I'd want a *baby* with you, Bella?" I laugh in her face. She has no idea that I'm dying on the inside. "Be real, for fuck's sake. I'm *Edward Cullen* and you're...well, *you*." I dip down a little and smirk again. "You're *nothing*, Bella. Fucking *worthless*. It was all a game to me—"

Unable to get another word out—unless I want to throw up—I bring out my wallet and empty it on cash.

It will be enough for the...the abortion.

*Fuck.*

My insides churn painfully.

"Edward," she whispers, and I clench my teeth together as I force myself to face her.

Tears stream down her cheeks. I swallow bile.

"*What?*" I exhale harshly.

Her last words are soft, shallow, but they couldn't cut deeper.

"I hate you."

With that said, she turns to leave.

*I hate you.*

*I hate you.*

*I hate you.*

It's suddenly impossible to breathe.

My eyes blur.

I watch her retreating form until she's out of sight.

*Don't worry, baby. I hate me, too.*



*Chapter song – The War Inside by Switchfoot*

## **EPOV**

This is probably the first Friday in my entire existence where I don't arrive at school with a fucking smirk on my face. The quiet purr of my Aston doesn't bring me satisfaction today. The girls who always meet me as soon as I slam the door shut just annoy me. Admittedly, they've always annoyed me, but I usually just keep walking. Sometimes I flash them my

lopsided grin, which for some reason makes them cream their fucking panties, and *then* I leave them hanging, wanting. Not this morning, though. I leave them behind with a scowl.

"Dude, you comin' with us to La Push tonight, yeah?" That's how Emmett greets me by the lockers. "Peter and I went to Port A last night, so we're good on vodka and weed."

"Can't," I mutter, taking out my chemistry book. "I fucking *told* you, Em."

I give him a pointed look and wait. He's a bit slow, so it takes him a while before realization hits him.

"Ah, that's right!" he booms out. "You're getting a sister today!"

He finds this funny for some reason.

And it's not a fucking sister.

Two of Mom's college friends died in a car crash or whatever, and they left a daughter behind. Bella. I used to play with her when I was little, according to Mom. I can't say that I remember *much* of it. I was five, for fuck's sake. Though, I do remember one time when...eh, never mind.

Anyway, Mom and Dad are her godparents, so she's coming to live with us. Today, in fact. Mom's down there—in Phoenix—to help her. She's been there since the funeral two weeks ago. Thankfully, I didn't have to show. Dad didn't show, either, but he's often away on work. *Thank God*. Medical seminars, conferences, you name it.

Bella's arrival is my reason for not enjoying this Friday.

To be honest, I'm afraid shit's gonna change at home. For the worse.

"So, you're just gonna be home tonight?" he asks as we head to class.

"Yep." As much as it sucks, I gotta stay home. Mom wants us to have a family dinner to make Bella feel welcome. Some shit like that. "Any plans for tomorrow, though?"

It's been months since I got laid, and I don't fuck around with high school skanks. That's what we have Port Angeles Community College for. Gotta love the more experienced ladies.

"I'm sure we can find something." He smirks.

~CYE~

"Hey, Cullen," Jessica coos, taking her seat next to me. I shoot Em and Pete glares, cursing as they laugh. They, of all people, know how impossible it is to get rid of Stanley. And now I have to suffer through the entire lunch period with her next to me? Fuck that.

"Piss off, Stanley," I mutter. "You're too fucking ugly for this table."

The look of hurt is gone too soon. "Oh, come on, Cullen. Don't be so mean."

I shrug, dragging a French fry through ketchup. "Just stating a fact."

She doesn't leave the table, much to my chagrin, but she does shut up.

"So...that chick's arriving today, huh?" Pete waggles his eyebrows. "She hot?"

I flip him off. "How the fuck should I know? I haven't seen her since we were five."

After that, we moved from Phoenix to Forks. Mom has visited the Swans a few times, but I never went.

"But what are you gonna do if she *is* hot?"

I smirk. "You want me to tell you about positions, man?" I chuckle.

"Always knew you wanted my dick."

That would be fucking golden—if she was hot.

This time, he flips me off. "Fuck you. Seriously, though...is she gonna be your sister or something?"

Yeah, I roll my eyes at that. "How fucking stupid are you, Peter? She's not gonna be my goddamn sister." Graduation is only a few months away.

After that, I'm so outta here. "My folks are just her guardian until she's eighteen."

"She's a senior, too, right?" Emmett asks.

I nod once. "She starts here on Monday."

He's about to say something else, but my phone buzzes on the table.

*Shit.*

**Come straight home after school. I need to talk to you – Dad.**

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

"What's up, man? You look all rigid and shit," Pete laughs. "Seen a ghost?"

*You have no idea.*

"Shut up," I snap angrily, kicking my chair back as I stand to leave.

Without another word, I walk out of the cafeteria, heading straight for the bathrooms.

I knew he'd be home today, of course. For two weeks, it's been calm. Two weeks of Mom being in Phoenix. Two weeks of Dad being in San Francisco for work. Now they're—*he's*—back. *Shit.*

When I reach the bathroom, I see two freshmen in there. "Get the *fuck* out." One of them trips as they scurry out, making his shoulder brush against my bicep. "Watch where you're going, you little piece of shit."

"S-sorry," he stutters.

*Loser.*

"Dammit," I breathe out, feeling the anxiety creep in. Walking over to the sinks, I grip one with both hands. My chest feels tighter. Cold sweat. Constricted throat. I swallow convulsively. I squeeze my eyes shut.

Is it gonna get worse with Bella in the house? I don't even know the chick and I already fucking hate a part of her. She's a threat. No doubt about it. There's a goddamn reason why I never bring friends over to my house. *Ever*. Now she's actually going to *live* with us. Not only is she gonna live with us, but she's also going to Forks High.

*"Do you remember Bella, honey?" Mom asks, making small talk at dinner, I guess. "From when we lived in Arizona?"*

*I shrug, eyes downcast as I pick at my food. "Not really." Or maybe I do. I think she's the girl I played with when I was little. Whatever. "What about her?"*

*When she doesn't answer, I look up. She shifts in her seat, and Dad gives her a subtle nod. Then his cold eyes meet mine, and I look down again.*

*"Well, the thing is, honey... Her parents died in a car accident."*

My breaths are choppy and shallow as I splash water on my face.

*Suck it up, Cullen.*

Hands shaking.

"Grow the hell up," I breathe out to myself. Looking into the mirror, I scowl when I see how fucking pale I am.

~CYE~

There's no stalling after school. I don't stay behind to talk with my friends, I don't go under the speed limit, I don't return the books to the library that I needed to.

I kill the engine and switch off my phone before stepping out of the car.

Dad hates it when my phone rings. It's a distraction.

"Here we go," I sigh, opening the door. The house smells clean. Maybe because I've spent the past two days making sure there are no traces left of my two weeks without parents.

I clear my throat and take off my jacket.

"Dad?"

My mind is going hundred miles a minute as I try to come up with anything that may piss him off. Have I accidentally left a pizza box somewhere? Didn't I empty the laundry? Has he heard anything from school? Are there any test results he could be disappointed in?

"In the kitchen, son."

Funny how my spine reacts to his voice before my fucking ears do.

Fourteen steps later, I reach the kitchen. As always, Dad is in a suit.

"Hey," I say lamely, shifting on my feet. My hands go to my pockets.

Dad looks up from the mail he has spread out on the kitchen island. Then he looks down again, saying nothing for a while. He has a knack for



making a guy sweat. And I can see that it's not just the mail he has on the island. There are also a few tests and school reports I've gotten back while he was away.

Straight A's. Anything else is unacceptable. When I came home with a B-once...

"Thought we could talk a little before your mother returns with Isabella."

I swallow. "Okay."

With his ever-cold eyes fixed on me, he says a few words that send me into a tailspin. "I quit my job in Seattle after they offered me a position here in Forks." He quit. He fucking quit. The job he had four hours away from here—the job that took him away from home so often...he quit. "I start next month." He smirks and I focus on my breathing. "The hours are good. I will be home for dinner every night. Isn't that wonderful?"

I have several words for his new job, but "wonderful" isn't one of them.

"I figured it was time to spend more time with my family," he continues smoothly. "Especially now when there will be one more in the household." His smirk fades. "Another mouth to feed...another set of eyes...another pair of *ears*." Pointed look. But it's pointless—pardon the pun—'cause I already know this. It's his way of telling me to keep my mouth shut. Like I would talk to Bella. Please. "But I have nothing to worry about, do I?" he chuckles. "You wouldn't want anyone to know what a pussy you really are."

I grind my teeth together but say nothing. Opening my mouth now would only give me shit.

~CYE~

After finishing my homework, I stare at the clock above my bed. Just waiting for time to pass, really. Mom will be back in an hour, which means dinner...talking... So, it's no use in taking out a joint. Wouldn't wanna be high at dinner. Well, I would, but Dad would also have my head, so...

It's a wonder he doesn't complain about the smell at all, but I guess he's letting me do whatever the fuck I want as long as I come home with flawless grades. In reality, though, he would probably put a stop to it if he knew I smoked as often as I do. But it's what I have. I *need* it.

All I have to do is light up a joint...close my eyes...

It takes me away for a few moments.

Just a little while.

Before Dad's words seep through.

*"You know why I'm doing this, son."*

*"I have a lot invested in your future."*

*"Johns Hopkins isn't going to want an average student."*

*"I'm just helping you, Edward."*

~CYE~

Around seven, I hear Mom's car pulling in. It's my cue as the perfect son to go out there and help with Bella's luggage.

I doubt she has a lot since the rest has been shipped.

"Hi, honey," Mom greets me as I watch a brunette step out of the car on the other side. Holy shit. Bella Swan grew up. And...er...she grew up nicely. Fuck, she's hot. "Come meet Bella."

When Bella looks up, I see past how fucking hot she is. 'Cause she also looks beyond exhausted and sad as hell.

*Duh. She just lost her fucking parents.*

"Hi," she says almost inaudibly as I take a few steps forward. "Nice to see you...again, I suppose."

"Ah, that's right," I chuckle quietly, shaking her hand. "We played when we were kids." The smile she returns is timid. "So, any bags I can help with?"

"I redecorated the guest room next to Edward's bedroom," Mom mentions, opening the trunk. I follow to take the luggage from her, and Bella mumbles something about the size of our house. "Your room will be on the third floor, sweetie," Mom continues. "And you will have the guest bathroom across the hallway." She smiles as I take two heavy fucking bags, and I'm pretty sure they're packed with bricks. "By the way, you don't have to worry. Edward has his own bathroom, so no thinking about his filth."

"Hey," I protest halfheartedly. Mom just winks.

Looks like two weeks away have been good for her. The smile on her face is genuine, albeit a bit nervous. I can only imagine why.

On my way inside, I pass Dad, who is wearing a smile as he walks out. It's when I walk up the stairs that I hear Mom introducing Bella to Dad, and I'm not surprised to hear how polite and kind he is. He's good that making people believe he's perfection personified. After all, he has Mom fooled.

Once on the third floor, I open the door to Bella's new room and walk over to her king-sized bed. Our rooms are mirror images of each other. The wall we share is where we both have our beds. Yeah, teenage dude here. Kinda hard not to let the mind wander. And we're alone on the third floor...

Interesting.

I shake my head, clearing it. I obviously need to get laid.

"Wow," says a small voice. I look over my shoulder, spotting Bella in the doorway. "This room is...big."

I raise my eyebrows, scanning the room. It's not *that* big. There's a king-sized bed—as mentioned—positioned in the middle of the room, with the headboard against the same wall as my bed— *Enough, Cullen. We've fucking covered the bed. Move on.* Right. On the wall—the *other* wall—is the entertainment center. Flat screen, bookshelves, DVD player, surround sound system... By the wall next to the door is a desk, a new laptop, a chair, some binders...and next to the desk is a double closet. That leaves the wall across the room, which is made out of glass. Though, it's not really a wall. They're sliding doors opening to the balcony that we share. Our rooms are really the same—even when it comes to furniture—only, I have an ensuite bathroom in mine. Oh, the colors are different, too. My room was done in shades of grey. Bella's is in white and dark red.

"Mom decorated it," I say dumbly, not really knowing what to say. "My room looks pretty much the same."

She nods once, and then it's almost awkward. So, I clear my throat and tell her that I'm next door if she needs me to tell her where stuff is. Shit like that.

Then I return to my room.

~CYE~

Five minutes into dinner, Dad pounces. "Isabella, what are your plans for college?"

With Mom and Dad at each head of the table, I sit across from Bella. Like me, she doesn't appear to be a talker. Maybe 'cause she has a lot on her mind. New town, new home, no parents. Now, *there's* something. No parents. I wonder what that's like—not to have parents.

"Um..." She clears her throat, looking very uncomfortable. "I'm thinking about holding off on college next year."

In reflex, everything inside of me tenses. I nearly drop my fork.

*Holding off on college?*

I swallow and look down at my plate, and I feel how my appetite just flies out of me.

And for the first time, I wonder if Dad will treat her like he treats me.

"I see," is Dad's reply. Yeah, he's not pleased. Fuck. "Well, perhaps you'll reconsider while you're here."

Keeping my head lowered, I sneak a glance at Bella. She's frowning at Dad; she's confused. I can't blame her. Hopefully, she won't learn his ways the hard way. Actually, she will hopefully not learn his ways at all.

"Anyone want dessert?" Mom asks lightly, breaking the silence. Sometimes I wonder if she knows.

"No, thanks," I mutter. "I'm full."

Five minutes later, I lock the door to my room before plopping down on the bed.

Too many questions swirl around in my fucking head. Or should I say worries? Fears?

With my hands behind my head, I stare up at the ceiling.

One thing is clear. I need to find a fucking balance. Bella can't ever find out about...well, me. She needs to know the Edward-Fucking-Cullen that attends Forks High. Not the lame pussy he- *I* – am...here, at home.

Nobody likes a fucking pansy.

Nobody wants a weakling.

~CYE~

I don't know for how many years the third floor has been mine and mine alone, so when I wake up on Saturday morning to the sound of a shower running, it takes a while for me to get my bearings straight. Then my mind starts wandering again. Bella, a very fucking hot chick, is showering just across the hall. Naked, water sliding down, hot, wet, steamy... *fucking...shower.*

I groan quietly, slipping a hand underneath the waistband of my boxers. I grip my morning wood tightly and use my free hand to push off the covers. It doesn't take long for the images to invade my head. Bella, in the shower, touching herself.

She'd look up at me as her hand traveled down her stomach. She'd be a tease.

"Fuck me," I grunt in my morning voice. I swipe my thumb over the head of my dick, feeling a drop of pre-cum. I groan again and thrust into my hand. My eyes are screwed shut. Images fucking assault me. Her tits, although covered by a snug hoodie yesterday, looked fucking spectacular. Not small—*definitely* not small—*round*, not perky. And her ass... "Oh, shit." I speed up, thinking about those skinny jeans she wore yesterday and how they hugged her ass.

I'd fuck her.

In the shower. I'd tell her to put her hands on the wall, and I would shove my cock inside of her from behind. I would fuck her pussy deeply and hard. My hands would grip her hips or reach around her to squeeze her tits, or...I would cup her ass in my hands and...

"Ahhh!" I moan, feeling my insides coil, my abs tense, my fucking thighs tingle. I stroke myself roughly, thrusting jerkily as I start coming. "*Ungh, fuck... Yeah, fuck, yeah...*"

Ripples of tiny shudders run through me. I let out a few labored breaths. *Holy shit*. Nice fuckin' way to start the morning, I gotta say. But when I lift my head and look down, I grimace at the goddamn mess that comes with being a dude. Girls have it so easy. Seriously.

*Time for a shower.*

~CYE~

"Good morning," I say, entering the kitchen. I smirk when Bella looks up from her breakfast, only to avert her eyes fast as hell. Maybe it's 'cause I'm only wearing a pair of sweats—drawn to my calves—and a towel around my neck. But hey, this is how I eat breakfast every morning. First I shower, then I eat, then I get dressed for the day. Should that change just 'cause a girl is living with us now? I don't fucking think so. And if Bella happens to like what she sees, then maybe we could *enjoy* these months we have left before graduation. I could make her forget the loss of her parents.

"Oh, Edward," Mom sighs, putting down a plate as I take my seat.

"Couldn't you put a shirt on?"

I shrug and take a piece of bacon. "Why the fuck should I?" She doesn't even bother to remind me of my foul language anymore. She just gives

me a tired look. "Whatever. Where's Dad? I noticed that his car's gone." I noticed 'cause it's the first thing I do after leaving the bed. Call it a ritual.

"He left for Seattle early this morning," Mom replies, and I frown. After a business trip, he's usually home for at least a few days before leaving again. "He'll be back on Thursday."

*Oh.*

I look down at my hands in my lap, processing her words. Unsurprisingly, I feel myself relaxing.

"So, any plans today?"

"Not really," I say with a shrug. "There's probably a party later, but other than that..." I shrug again.

She nods slowly, casting a glance at Bella. "Maybe you could show Bella around town?" I'm good at shrugging, so I do that again. I don't mind showing her around. It's sorta up to her. "What do you think, Bella?"

"Uh... Yeah, sure." She doesn't really sound enthusiastic, but I guess I can't blame her. Forks is a pile of crap compared to Phoenix. "But only if you have nothing better to do," she adds quickly, eyes on me.

I smirk. "Nope. Nothing better to *do*."

Since she's been kinda timid so far, I'm a bit surprised when she reacts to my innuendo with the bitch-brow cocked. Fuck, that's hot. I give her a wink for good measure, making sure that there's no way for her to misunderstand my intentions. I mean, why beat around the fucking bush? No pun intended.

If she shoots me down, then fine. I'll just move on. But if she's on board... well...



~CYE~

"Want some music?" I ask, placing my right hand on the back of the passenger seat's headrest as I back out of the garage. When the road widens, I spin the car around before revving the engine. I swear, that purr does it for me. Fucking *love* my car.

"Doesn't really matter," she mutters, sinking down in her seat. And of course, she's facing the fucking window. I'm honestly starting to wonder if she's a shy girl. Her clothes – skinny jeans and a sexy top – tell another tale, as does the bitch-brow she shot me at breakfast, but other than that, she's fucking mute. I briefly entertain the idea of her being a geek, but she's too hot for that.

I check her out from the corner of my eye, easily looking down her cleavage. Yeah, she's definitely too hot to be a geek.

"Fuck, you're a quiet one," I sigh, reaching the main road. I turn left, driving toward the center of this shitty little town.

What the fuck am I supposed to show her, anyway? There's *nothing* fun in Forks.

"Edward?"

Wow. "She speaks."

She snorts. "Whatever. You wouldn't by any chance know where a girl can get some pot around here, do ya?"

Ah, *now* we're talking.



## Chapter 2 Fucking High

*Chapter song – One Way Trip by Lil Wayne*

### **BPOV**

"Oh, you wanna get *high*, Bella?" Edward asks, looking awfully amused. I just give him a nod before returning my gaze to the window. "Okay, you got it."

I close my eyes, feeling him speed up the car.

Behind closed lids, I see my parents' disappointed looks. It's the expression they'd both wear if they knew why I had called them from school, begging for them to come and get me. And, of course, it had to happen on a Thursday—the day they went grocery shopping together before I came home from school. Thursdays were their days. Owning their own business made it possible for them to decide when to take time off.

*Fucking* Thursday put them in the same car. My phone call sent them both to a sure death. Both of them. *Both* of my parents. Just gone.

"I have a buddy in Port A..."

I tune Edward out. As hot as he is, and as much as I'd love to give him one helluva ride, it's the last thing I need...even though there's a part of me telling me it's inevitable. Especially if we're gonna get high. But if I did sleep with him...*when I do sleep with him*...it would just confirm the shit

my so-called friends at my old school called me, which in the end made me call Mom and Dad to pick me up...*that* day. That fucking Thursday.

"*You dirty fucking whore!*"

"*Takes nothing for you to get on your knees, does it?*"

"*Manipulative bitch!*"

"*Lying slut!*"

"*Fucking skank!*"

"*Home wrecker!*"

I flinch as the insults play on repeat in my head.

~CYE~

Edward tells me to wait in the car when we've reached an apartment building in Port Angeles.

*Like I had plans on coming with him in the first place.*

When he returns, he says, "All right. I know some place secluded."

His wink doesn't escape my notice.

It's quite clear that he thinks we're gonna do something more than smoking.

I remind myself *again* that I shouldn't cause trouble—I *shouldn't* sleep with him...

But as we reach Forks again and Edward turns onto a dirt road, leading farther away from civilization, I can feel reason leaving me. I will feel

horrible afterward, but that's not enough for me to stop. The only thing stopping right now is the car. We've reached the end of the road.

"Come on."

He leaves the car. I follow silently.

Fuck warning bells.

It's just for a little while.

Right?

"We'll be there in five minutes."

*I wasn't asking.*

We keep walking. Edward's nice enough to help me over a few trunks and smaller boulders. Through the thick forest, we walk. I focus on breathing. And maybe Edward's ass for a beat or two. I guess I could've done worse. Hell, I *have* done worse.

Five minutes later, we reach a small hunting cabin. It looks abandoned, but a closer look tells me that this is probably one of those places Edward visits every once in a while. Maybe with his friends. There are a few beer cans, empty bottles, cigarette butts, and food containers.

The inside isn't impressive—just one single room—but for this, it's perfect. There's a couch, a coffee table, a few chairs, and a twin bed.

There's a faint smell of pot in here. Lingerin'.

"Home, sweet home," Edward jokes, plopping down on the bed. Of course he'd go for the bed. Hormonal fucking teenager. "C'mere." He pats the spot next to him, smirking. "I won't bite. Unless that's what you like."

*Pathetic.*

I walk over to the tiny bed. It looks clean, but I wonder if it really is. I *should* care.

"Consider yourself lucky, Bella," he chuckles quietly as I sit down on the edge of the bed. I lean down to untie my shoes. "You're the first girl I've brought here. Only Emmett and Peter know about this place."

"Lucky me," I deadpan. The bed creaks a little as I fall back against the mattress. "Just light up the joint, will ya?" I sigh, getting comfortable.

With us being so close, I can feel his laughter rather than hear it. His shoulders shake slightly but, luckily, he keeps his mouth shut. Words are the last thing I need right now.

I breathe in deeply, smelling the heavy scent of pot.

It's quiet and peaceful.

"Here," he mumbles, all traces of humor gone, and then he places the lit joint at my lips. He holds it while I take a drag, not a big one. One to test, one to see how strong it is. I hold the smoke in my lungs, feeling my eyes well up a little. Edward's close, propped up on his elbow and looking down at my face.

I exhale as he takes a deep drag.

*More.*

When he places the joint for me to take another pull, he leans down a few more inches.

I feel his fingers on my lips as I inhale.

"Close your eyes," he whispers. His sweet breath wafts over my face, and I obey him, closing my eyes as I hold my own breath.

*Exhale.*

It doesn't take long before I'm completely relaxed.

Not moving a single muscle.

"Open your mouth."

The joint fizzles and crackles quietly when he takes a pull from it, and I know that he's wants me to shotgun him.

I do.

Soft lips touch mine, and I breathe in when he breathes out.

Again, I hold the smoke. But this time, there's more pleasure.

He moves his mouth to kiss my neck. Slowly, sensually. I shiver and release a breath.

"Fuck, you're so hot," he whispers against my skin. Through two layers of denim, I can feel his dick on my thigh. Hard, so hard, making me wet, so wet. His tongue darts out, and another shiver runs through me when he drops an openmouthed kiss below my ear.

"More," I moan softly.

My nipples constrict against the lacy bra I'm wearing.

We're wearing way too much. We should rectify that.

"*Fuck,*" he curses, lifting his head. I open my eyes to meet his dark ones. I don't look away from him as I take another drag, and he doesn't look away from me, either. "I want to finger you."

I smirk lazily, feeling my eyes glaze over. "Is that all?"

His smirk is just as lazy. "No." He shakes his head slowly. "I want to fuck you, too." I breathe in shakily. My panties are soaked. "But I want to finger-fuck you first."

I lick my lips and nod. That's all he needs before closing his mouth over mine. He kisses me forcefully and deeply, pushing his tongue into my mouth. It makes me whimper. Fuck, it sets me on *fire*. But then he's gone. He puts out the joint and tells me to strip. Which I do. We're all hands while we get rid of our clothes. *Oh, my God*. His body is...so hot. Like a swimmer. Lean, but muscular.

"*Jesus, you're sexy,*" he breathes out. He kneels in between my parted legs. My eyes are on his cock. Not the biggest I've had, but definitely *big*. Big enough to make me feel stretched and properly filled. And hard. "You shave," he murmurs huskily and licks his lips. I hum when he traces a single finger along the length of my pussy. "Damn, baby." He pushes one inside of me, and I arch my back, wanting more, more, more. "Fucking hell, Bella," he moans, looking up at me. He keeps fingering me slowly and deeply. "I..." He swallows. "Shit, can I take a picture of this? No faces, just...your pussy and my fingers."

*No. Never. That's stupid. It could come back to haunt me. It can hurt me. Forget it.*

"Okay," I exhale.

It's obvious that he didn't expect me to agree, and somewhere inside of me, I don't. But I'm beyond caring.

He practically salivating as he fingers me, all while clicking off shots on his iPhone. True to his word, he only takes pictures of my pussy and his

fingers. He even shows me them, and...they're fucking hot. He thinks so, too. At least, his leaking cock says so.

"Oh, fuck," I moan, throwing my head back. He can use his fingers. *Shit*, he can really use his fingers. The spots he finds, the speed, the pressure, the heat, the tingling... "*Edward*..."

He almost makes me arch off the bed.

"Holy fuck," he whimpers. Yes, *whimpers*. "Come on, baby. Let me see you."

And then he covers my body with his. He kisses me frantically, hotly, wetly, and thrusts his hips against me at the same pace he fingers me. Two, three fingers inside of me. I moan loudly and cling to him. I fist his hair and return the kiss as passionately as I possibly can. It's a frenzy. The fire is spreading through me. He's got me so fucking worked up, it's insane. His thumb pressing down circles on my clit sends me into goddamn oblivion. Pretty sure he makes me scream as I come.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," I hear him chanting...somewhere.

It's like I'm under water.

And before I can return to reality, his fingers are replaced by his cock.

I choke on a moan.

"Oh, *God*," he groans loudly against my neck, and then he's pounding into me.

It's wild, with nothing held back.

He's rough—so far from gentle.



My legs are suddenly wrapped around him. The angle brings him deeper and deeper. There's no stopping. He's forceful and relentless. But he's good. He's so fucking good. Through sharp thrusts, he both takes and gives.

But... "Condom," I manage to wheeze out.

"*Fuck that,*" he all but *growls* out. "I won't come in you, but...*fuck, fuck, uungh...*I gotta feel...all of you."

I push down the voice of reason, getting lost in the pleasure again.

However, I'm not "lost" for long. Edward is a teenage boy. Soon, he pulls out of me and strokes himself roughly as he comes on the mattress. Three, four, five streams, and a little one that trickles down his cock and his hand. The sight of him sends the umpteenth shiver through me. His heaving chest, his Adam's apple as he swallows, the small beads of sweat on his forehead, his slightly flushed cheeks.

"Motherfuckin'..." He pants and drops his chin to his chest.

The euphoria is seeping out of me, taking a little of the high with it.

Reality isn't as fun.

While he recovers, I sit up and put on my clothes again.

*Condom, condom, condom.* The fucker didn't use a condom.

"Next time, use a goddamn rubber," I spit out, reaching for my shoes.

He chuckles breathlessly. "Next time?"

I give him a glare. We both know there will be more. We're going to live together, for fuck's sake. There's no use in pretending.

"All right, all right," he laughs, putting up his hands in surrender. "I just don't see the fucking problem." I arch a brow, wondering if he's mentally challenged. "I didn't come in you," he points out.

I roll my eyes and he gets out of the bed to redress. First of all, I can still get knocked up—even if he doesn't come in me—'cause his dick isn't exactly closed off while fucking me. But it's the "second of all" that bothers me. "I don't wanna catch anything from the previous skanks you've fucked." I mean, let's be honest. It's quite clear that Edward has a casual view on sex. So do I, but I *never* go without protection.

"Shit, I didn't think of that," he mutters, and I want to *hit* him! "Well, *you're* safe," he says, stepping into his jeans. "But am *I*?"

"What?" I ask, irritated.

He waves a hand at my pussy. *Articulate asshole*. "I've never fucked without a condom before. So, you're safe. But am I safe?"

Oh. "Yeah, you're safe."

He grins. "Good. So, are we cool? You trust me and shit?"

"Why the fuck should I trust you?" I chuckle humorlessly. "I barely *know* you, Edward."

The bastard pretends to be wounded by placing a hand over his heart. The smirk tells it all, though. "I'm hurt, Bella. We're practically family."

"Whatever," I mutter, waving him off. I just want to get back to my room now. The fun is over. "Next time, use a condom."

"Fine," he sighs.

When we get back outside, he surprises me by grabbing my hand. "Wait," he says, and I turn around to face him. "Exclusive, yeah?"

*What?*

"Exclusive?"

He nods. "Don't fuck anybody else when you're fucking me."

I can't help but laugh. "You have nothing to worry about, Edward. I wasn't supposed to fuck *you*, much less anyone else." I don't need more drama in my life. "Exclusive sounds good, but it's a two-way street, all right?"

"I wouldn't tell you to stay away from other dicks if I didn't plan on doing the same. But with pussy," he laughs, and we start walking again. "What do you take me for?"

He *really* doesn't want me to answer that question.

~CYE~

After a quiet dinner with Edward and Esme, I'm told that there's a party in Port Angeles. Apparently, before dinner, Edward was holed up in his room, making plans with his friends. Or something. He asks me if I want to tag along, and seeing as the Cullens' house freaks me out a little, I agree without missing a beat. Okay, it doesn't really freak me out, but there's a not-so-pleasant vibe about the massive house. Besides, it's either going to a party or staying in my room, crying over my parents.

"Don't wait up, Mom!" Edward calls out as we leave.

He doesn't stick around for a response. Instead, he just drags me out to his car. I guess the clothes I changed into after dinner have earned his approval, 'cause boy can't take his eyes off my legs.

"So, denim skirts are okay in your book?" I ask casually, sliding into the passenger seat. If he likes my rather short skirt, he's probably going to like my top, too. It's just a simple wife-beater in black, but it's tight, and

my bra pushes my tits up perfectly. That's for later, though. For now, I have a snug dark brown hoodie over it. It matches my brown Chucks.

Edward closes my door—I know, how chivalrous—and rounds the car, not answering my rhetorical question until he's peeling out of the driveway.

"You can say that," he replies quietly, reaching over to place his hand on my naked thigh. Big hand, long fingers. He's not shy, that's for sure. Then again, neither am I. "By the way, stay close to me tonight."

A small laugh escapes my lips, and I'm surprised. "What do you mean by *that?*"

I'm not looking for someone to piss on my leg. I don't want a fucking boyfriend.

The last one stabbed me in the back, so I can't say I'm looking for that to happen again.

And Alec was supposed to be a goddamn *adult*.

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself," I add, folding my arms over my chest.

"I'm sure you are," he chuckles and steps on the gas. "But I need people to understand that you're off limits. You're mine now, Tinks."

*Tinks?*

"Who the hell do you think you are, you prick?" I snap. "I'm not a fucking possession you can control."

Been there, done that.

"Calm your tits, Bella," he laughs, only infuriating me more. "This is just how shit is. Fucking deal with it. As long as you and I are fucking, other

dudes need to know not to come on to you. And I'm Edward Cullen, all right? My word is law."

Can't fucking *believe* this. "You're *serious*," I say incredulously.

He keeps his eyes on the road, nodding slowly. "Without a doubt. I don't want to have to look over my shoulder and see some douche trying to score with you. So, if you just stay with me tonight, people will know. I promise, it won't get back to my parents."

Earlier—after our "grand tour of Forks"—he told me not to say a word about us to his folks. 'Cause *that* was my plan.

Sarcasm.

"No, you just want the entire school to know," I respond sarcastically.

"Yes."

Son of a bitch. "Well, you can forget it," I huff.

"*Really?*" He hums, appearing to be amused. "So, you're okay with girls flirting with me, then?"

Honestly? "I couldn't give two shits about that. As long as they keep their hands to themselves."

I'm not the jealous type. Plus—like I already fucking told him—I barely *know* Edward. I have nothing to covet. His fingers are magic, his cock knows how to work me, and his body is perfection but, as far as I know—what I've come to understand—is that Edward Cullen is an arrogant prick. He's pompous and cocky. Goddamn conceited.

"Ah." He nods. "But they won't, Bella."

See? He's so fucking full of himself.

"I speak from experience," he adds, giving me a wink.

"Whore," I cough, and the word echoes in my head afterward. I can't believe I just said that. Even as a half-joke. The use of that word almost slams me back to my life in Arizona. I didn't deserve to be called that.

Edward, on the other hand, responds by barking out a loud laugh.

"Oh, Bella." He shakes his head. "You don't know what you're talking about."

He's wrong. Edward isn't the first prick I've encountered. My old school is full of idiots like Edward. They're great in the sack, but they leave a lot to be desired in every other department. The cheerleaders and various skanks who want them as boyfriends are just delusional. Guys like Edward don't know how to keep it in their pants for long.

"Like you haven't slept your way through Forks already," I mutter, turning my gaze to the window. "I wasn't born yesterday."

"Like I said." He clears his throat. "You don't know what you're talking about."

And I leave it there, 'cause I suddenly feel drained. There's no fight in me. Plus, if I let Edward "stake his fucking claim", other guys will back off, which is a good thing for me.

I need alcohol.

~CYE~

When we arrive in Port Angeles, I'm at least glad Edward's not treating me like a girl made out of glass. There's no sweetness. Sure, he opens my door, he tends to call me "baby", and he drapes an arm around me. But it could've been worse. He could hold my hand, he could kiss me sweetly, or

he could caress my fucking cheek, at which I would've vomited all over his designer label motherfucking shoes.

Edward isn't sweet. He's possessive.

As we walk up the path, leading to a two-story house, several people who are in the front yard stare at Edward with wide eyes. Like he's Gandhi or... maybe Hitler. Yeah, 'cause there's definitely fear in some people's eyes. Jesus fucking Christ, what has Edward done to make people scared of him?

"What are you wearing under that sweatshirt?" he asks, peering down at my chest.

Well, no one can mistake him for being a grownup.

"A beater," I sigh as we walk up the porch steps.

"Nice."

Jackass.

"So, whose house is this?" I ask. The fact that I'm going to meet my future classmates—or some of them—at a party and not in school, yeah, that feels a bit odd, but whatever.

"I have no idea," he chuckles in response. "But who cares?" And then we're inside. The music is loud and there are drunken people everywhere. Holy shit. "My friends are in the living room," he murmurs in my ear. "You smell good, by the way." He takes another whiff, then straightens and leads me through the house until we find the living room.

"Oi, Cullen's here!"

"Over here, man!"

"Hey, Cullen!"

"Cullen!"

"Good God," I mutter, watching in disbelief as everyone just makes room for Edward. It's like watching the parting of the Red Sea, for fuck's sake. Standing on my tiptoes, I ask an honest question in Edward's ear. "If you say 'jump', will they ask how high?" I'm seriously wondering, 'cause this is *ridiculous*.

Edward's not even a jock. In fact—according to Esme—he's a straight-A student.

"You might as well get used to it, baby," he replies, kissing the spot below my ear, which his friends see. It's comical how their eyes widen. "I'm the king here."

I roll my eyes.

"Now, let's get comfortable," he says, ushering me to the couch. Said couch was—up until a moment ago—occupied. But when Edward's in the room, he can sit wherever the fuck he wants, and now he wants us on the couch. He sits in the middle, owning it. Like a sexy version of Al Bundy. *Sans* the hand down his pants—thank *God*. And it's easy to see that Edward is a "the" person. He's not Edward Cullen. He's *the* Edward Cullen. People know of him, *about* him. And I sit next to him. With Edward's arm resting behind me, on the back of the couch.

By now, his friends are smirking.

"You work fast, man," a guy—who could be a linebacker—laughs as he and Edward bump fists. "So, this is the new chick, eh?"

Edward smirks. "Yeah. Guys, this is Bella. Bella," he tilts his head in my direction, "that's Emmett," he points at the linebacker, "and there's Peter,



Tyler, Mike, Eric, and the bitch that just sat down on Emmett's lap is Rosalie."

"Fuck you, Cullen," Rosalie spits out, glaring at Edward before facing me with a softer expression. "Nice to meet you, Bella. But I gotta say your taste in men is despicable."

Edward flips her off before saying something to...Peter, I think his name was.

I can't help but laugh at that. I think I like this chick. "Nice to meet you, too, Rosalie."

"Rose," she corrects before tipping back her beer bottle. Leaving Emmett's lap, she walks over and sits down next to me on the couch, and I can see that Edward and his friends are already busy talking about...whatever.

"So, he snatched you up pretty fast," Rose mentions quietly, even leaning in a little. "Didn't you just arrive?"

"Yesterday," I chuckle dryly. "For the record, though, he hasn't snatched me up, as you put it." I gotta get this shit right.

She smirks. "Just sex, then?"

"Well, it sure as hell isn't for his sweet personality."

"Ha! Okay, I like you, Bella," she laughs. "Just..." She leans in again. "Make sure he wraps it, 'cause he has four skanks here in Port A at his beck and call."

Mother...*fucker!*

If he's given me an STD, I will *cut* his fucking dick off with a rusty knife.

"Does he now?" I respond, gritting my teeth together.

Rose nods. "He doesn't do high school students, but he has a few girls over at the community college here in Port Angeles." She scans the crowd here in the living room. "Wouldn't be surprised if at least one of them is here."

That's when I feel Edward's hand on my neck, and he presses two fingers against my jaw, making me face him. He leans in, too. "You two can't whisper for shit, Bella," he murmurs. An involuntary shiver rips through me when the tip of his tongue brushes my earlobe. "And I fucking *told* you. I've always used rubber before."

I huff and lean back a little. "I have *no* reason to trust you," I say quietly, angrily. "I swear to all that is holy, Edward, if you..." I trail off, too pissed to continue without shouting.

I realize that all my anger isn't directed at him, though. I'm furious with myself, too. I was stupid enough to jump into bed with a guy I hardly know, all while being high as a fucking kite. I should've known better.

"Feel free to get tested," he replies with a shrug. "But I'm clean."

I sigh and let it go for now. All I want is alcohol.

"I need a drink," I announce, making a move to stand up.

Edward stops me before I can. "Ask and you shall receive, baby." He lets out a sharp whistle, and...

"Unbelievable." I'm in disbelief again.

Some dude walks over with two unopened beers and hands them over.

"Here ya go," Edward chuckles, removing the cap from one of them before handing me the bottle. "Enjoy it, Tinks."

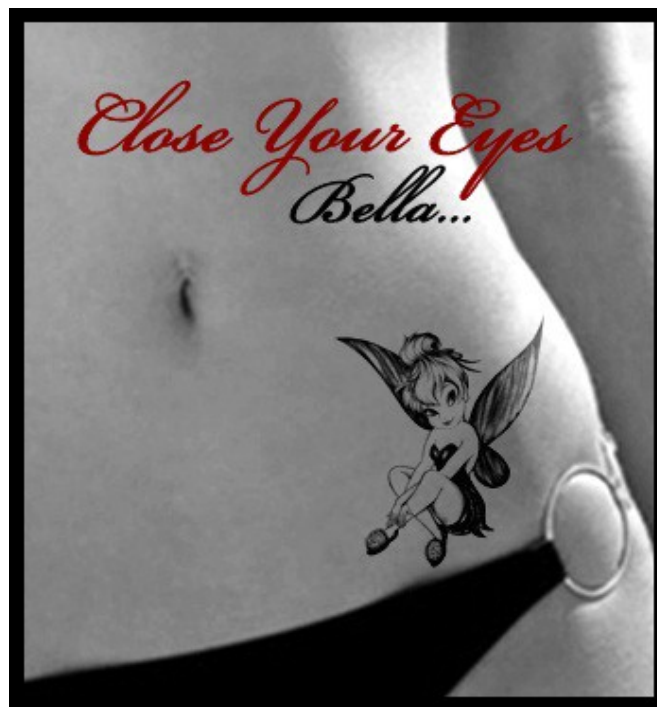
There it is again. "That's the second time you've called me that."

He winks. "Don't think I didn't notice the ink on your hip earlier." Oh, right. *That*. "Yeah, fucking *hot*." He licks his lips, watching me hungrily. It makes me clench my thighs together. Again, he leans in, and I find myself leaning in, too. "Seriously, baby," he whispers in between kisses on my neck. "I almost came when I saw it."

*Ungh.*

Without changing his position on the couch, he tilts our heads together and kisses me slowly, seductively, lazily, tasting me with his tongue. And if this is the reaction I get from a tattoo, I wonder what I'll get when I tell him that my tongue is pierced. I make a mental note to put in a piercing tomorrow.

"I assume it was the ink and not the image itself," I chuckle breathlessly as he nibbles on my bottom lip.



He chuckles, too. "The ink. Definitely the ink." I'm relieved. 'Cause the tattoo is of Tinkerbell, and though it's designed to be a sexy version of Tinkerbell, it's still a very girly tattoo. Had Edward loved the fact that it's a

cartoon fairy, I would've been worried. But I chose Tinkerbell for a reason, and it's for that same reason I break the kiss and chug down some beer.

"There's a story behind that tattoo, isn't there?" he asks, studying me closely. "Your eyes just changed."

My brows knit together. *How the fuck did he notice?*

I force a smile. "It's nothing."

Despite his obvious doubt, he lets it go, and I return my attention to Rose for a while. She's talking to some chick who she introduces me to. Charlotte. She's dating Peter, apparently. And for the next hour or so, they fill me in on a few things about Forks High, the people who go there, and some other shit. The only evidence of Edward's presence is the occasional touch on my thigh and kiss on my neck. Other than that, he's busy with his friends. I hear them laugh, talk about sports, and I see them drink, but that's it. We all remain seated around the coffee table. Drinking, laughing, talking. The girls in one group and the guys in another.

We're in a bubble, but that's not to say that I don't notice the people around us, outside of our "group", 'cause I sure as shit do. My arrival in town is evidently a reason for gossip and whispers.

Same shit, different town, really.



*Chapter song – Daddy's Eyes by The Killers*

**BPOV**

"Time to go," I sigh in frustration. The sigh is soon replaced by a grunt as I try to pull Edward off the couch. He's so shitfaced. "It's three in the fucking morning, Cullen."

"Don't call me that," he slurs. Finally, Emmett helps me, and soon I have Edward on both his feet. His arm goes around my shoulders, and I place a hand on his stomach to steady him. He's like Bambi, only worse. "I'm telling-ing you, Tinks..." He dips down and nuzzles my neck. "Don't call me Cullen-en."

"Fine," I reply dryly, slowly walking us toward the door. "I won't call you *Cullenen*."

Again, it's like the parting of the Red Sea. Everyone makes space for Edward, albeit slower this time. Maybe because no one at this party can handle their liquor.

"I'm *serious*, Bella," he mutters drunkenly when we finally reach the door. Now I just need to get him to the car. "*Everyone* calls me that, and..." He makes a weird hand gesture. "But you're not allowed."

I sigh. "Is that supposed to be an insult?"

"No, the opp'site," he hiccups, making me laugh quietly. "You have a beautiful fucking smile, Tinks."

And my laugh dies.

"*We have to keep this quiet, Isabella. I love you so much, but we can't risk getting caught.*"

"You're so amazing, love. Only one semester left, and then we can be together."

"Do you know how much your pretty smile owns me? I'd do anything for you."

"Soon, Isabella. Just keep quiet a little longer."

"Smile for me, sweetness. I need you to smile for me. You're not giving up on me, are you?"

God, how fucking clueless and naïve I was.

"Give me your keys, Cullen-

He shuts me up by pressing his lips to mine. Right there, next to his car.

"Edward," he mumbles, pecking me. "Not fuckin' Cullen."

And this is disturbing. Affection isn't my thing. It's all bullshit. *Lies.*

I'm a good fuck. That's it. That's *all*. It's what I've been told.

"You're a fucking girl," I tell him, backing away. I cringe at the shiver that runs through me. The last thing I need is to get played again. "Now, give me the keys, *Edward.*"

He frowns and leans back against his car. "What's your *problem?*"

"Nothing!" I groan. It's late, I have a headache, I remember too much. "I just want to go..." *Home?* I don't *have* a home. I sigh. "Back to Forks. I need to sleep."

"Well..." A slow smirk takes over his features. "I'm the on-only one allowed to d-drive my Aston."

Yeah, he tells me this as he hands over the key.

Smooth operator.

It takes a while, but eventually I manage to get Edward's drunk ass into the passenger's seat, and then I take the wheel. Shit. Feels like power, this. Hell, when I rev the engine, I'm pretty sure I'm close to having an orgasm.

"Savor the moment, Tinks," he yawns.

Whatever.

~CYE~

The house is quiet and dark when we get back, and I'm a little surprised that Esme doesn't wake up when I help Edward up the stairs, 'cause he's not very quiet. For the record, Edward can't sing to save his fucking life, but that doesn't stop him from trying.

"Jesus, Edward," I breathe out when he almost walks into a wall. "Get a goddamn grip, will ya?"

He giggles.

*Awesome.*

Thankfully, I reach his bedroom then. I swing it open, all but pushing Edward inside.

"Trying to get into m-my be-ed, baby?" he slurs, smirking lazily. I roll my eyes at him and lead him over to his bed. Once there, I unbutton his jeans and push them down his hips. Then I let go, knowing that he's going to fall back against the bed, which he does. "Damn, Tinks, I'm getting hard for ya." He waggles his eyebrows as I help him with his shoes. "Wanna fuck?"

I *really* don't. "Get some sleep, Edward," I sigh. His jeans and shoes are off. Same goes for his jacket. That'll do. "See ya tomorrow," I mumble before I leave his room. He's already snoring.

Instead of going straight to bed, I aim for the bathroom. I need a shower, like I always do. Time to wash away the filth of the day. Not that I can actually get rid of it. It's always there.

When the hot water runs down my body, I squeeze my eyes shut.

I scrub until my skin is red.

Religiously.

"I'm sorry," I breathe out. Faces flash before my eyes. Their expressions change. Tears burn behind my closed lids. My parents, my so-called friends, Alice, the cops when they showed up at school, Alec... "I'm so sorry..."

I wish I could be someone good. A person my parents were proud of.

Not a whore.

Not a gullible little girl.

Not a runaway.

~CYE~

## **EPOV**

Motherfucking headache.

After my morning shower, I go downstairs to hunt for food.

"Good morning, honey," Mom greets me from the stove. "Did you and Bella come in late?"



"No fuckin' idea," I mutter in my morning voice. "I need coffee."

"Coming right up," she says, smiling. "Bella's in the dining room already. Take a seat and I'll bring you breakfast."

"All right."

And, of course, Tinks has to look fucking hot this morning. She may call what she's wearing pajamas, but I call it major cockteasing. Pajama shorts, ending mid-thigh, and a black wife-beater. Goddamn ponytail. All that skin showing. Maybe I can talk her into another visit to the cabin.

"Morning," I yawn, taking my seat across from her.

She doesn't even look up from her plate. "Good morning," she mumbles quietly.

I scowl.

Would it fucking kill her to smile?

"Here you go, honey," Mom says, appearing in the dining room with my breakfast. "What are your plans for the day?"

"Thanks," I mutter, digging into my toast. As for her question, I shrug.

I have no idea what today's plan is. Well, there are a few things I need to get done, preferably right after breakfast, but after that...

"If you don't have any thing planned, maybe you could give Bella a ride to Port Angeles?"

I cock a brow at her. "Why?" Then I look over at Tinks. "What's in Port A?"

Mom answers for her. "Your father called earlier." I stiffen. He's not returning yet, is he? I mean, she told me he wasn't coming back until Thursday. "And he said that Bella's new car has arrived at the dealership."

*Oh.*

"I really don't need my own car, Esme," Tinks says quietly.

"Of course you do, sweetie," Mom replies, smiling all motherly and shit.

"What kind of car is it?" I ask, reaching for my coffee.

Better not be a black Aston.

But I know it's going to be an expensive car. That's just how Dad is. Shit's gotta be perfect.

"A Porsche, I believe Carlisle told me," Mom says, and I nod slowly as I blow on the too-fucking-hot coffee. "And I think it's dark green."

I cock a brow. "Model?"

"Oh, I don't know such things," Mom chuckles.

~CYE~

"Jesus fuck," Tinks mutters, twirling the car key on her finger. Eyes focused on the Porsche Cayenne that is now hers. "Do you shit money?"

I snort and head back toward my car, which is parked right next to hers. "Asks the millionaire." Her parents left her a fuckload of money after they died. Life insurance, a successful gaming company, a house, stocks, a vacation home in Florida...it's all been liquidated now, so Tinks shouldn't fucking talk about money. "The cabin?" I ask over my shoulder.

I need to get high.

I need to get laid.

Honestly, I don't know what it is about that chick, but there's something... and I want more of it. Her. It. Whatever.

"Lead the way," she sighs.

So, I do.

Since I'm alone in my car, I make a few calls.

Eric Yorkie first.

"*Hello?*" he answers timidly.

Fucking loser. "It's Cullen," I say, passing the sign that tells me I'm leaving Port A. "I need you to do the usual for me on Monday." I speed up and check the rearview mirror, smirking when I see that Tinks speeds up, too. Fuck, she's hot. "And one more thing."

"Yes?" His voice cracks.

I laugh through my nose. He's so fucking scared of me. But he wants to go to college, and I pay well.

"Make sure you drop it off when a Bella Swan is next to me."

"*Uh, that would be the new girl?*" he asks nervously.

Of course, he's heard the rumors about my so-called sister. Ha. If Tinks was my sister, we'd be some serious freaks.

"Yeah, that'd be her," I reply. "If all goes well, I'll leave two hundred in your locker by the end of the day."

With that said, I hang up.

Next up is a call to my dealer in Port A. It's only a matter of time before he learns about Tinks, and I don't want him to go near her. I want to be her supplier. I mean, it's not like I'm going to charge her, but if she finds someone else, she might find another cock, too.

I was fucking serious when I told her that we'd be exclusive, but I have no goddamn idea whether or not Bella will honor that. Who knows? Maybe she was the school slut back in Arizona. 'Cause, when push comes to shove, she did spread her legs for me pretty fucking quickly. And then there was last night. Where the hell did she get off, thinking that I was some disease spreader? I've had my four go-to girls in Port A since I lost my fucking virginity. Five girls in all—well, six counting Tinks. That's not a lot, considering the pussy I've been offered in the past. And I *always* wear a damn condom. Why I didn't use one with Bella is a bit of a wonder for me, but whatever. After taking those fuckhot shots of her, fingering her into oblivion, I just had to feel all of her. I'm seriously going for it again, too. If she's high enough, she might not remind me of rubber. Going bare was fucking golden. Besides, she's probably on the pill. Aren't all girls on the pill these days? Especially those who are sexually active.

Exactly.

~CYE~

"Motherfucker," I curse, slamming the door shut behind me. Behind me, I can hear Tinks parking her car. Pissed, I take out my phone and fire off a text to Emmett.

**Cover your fucking dick. We are on our way to the cabin – Cullen.**

"Are your friends here?" Tinks asks, appearing next to me. While she's watching Emmett's Wrangler, I'm glaring at the red M3.

"Friend. Singular," I say bitterly. "The red one's Rosalie's."

She chuckles as we leave the dirt road behind. "I thought it was no girls allowed."

Well, it was supposed to be that. I wonder how long Emmett's been bringing Rosalie here. Fucker.

"Dude, are you seriously mad at Emmett for taking his girlfriend to the cabin?"

"Yes," I say flatly, holding a branch out of the way so that she can pass. "We fucking said that we wouldn't take chicks here."

"But you're bringing *me*," she points out. "Am I not a chick?"

*Oh, you're a chick, all right. Your tight pussy is proof of that.*

Damn. I adjust my dick as I walk behind her.

"That's different," I tell her. "Rules don't apply to me."

She laughs mirthlessly. "God, you're such a fucking prick."

I know.

~CYE~

Unsurprisingly, Emmett and Rosalie didn't want to leave the cabin just because Tinks and I showed up. So, now it's the four of us, smoking, talking...listening, in my case. Emmett's yammering about football, which I couldn't care less about. I am, however, listening intently to Tinks and Rosalie, who are talking about a subject I may be more curious about than I'd like to admit – Tinks' life before Forks.

The chicks are both sitting cross-legged on the bed, passing a joint between them, while Emmett and I are on the couch, and as much as I'd love to fuck the sexy brunette, I sit still, listening. Rosalie, having heard

me calling Bella "Tinks", asked why a few moments ago. A part of me didn't want Tinks to answer. Well, not to her. I honestly don't know why I call her that all of a sudden but, after seeing her sexy tattoo, I kinda enjoyed knowing a part of her that no one else knew. Knew, as in past tense, 'cause *Bella* did answer Rosalie's question.

"It's sorta in memory of my best friend from back home," she'd said, to which Rosalie had asked follow-up questions.

Questions that I'm now awaiting the answers to. If Tinks could just pass back the joint to Blondie.

Finally she does, and then I wait another few seconds before she's exhaled the smoke in her lungs.

Christ, she's so hot that it almost hurts.

"Her name was Alice," she says lazily, quietly, sadly.

*Was?*

Rosalie, who has her back to me, asks the question I want the answer to.

"Her name *was* Alice?"

Tinks looks down at her lap. "Yeah, she died when we were fifteen."

*Jesus.*

Emmett hands me the joint we share, and I take a deep pull from it, feeling my eyes glaze over as I hold my breath.

"She always reminded me of Tinkerbell," Tinks...*my Tinks*...continues quietly. "So, last year I managed to convince my folks to let me get a tattoo in her memory."

I exhale.

"That sucks," Rosalie mutters. "That she died, I mean. How'd she die?"

It's clear that the questions are unwelcome, but I fucking want the answers.

So, I don't interrupt.

"She killed herself."

"Jesus fucking Christ," I whisper under my breath as Rosalie gasps. And then I can't stay out of the conversation any longer. "Why would she kill herself?"

If they're surprised about me listening in, they don't let on, and Tinks replies without missing a beat. Flat tone, devoid of any emotion whatsoever. "Because her mom, the fucking drunk, abused her."

Warning bells go off in my head.

"Holy shit," Rosalie whispers.

I can feel myself paling and breaking out in a cold sweat.

Tinks nods. "It started when Alice's dad left them."

In an attempt to hide my shallow breaths, I take another drag from my joint.

"I begged her to go to the police," she adds. "For months, I watched how she put makeup on to cover the bruises." I clench my teeth, silently wishing she could just shut the fuck up now. "But she refused to listen. She made up excuses for her mom all the fucking time. 'She was drunk', 'She just misses Dad', 'Money's tight, so she's frustrated', 'She didn't mean it'."

I squeeze my eyes shut.

"And then she decided that she'd had enough?" Rosalie guesses quietly.

My insides churn and twist painfully. Everything feels raw and acidic inside of me. Rotting. Eating, festering. Every thought, every memory, every consequence, every excuse, every word. The times when I was younger and still cried after Dad let his fists do the talking. The times where it took several seconds before I could lie smoothly. The times when I questioned everything. The times when I actually had to go back to Dad to get stitched up or bandaged.

I wish I could say that all of this is my past and not my goddamn present.

"Yes," Tinks confirms in a whisper. I swallow bile. "She hanged herself."

And that's my cue to get the fuck out.

Handing back the joint to Emmett, I get off the couch and head outside.

I walk aimlessly, internally struggling.

After a while, I sit down on a trunk. Elbows on my knees, hands tugging painfully at my hair, eyes screwed shut.

*"She hanged herself."*

So, she gave up. She lost.

I won't surrender. Only the weak ones give up.

*"She hanged herself."*

If word got around...if the truth came out...I'd be the fucking joke. The people in Forks would see me for who I really am—weak, taking punches. Well, that's who I am, according to Dad. He says that a *real* man survives and grows stronger.



*"She hanged herself."*

Fuck, I can't wait to leave this shithole. My personal hell.

Even if it's pre-med. Even if I have to become a fucking doctor, which I don't want.

As long as I get away.

Thankfully, Johns Hopkins University is all across the country.

"God, I can't wait," I breathe out.

*God.* I scoff internally. There's no fucking God.

After firing off a text to Tinks about being hungry and going home, I make my way toward my car.

~CYE~

Don't fucking ask me why I'm in Tinks' room, but that's the first place I went once I got home. Even up here, I can smell the dinner Mom's cooking. Always the June Cleaver, that woman. And I really fucking am hungry, but I'm still here, staring blankly at the photos she's unpacked and placed on her entertainment center.

My own is filled with movies and video games. Hers is somewhat empty, apart from a few books and family photos.

She loved her folks. Easy to see in the pictures. They were close.

I hold one photo in my hand.

I laugh bitterly. I'd have to be blind not to see the special bond she shared with her dad. In the photo, she and Charlie – I remember his name was – are grinning widely, holding up a fucking fish. Sun's shining and all that

poetic crap. Renee's also in the shot, smiling at her husband and daughter. The goddamn serenity is almost mocking me.

I wonder if Charlie let Tinks choose for herself. If she wanted to dance the ballet or whatever, did he let her? If she wanted to play an instrument, did he sit patiently and listen while she practiced?

*"Oh, you don't want to do that, son," Carlisle said, grabbing Edward's arm. The five-year-old boy pouted as his daddy ushered him away. He really, really wanted learn how to use a hammer—like the boy on the picture did. The tool box looked so cool! "This is much better." Carlisle squatted down next to his son, holding out a medical kit for kids. "You want to be a good boy, don't you?"*

Dad's ringtone brings me back to reality, and I suck in a breath as I pull out my phone.

*Rigid fucking spine.*

"Hey, Dad," I say, putting back the photo.

"Son," he greets me coldly. *"I trust that you're behaving?"*

I swallow. "Of course."

*"Good. Now, I just got off the phone with Dr. Sarah Black at Forks Hospital. I told her about you." I'd say I'm surprised, but I'm really not. In fact, I've waited for this to happen. "You have a meeting with her on Monday after school."*

"About volunteering," I state quietly. In my head, I'm counting the hours I can squeeze in, and it's going to be hard. I may already have received my early acceptance to Johns Hopkins, but Dad refuses to let me back down, even a little, even if my application is full of extra credit bullshit.

*"Yes, I figured three shifts a week. Three or four hours a shift."*

Three shifts. Three days. How the fuck will I hide this shit in school? Being feared has helped me a lot over the years, and no one fucking questions me. Whatever I do, people in Forks know better than to let that come back to my parents, which means they don't tell their own parents. That's why I don't care if people know that Tinks is fucking mine. It won't come back to Mom and Dad. It's just that fucking simple. All I need to do is be careful so that no teacher will see, but the students are no issue. The hospital, however... Both grownups and kids run around there, not to mention a few losers at school who also volunteer.

This won't go well with my reputation—a reputation I fucking need to uphold.

*"Is there a problem, Edward?"* Dad asks, and now he's angry.

"No, sir," I reply, managing not to gulp. Fuck, I really am a pussy. But I can't let people know that. "I'll meet with Dr. Black right after school on Monday. Three shifts a week. Consider it done."

Dad hangs up the phone.

I breathe.

~CYE~

The rest of Saturday is uneventful. Tinks texts Mom around seven to let her know that she's with Rosalie, and that leaves Mom and me alone for one awkward fucking dinner. But I bail out after ten minutes and retreat to my room.

When someone knocks on my door little over ten PM, I tell whoever it is to fuck off.

I have too much shit to sort out with this hospital thing.

I also have plenty of homework.

Not just for school, though. Dad gives me assignments from his textbooks that I have to solve. It's a weekly thing.

So, I study.

Same goes for Sunday. It's the day I always devote to school work, though if you'd ask any of my friends, they'd tell you that I'm hanging out with my other friends in Seattle—friends that don't exist. It's my cover. And I'm painfully aware of the fact that Tinks knows I'm not in Seattle. Just another thing I have to work out.

Or...I could just say "fuck it", and let everyone know that I'm a loser.

Yeah, not happening. I'm Edward Fucking Cullen. There is one place that I control and that's Forks High. I refuse to let that slip through my fingers. I will just have to think of something if Tinks questions it.

Graduation can't come soon enough.

Only a few months to go.

~CYE~

"Wow, you're alive," Tinks mutters as I join her in the kitchen on Monday morning. "Did you even leave your room yesterday?"

No. Not for a second. I have an ensuite bathroom. I have a mini fridge. I'm all set.

"Aw, did you miss me?" I smirk and pour a cup of coffee. A good thing about *most* weekday mornings: Mom's not home. This is when she does charity work at some fucking women's shelter in Port A.

"Fuck you," she huffs.

*That sexy mouth of hers...*

I will definitely have to watch her today. She's looking incredibly fuckable in skin-hugging leggings in black...and a long t-shirt in dark blue...or is it a tunic? Whatever, it's a t-shirt that ends below her ass.

"Later," I reply with a nod. Leaning back against the counter, I sip my coffee and read the headlines on today's paper. Like I could give two shits about it.

A soft clicking sound makes me look up, though, and what I see makes my cock twitch.

"Shit, your tongue is pierced?" I ask.

She shrugs and returns to whatever she'd reading as she eats her cereal.

Fuck, I wonder if she'd be up for another photo session soon. I'd love to get a few shots of her sucking me off.

I groan under my breath and adjust my hardening dick in my jeans.

"C'mon," I sigh. "Time to get to school."

I have a feeling it's gonna be a long fucking day.



## Chapter song – Paradise by Lil Wayne

### EPOV

As Tinks and I arrive at school, I gotta shake my head in amusement at the students just standing there in the parking lot, staring at our cars. I may be used to it, but it's new for Tinks. At least I *think* it's new for her.

She parks next to me, and I grab the folder I have for Yorkie and get out of the car.

"What the fuck are they staring at?" she mutters as we start walking toward the school.

I chuckle. "Well, they *were* staring at your Porsche. But now..." I look down at her pointedly. Those tight leggings, showcasing her legs...the long t-shirt—V-neck—showing nice cleavage, and that sinful fucking leather jacket... She's wondering what they're staring at? "You're the new toy, baby," I murmur in her ear. "And they all want to play." Which reminds me... "If they come on to you, let me know."

She laughs humorlessly. "So, you can go kick their asses?" Her smile is sickeningly sweet and full of sarcasm. "My, such a hero you are, Cullen."

"Fuck you," I say, holding the door for her to enter. "Now, there's the sign," I tell her, pointing at the sign that will lead her to the principal's office so she can get signed in or what-the-fuck-ever. "I think we have four classes together, but none today." Four classes. The only AP classes she's taking. I wonder if she's an average C student and, if she is, will Dad freak out? I hope not. "We do have lunch together, though, so I'll see you later."

"All right, see ya," she sighs, and then she's off.

I let out a low whistle as I check her out, to which she flips me off over her shoulder. I laugh, 'cause she's got fire in her. Gotta appreciate that. Makes the sex better.

That's when I notice all the stares I'm getting. Safe to say, not all of these people were at the party this weekend, 'cause if they were, they'd know about Tinks by now...and me, for that matter. Tinks is off-limits, and no one is supposed to know about us. No one = adults.

"What?" I snap, glaring at the few losers gathered in the hall. "If you stare much longer, I'm gonna fucking charge."

At that, they scamper off and I walk over to Yorkie's locker.

I know the combination, of course, and once it's open, I place my folder inside. The folder with the homework I finished yesterday.

There. Done.

~CYE~

"So, how is your first day coming along?" Rosalie asks Tinks as I take my seat at our lunch table. "You're already the talk of the school."

Yeah, I've fucking heard.

"Oh, I just love it here," Tinks replies sarcastically, making Rosalie laugh.

"I know. I can't wait to get out of here, either."

At Blondie's last comment, I look over at Emmett, not surprised to see him averting his eyes. He's not going to college. Small-town kid. He likes it here. His dad owns the only diner in Forks, and Emmett's gonna take over one day. Rosalie is the opposite. She can't wait get out of this place. Think she's going to LA or some shit.

"Seriously, though," Tinks says, lowering her voice, "all they're asking is if I'm fucking Cullen." She doesn't look at me. It's just a jerk of her chin in my direction. "I gotta say, I'm already tired of listening to the girls here. Their thoughts about him are making me wanna hurl."

Rosalie laughs loudly, even throwing her head back.

"You're fucking begging for trouble." I huff, nudging Tink's arm with my own. She turns in her seat, facing me fully, and places her hand on my thigh. Much better. "You better watch it, Tinks," I add quietly, leaning in. Her breathing stutters. Just once, but it's enough. "Because we both know you fucking want me."

"You think you're a god, don't you?" she whispers in my ear.

I cover her hand with mine and guide it to my hardening dick.

"Doesn't matter what I am. You want it, regardless."

And that's the truth.

"Dude, teachers all over the place," Emmett reminds me, and I lean back in my chair again.

"Whatever," I mutter, opening my soda. But he's right. I gotta be careful. I have too much to lose. "So, what's happening this week? Any parties?"

"I'm sure something will go down," Peter says, looking up from his tray of food. "By the way-"

I cut him off there, 'cause Yorkie approaches the table with a folder in his hand. "It's another A, I hope." I smirk at the loser.

In my periphery, I can see that I have Tinks' attention.



Yorkie says nothing, of course, 'cause he's a chicken shit. He just hands me the folder before rushing away.

Idiot.

"What's that?" Tinks asks.

I don't reply, but Emmett does, chuckling. "You didn't think Cullen gets straight A's by actually studying, did ya?"

"He pays Eric Yorkie to do all his work," Rosalie adds, giving me a look of disgust.

I flip the bitch off.

"Wait, so you don't study at all?" Tinks looks up at me in disbelief.

I shrug. "I study like hell right before tests, but that's about it." I chuckle. "I have more important shit to do than being a fucking loser."

She gives me an odd look, just staring at me for a beat, and I don't fucking approve. I'm not some goddamn math problem she can solve, so I face the guys again and we start talking about sports.

~CYE~

After school's out, I drop off the two hundred bucks I owe Yorkie in his locker.

Then I'm off to the hospital.

Dr. Sarah Black greets me outside, singing Dad's praises.

She thinks it's amazing that I want to honor him by following in his footsteps and become a doctor.

I want to throw up at her.

But I don't. Instead, I pretend to be a golden boy as she shows me around and talks about what I'll be doing here three days a week after school. Talking to patients, helping nurses, answering phone calls...

I also ask about other volunteers, and I find out that there are four girls from Forks High who all spend several hours here each week. Bree Tanner—some geek, I think—wants to be a midwife, so she usually hangs out in the maternity ward. Angela Weber—the minister's prudish daughter—wants to be an NICU nurse, so she also hangs out in the maternity ward. Then we have Dr. Black's daughters. Rachel and Rebecca—recently transferred from La Push to Forks—and they are both volunteering at the hospice.

I'll avoid all of them, and when word gets out that I'm volunteering at the fucking hospital, I'll tell people that my parents will buy me my own house when I move to the East Coast for college. That should work.

Right?

Maybe I shouldn't even wait 'til rumors spread. I can tell people myself, which might let them know that it's nothing I'm embarrassed about.

~CYE~

After dinner with Mom and Tinks, all I want is to get high and to get laid. Not necessarily in that order, but I doubt I can talk Tinks into letting me film us unless she's high. And I really fucking want that. It'll be a souvenir that I'll bring with me to college. Plus, after my talk with Dad earlier, I need some good in my life. I called him as soon as I left the hospital and told him about my meeting with Dr. Black and, as predicted, his mere voice sent chills down my spine. It doesn't matter that he wasn't threatening me or disapproving of anything. That's just what his presence does to me.

Anyway, Tinks and I take my car, which I soon regret, 'cause if she'd just taken her own car, I would've had silence now.

"You sure took off after school quickly today," she starts by saying.

I look in the rearview mirror, watching as our house gets smaller and smaller. "I had some shit to deal with at the hospital." Once I reach the main road, I turn right, away from Forks, toward the cabin, which is located between Forks and Port A. "I'm gonna volunteer there," I add. Might as well get it over with.

"That doesn't sound like something you'd wanna do," she replies dryly.

"It's not." I step on the gas a little. "But my folks are gonna give me a house when I move...if I put in a few hours at the hospital. Beats the shit outta dorms, right?"

She doesn't say anything in response, and I keep my eyes on the road.

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"You really let some guy do all your homework?"

I huff out a laugh. "I fucking pay him."

I pay him to make others believe that he's the one doing the work.

Yorkie doesn't ask questions, and he's too scared of me to rat me out.

"But your parents think you're this smart guy..."

I *am* a smart fucking guy.

"And you're going to Johns Hopkins, for fuck's sake!" she exclaims, and she really can't let this go, can she? "Esme couldn't shut up about it when she was with me in Phoenix."

I give her a sideways look. "Do you have a fucking point?"

"Yes," she says, turning a little in her seat to face me better. "They think you're so accomplished, and I wonder how the hell you're gonna be able to pull off med school when you don't know shit."

"First of all," I say, turning onto the dirt road that leads into the woods, "it's pre-med. Second of all, I'll manage just fine."

She huffs. "Whatever."

Yeah. Whatever.

That's pretty much when we reach the end of the dirt road, so I quickly pull over, kill the engine, and step out of the car. More than before, I need to just fucking smoke 'til I can't think straight.

"Hurry up, will ya?" I snap. I didn't really mean for it to come out that harshly, but I don't fucking want her to ask me a bunch of questions. I'm already keeping track of so many lies that I could drown in them. It's goddamn exhausting, to be honest. But I've worked hard to create a fierce illusion, and I sure as hell don't want Bella Swan to ruin it for me. Not when I'm so close to getting out of here.

The next couple of minutes pass in silence but, apparently, Tinks is in a chatty mood.

Go fucking figure.

"Do you really drive out here every day just to smoke?"

I shrug and pick up some speed. "I used to smoke at home."

"Not anymore? Why?"

Because Dad wouldn't like it if I smoked away my fucking brain.

Mom never cared.

"You ask a lot of questions," I sigh, finally spotting the cabin ahead.

"I'm just curious, I guess."

I look over my shoulder, catching her expression as she walks behind me. Pursed lips, tilted head...inquisitive fucking eyes.

"Well, don't be," I bite out, ending the conversation as I reach the cabin. I yank the door open and breathe in the smell of pot. "Now," I turn around and face Tinks as I walk backward in the direction of the bed, "be a good girl and strip for me, yeah?" I smirk cockily and shrug out of my jacket. "I really need a good fuck right about now."

Something flashes across her eyes, something dark, but I'm too wound up to read into it. Hell, I *don't* read into shit. Period. I'm not a fucking girl.

"A good fuck," she states quietly, standing still in the middle of the room.

"That's right." I sit down on the edge of the bed. Shoes off, jeans off, shirt off. Lighter out, pot out, phone... I smirk. Phone—definitely out.

"Well, that's me," I hear her say softly.

*True, baby. You're really fucking stellar.*

Standing up in just my boxers, I light up the rolled joint and walk over to where she stands. "Here." I hand the joint to her, and she takes it. And then I go to work. I kiss her neck, I unbutton and unzip, I push and pull... until her clothes are on the floor. "Come on, baby." Grabbing her hand, I pull her with me to the bed. Before she sits down, she brings the joint to

my lips and I take a deep pull from it, watching how Tinks' eyes darken—this time in lust. I hold the smoke in my lungs, closing my eyes momentarily to savor the ease and comfort washing over me. It makes me sway a little, but it feels so fucking good.

My eyes open as I exhale, revealing a naked Tinks on her back...on the bed, looking fucking gorgeous.

I stare at her hungrily.

My cock hardens in my boxers.

With each drag from the joint, she looks oddly younger. But I realize it's not in years. It's in innocence. Or something.

"What are you waiting for?" she asks softly, quietly, lightly.

I smirk.

I join her.

I cover her body with mine.

She shivers.

Eyes glazed over.

That lazy, content, relaxed smile playing on her lips...

She looks carefree.

"Close your eyes," I whisper, taking the joint from her. She does, sighing softly as I press my body harder against hers. With my free hand, I push down my boxers. "Fucking hot," I breathe out and bring the joint to her lips. "Open."

She takes a pull from it and holds her breath.

Positioning myself at her wet pussy, I grind gently in attempt to turn her on further. I know she's fucking horny already—her taut nipples, flushed skin, and wetness tell me that—but I want more. I want her needy and desperate. I want her to forget the fucking condom issue.

I close my mouth over hers.

She exhales and I inhale.

"Mmm..." She hums, dragging her short fingernails along my back.

I hiss in pleasure.

"Condom," she moans. *Forget it, Tinks.* "I need you, Edward..."

"Fuck, baby," I breathe out, capturing her lips with mine again. For some reason, I love it when she says my name. Oh, fuck me. I can feel her tongue ring, reminding me that I want to feel it on my dick. But not now. "You're so fucking sexy," I groan, guiding my cock between the soft, wet lips of her pussy.

I take a drag from the joint, simultaneously rubbing the head of my dick against her clit. That makes her whimper – a sound I fucking love. Eyes still closed, she opens her mouth, probably having heard me take a drag, and so I take the hint and exhale in her mouth.

That's the last of it, so I drop the joint in the half-empty soda can next to the bed. Then I reach for my phone, 'cause there's no way I'm missing out on this. I can't fucking get enough of this girl, and I have every intention of capturing at least a few of our moments.

"Can I film us when I fuck you, baby?" I whisper softly in her ear. She stiffens slightly, so I rush to add, "No faces. Just my cock as it slides in and out of you." At that, she moans and shivers. Fuckin' A. "Mmm, you want that, don't you?"

"Fuck, Edward!" She arches into me. I almost have her. "Jesus, just fuck me already."

*My pleasure.*

Sliding down toward her slick entrance, I take a deep breath before I slam in.

"Motherfuck," I grit out through painfully clenched teeth. I bury my face in the crook of her neck—eyes squeezed shut—as I try to restrain myself. Being a teenager comes with a few negative things, and stamina is definitely one of them. "You feel so good," I moan, slowly pulling out before I push in again.

Hot.

Wet.

Tight.

"Edward," she mewls. "Fuck, I told you to wear a—"

I cut her off with a kiss. "Shhh, baby," I mumble against her lips. "Do you really want me to stop right now?" I breathe heavily and start fucking her in earnest. "I won't come in you, I fucking swear, but...oh, *fuck*." I cup her ass with my free hand and grind into her. "Let me hear you, Tinks," I moan. "Tell me you want me to continue."

Letting my phone go, I slide my hand between our bodies and start rubbing her clit.

"Oh, yes," she moans, tilting her head back, exposing her neck to me.

"Don't stop, don't stop. Oh, shit..."

I smirk.



*That's right, baby. Take my cock.*

But I want more, and I haven't forgotten my phone, which is laying next to her pillow. So, in a swift movement, I flip us over.

"Ride me," I pant. "I'm gonna film us."

She moans loudly, using my thighs as leverage, and then she fucks me.

Slowly and deeply.

With each swivel of her hips, I groan.

And I look at us through my phone.

Recording.

Capturing.

I watch how my cock, wet from her juices, slips in and out of her.

I feel how her muscles constrict around me.

I blink slowly, caught in something weird. It's like I'm lost. The pleasure fucking consumes me, and I drop the phone...I *forget* the phone...and am I even breathing? I have no fucking idea but, suddenly, my hands are on her hips, and I slam her down on me, making both of us cry out.

*Euphoria*. Dizziness. And then she's coming. And then I'm coming. Every muscle in me tenses. My fucking toes curl. My thighs throb. My cock pulses in her pussy. Nope, not breathing.

"Fuck!" I hear her gasp out before she collapses on my chest.

We're both panting heavily. I can feel her rapid heartbeat against my skin, her hair all over the fucking place, her hands on my biceps, my hands...? Oh, there. Of course. My hands are on her ass. Where else?

Sweating, panting, blinking, slowly making our way back to reality.

That's when exhaustion hits, and I fall asleep a few seconds after she does.

~CYE~

I wake up before Tinks, and it's only because I can't fucking stand messes. Well, I've got one now. On my fucking thigh. Jesus, it's her pussy. I grimace, realizing that I must've come inside of her, which she'll be pretty fucking pissed about when she wakes up.

After slowly detangling myself from her, I use one of the pillowcases to clean us off, and it's not easy. The cabin is dark, only a faint light from the moon filtering in through the windows, so it takes time before I've found and separated our clothes. It's pretty chilly in the room, too—there's no heat source—and I shudder as I put on my equally chilly clothes.

When I'm done, I sit down on the edge of the bed. "Tinks, wake up," I say quietly, brushing my fingers along her arm. Her skin is so damn soft. I find myself smiling a little when I look at her beautiful face. The moonlight paints her skin white, and the contrasts between her skin and her dark, long lashes... Yeah, she's really fucking beautiful. There's no other word. Except for...stunning. She's hot, sexy, and gorgeous, too, but those words don't capture it all. "Baby, can you wake up for me?" I gently tuck a piece of hair behind her ear, feeling a twinge of something inside my chest.

"Not yet," she mumbles sleepily, and I crack another smile. She's still out of it. "Five more minutes, Alec..."

*What the hell?*

I'm off the bed in a flash.

Alec? Who the *fuck* is Alec?

Boyfriend from Phoenix? *Ex*-boyfriend from Phoenix?

And why do I care?

*Do I care?*

Before I can think further, I shake my head and laugh bitterly to myself.

Fuck this.

"Wake up, *Bella!*" I snap.

That sure did it.

I think the tension rolling off me keeps her from speaking as we make our way home.

Good.

When we finally do get home, I take a quick shower before heading to bed.

~CYE~

On Tuesday, I brag about the house my parents are gonna get me if I just volunteer at the hospital for a while. Emmett and Peter eat that shit up, and for a second, I even forget that I'm lying. I'm grinning and bumping fists at my good fortune like there's no tomorrow. But there is a tomorrow—Wednesday. And that's the day I wake up in a familiar mood. There's scowling and snapping. I hardly eat, and I'm not above begging Tinks for a fuck. Which I fucking do after my shift at the hospital. I beg. But I don't care. I just need a few hours where I don't think, where I don't worry, where I don't fear tomorrow—the day Dad comes home.

It takes hours, but she finally relents and we drive out to the cabin and get so fucking high, it's not even funny. And we fuck. God, we fuck hard.

She even blows me, and I...I... No words, all right? She can suck cock like a professional, which I accidentally tell her. But she doesn't get mad. I figured it would be a bit insulting to hear that shit, but she just gives me a tight-lipped smile before taking me inside of her. The only bad thing, really, is that she refuses to cave when it comes to wearing rubber. That sucks, but I'd rather fuck her with a condom than not fuck her at all.

Later that night, when we get home, Tinks disappears into her room, and I get slammed back into reality.

Dad's coming home tomorrow.

Sleep doesn't find me.

I study instead. Using Dad's textbooks and medical journals, I read and memorize. He's already drilled so much information into my head that will cover my freshman year, so I grab a few books he's told me are for my sophomore year. I'm not saying that I'm ready for the second goddamn year, but I am saying that Dad's trained me well. I'm prepared and shit.

I already know the classes I'll be taking, of course. They're the same ones that Dad took. The same EC's, the same research fields, the same everything.

He still subscribes to *Hopkins Medicine*, the university's own magazine, and every textbook is up to date.

After a couple of hours of reading, I walk over to the mini-fridge next to my bed and grab a Coke. I also change out of my clothes and pull on a pair of grey sweats before walking back to my desk. Just as my ass hits the chair, I hear a thud coming from Tinks' room, and it's without thinking that I leave my room to enter hers. It's almost three in the morning, so I wonder what the hell she's up to. Slowly, not wanting to make a noise, I open her door. Unlike me, she doesn't lock hers...evidently.

The room is pretty dark, which I find odd since I just thought she was awake. Damn, I half expected to catch her climbing out the window, hence my sneaking, but I don't know why. Maybe wishful thinking, though not for her. I wish *I* could just sneak out and never come back. I guess, in a way, I could. Being homeless probably beats this place, but with only a few months 'til college...yeah, not going anywhere. I'll be outta here soon enough.

I shake my head a little, clearing it, and spot Tinks in her bed.

I also spot something on the floor, right next to her bed. Again it's without thinking that I walk toward her, and I bend over and pick up...huh, a picture frame. She must've had it in bed and knocked it down or something. Whatever. I look at the picture, recognizing her parents from the other pictures I've seen. This particular photo is new, though. Well, it's new to me, and since I snooped around here a few days ago, I kinda wonder where she's been keeping this stashed...when it's not in bed with her, that is.

Focusing on the photo in my hands again, I see the wide smiles on Charlie and Renee. I think Tinks took the shot, 'cause I can see a hand in the photo, too—blurry and out of focus—giving Charlie and Renee a thumbs up. I smile at that for some reason, and I wonder if it was taken on some family vacation. The ridiculous Hawaiian shirts suggest that...and their sun-kissed faces. Same goes for the background; they're obviously in a restaurant. An exotic one. There are colorful drinks on the table, umbrellas and other decorations stuck in them. Wherever they are, the first thing you notice is still the smiling. They were a happy family. Charlie's arm is draped over Renee's shoulders, and both of Renee's hands cover Charlie's free one on the table.

I grit my teeth, overcome with envy.

I never had that.

I've seen places. Fancy places. Dad's taken Mom and me to London, Tokyo, New York, and San Francisco. That's just naming a few, but it wasn't like this—not like what the Swans clearly had. Dad would never be caught alive in a Hawaiian shirt. He'd never hold Mom like that. Hell, he doesn't even smile. Smirking, yes. Smiling, no.

"Oh God, no..."

My head snaps up, and my heart starts pounding in fear. Has she woken up? Have I been caught? But no. She's asleep, and...evidently sleep-talking. It doesn't look like a pleasant dream, either. Her face is contorted in pain.

"No...he wouldn't..."

I frown.

"Not true," she whimpers.

All right, it's obviously time for me to get the fuck out. I can barely deal with own nightmares—dealing with Tinks' is way too much. They're probably only about her parents, anyway. Which I sorta understand. If I had her parents, I'd probably mourn, too.

After putting the picture back on the floor where I found it, I leave her room as quietly as I entered.



## *Chapter 5* Acting Fine

*Chapter song – The Lion's Roar by First Aid Kit*

**BPOV**

*Despite the whispered rumors going around in school, I still woke up this morning with a smile on my face. After all, Alec told me a few days ago that he was handling it. Rumors were nothing, he told me repeatedly. It wasn't like anyone had proof that we're together romantically. But as I arrive in school, my smile is slowly but surely fading away. The whispers have gotten louder. The looks have become accusing.*

*I get self-conscious as I walk toward my locker.*

*"Poor Mr. D," I hear one girl whisper.*

*Mr. D? As in...Alec?*

*Everyone calls him that, as opposed to Mr. Devin.*

*Holy shit! Has something happened to him? Oh God, no...*

*"She's such a fucking slut," another girl whispers as I pass.*

*Rounding a corner, I catch more hushed whispers and accusations.*

*"I heard she stalked him."*

*Who are they talking about?*

*"It's not fair that Mr. D has to pay the price when she's the one ruining his life."*

*I frown but keep walking.*

*Until I reach my locker.*

*A gasp slips through my lips, and I raise a hand to cover my mouth.*

*I don't even know that someone is behind me until she speaks.*

*"Mr. D was, like, our favorite teacher, skank. Now he's fucking leaving just because you couldn't keep your obsession with him to yourself."*

*No. No. No. No. No.*

*"He just left the principal's office, you know. He quit. He fucking quit."*

*This can't be happening.*

*"Did it even bother you that he's engaged to Ms. Novikov's sister, or are you just that fucking selfish?"*

*Through blurry vision, I look at my locker again.*

*Isabella Swan = HOME WRECKING WHORE!*

*But, but...he said he was gonna fix everything.*

*He loves me.*

*Alec loves me. He wouldn't do this.*

*Ms. Novikov...Irina, my damn math teacher...she has a sister? And Alec... my Alec...is engaged to her?*

*No fucking way. No. Alec wouldn't betray me.*

*Behind me, I hear the vicious accusations.*

*They're all directed at me.*

*"You dirty fucking whore!"*

*"Lying slut!"*

*"Fucking skank!"*



*"Home wrecker!"*

*I run.*

*I run as fast as I can.*

*The final bell rings, and by the time I reach the bathrooms, the halls are empty.*

*"Oh, God," I choke out.*

*The pain burns through me, and the confusion cripples me.*

*"No...please..." I whimper, barely registering as I fall to my knees. Before I know it, painful sobs rock through my body. I'm still so damn confused. All those harsh words...all the rumors...spreading so fast...*

*A teacher wouldn't spread rumors!*

*"No," I whimper, shaking my head to myself. No, Alec wouldn't lie to me. He loves me!*

*I cry.*

*My sobbing almost drowns out the sound of clicking heels.*

*Almost.*

*"Takes nothing for you to get on your knees, does it?"*

*I stiffen, immediately recognizing the voice. Ms. Novikov's accent is unmistakable.*

*I didn't miss the condescending tone in her voice, either.*

*"You know, when Alec decided to keep his apartment a few blocks away from here, I never questioned it," she says. I keep my eyes on the floor. I*

*don't even think I'm breathing. "It made sense. My sister and I share a house on the other side of Phoenix, after all. And I know all about commuting." She huffs out a humorless laugh. "It wasn't until a few days ago that I realized there was another reason for Alec to keep his place."*

*I swallow hard, forcing myself to breathe.*

*She continues in her cold voice. "I saw you. Both of you. I was just going to drop off some papers at Alec's, and what do I see? I see you two kissing goodbye at the door."*

*Please, no. Let this be a nightmare.*

*Another icy laugh. "I confronted him right away." I stop breathing again, but the tears run steadily down my cheeks. "I even made sure a little rumor was started in order to make him understand that I wasn't fucking around."*

*A sob gets stuck in my throat.*

*The fog of confusion clears.*

*"You ruined my sister's life, you manipulative little bitch," she seethes. "I don't know what you did to get into Alec's pants, but it's all over now. As I ordered, he went to the principal this morning and resigned, stating that you were sexually harassing him."*

*I gasp and look up. "That's not true!"*

*"Oh, I know," she chuckles. "But I had to get Alec out of the mess he's created, and despite the fact that he confessed everything to my sister, she still loves him." She throws me a glare. "Now, how could I make my sister happy if Alec went to prison?"*

*It dawns on me right way. The age of consent here in Arizona is eighteen. I'm still seventeen for a few more months. Alec's twenty-five. It's not legal for him to be with me, which we both knew from the beginning, but...we...we love each other.*

*"Where's Alec?" I cry. "I want to see him; I have to hear this from him!"*

It's to the memory of Ms. Novikov's cackling that I'm startled awake.

I sit up, blinking, struggling to get my bearings. A hand goes to my chest...an attempt to calm my rapidly beating heart, maybe. And it all comes back to me in the darkness of my room here in Forks.

Mom and Dad are dead.

I'm not in Phoenix anymore.

Forks. *Jesus Christ.*

I flop down on the bed again.

*Alec.*

I did speak to him again—one last time—after my encounter with his future sister-in-law.

Oh, I talked to him, all right.

But I wish I never had.

He basically smirked, even chuckled a little, and said it was all a game. He wanted to see how easy it was to get into my pants.

No one made me feel more like a whore than he did.

"What a fucking nightmare," I mumble to myself, scrubbing both hands over my face. In a way, it feels like what happened in Phoenix happened ages ago. Not a goddamn month.

~CYE~

"Good morning," I say quietly, a bit surprised to see Esme here. She's usually gone by the time I get up in the morning, but here she is now, cleaning the kitchen.

"Good morning, sweetie," she responds warmly. "Did you sleep well?"

No. "Yep."

She smiles. "Good. Have a seat in the dining room, and I'll come in with breakfast. I made muffins."

Such a housewife.

"Thanks," I mumble.

As I make my way to the dining room, I pass so many things that prove how out of place I am here. There's expensive-looking art, fancy vases... Pristine white and museum-like. It's a magnificent house—there's no denying that—but it gives off this vibe...a look-but-don't-touch kinda vibe. Which is so not what I grew up with. My parents were very well-off, owning a successful gaming company. Dad was a fuckawesome—professional—poker player, and Mom had a really good business eye. So yeah, we were well-off, but we were also very laid back. My parents were...fun. We traveled a lot. Many family activities. We were sorta loud, too. There was always music in our house. Laughter. Sometimes when I came downstairs before school, Mom and Dad were dancing in the kitchen. They looked like fools, really, but it was so fun.

"Here you go, sweetie," Esme says, placing a plate in front of me. "I'll make a plate for Edward, too; he should be down soon."

I nod in thanks, grabbing a blueberry muffin to nibble on.

And about ten minutes later, Edward joins me at the table, looking awfully stiff.

"Mornin'," he mutters.

"Good morning," I sigh quietly.

There's no music in this house, that's for sure.

When Esme comes in to refill our coffee mugs, my phone chimes in my pocket.

I smile a little smile as I read the text.

**Need to buy clothes after school. Wanna join me and Charlotte in Port A? – Rose.**

I like Rose. She's crass and blunt, but also sweet and genuine. She's no bullshitter.

**Sounds good. I need to pick up some stuff, too – Bella.**

"New friends, Bella?" Esme asks sweetly.

"Uh, yeah," I mutter, pocketing my phone again. Then it hits me. Maybe I should ask to go to Port Angeles? I mean, I don't know how the Cullens live, really. "By the way, is it okay if I go shopping in Port Angeles after school?"

"Sure, sweetie," she says, still smiling that motherly smile. It's kinda weird, actually. Too wide. "Just be home for dinner. Carlisle will be back

today and he usually has work to do in his study, so dinner will be at eight instead of seven."

I nod with a dip of my chin. "All right."

Esme returns to the kitchen, and I go back to nibbling on my blueberry muffin.

The silence isn't comfortable.

"A word of advice," Edward says quietly, and when I look up at him, his eyes are focused on his plate. "Switch off your phone before dinner."

I frown. "What?"

He finally meets my gaze. There's no emotion whatsoever in his expression. Flat, dead. "Dad doesn't like when dinners get interrupted."

Umm...?

"Okay, I'll turn it off," I answer with a shrug.

He exhales and gives a jerky nod, and then we're quiet again.

Weird fucking family.

~CYE~

"Time to spill, Swan," Rose says when we take our seats at the diner here in Forks. The shopping trip to Port Angeles went by in a flash, and Rose and Charlotte weren't overly talkative. I liked that. But I guess that's over now. With the clothes bought, out come the questions? Is that how it works?

"Spill about what?" I ask, sticking a straw in my soda. Since I'm having dinner with the Cullens in half an hour, I didn't buy a hamburger like Rose and Charlotte did.

"About Cullen, duh." Charlotte smirks, green eyes showing amusement. She's just like Rose, I've noticed, which means I like her, too. The only difference between the two is their appearance. Whereas Rose is blond and blue-eyed, Charlotte couldn't look more Irish with her fiery hair, light green eyes, and freckles.

"How is it living with the royalty of Forks?" Rose adds with a wicked grin.

There's nothing wicked about my expression, though. I'm just confused.

"*Royalty?*" There's nothing royal about the Cullens, is there? Sure, they're all blessed with good looks and money, but...eh.

Charlotte nods. "Oh, yeah. The charming doctor, his perfect wife, and their..." She scrunches her nose in disgust. "Well, I don't have enough words to describe the kid they produced."

"I do," Rose huffs and starts counting on her fingers. "He's an arrogant, pompous, vicious, cruel actor." She nods firmly. "Fucking bully, that one."

So I've noticed. "What do you mean by actor?"

Rose shrugs. "Or schizo. Whatever floats your boat." I give her a look asking to clarify, and she does. "If you go and ask any adult in this shitty little town what they think of Edward Cullen, they will tell you that he's a 'charming young man, meant for great success'...crap like that." I really fucking doubt that. "I'm telling you, Bella," she shakes her head and pours a massive amount of ketchup on her fries, "he has so many people fooled. I mean, I wouldn't say that he's an ass-kisser around adults, 'cause he sure as hell isn't. He's quiet and polite enough, but being his dad's son gives him the same praise. No one speaks badly about him."

"Yeah, I don't see that," I reply, still feeling incredibly confused. "He's a complete dick at school, and...shit!" I exclaim, remembering the party he took me to. "Last weekend—what the fuck. I don't get why everyone treats him like a god!"

"Most girls think he's hot as hell," Charlotte says nonchalantly. "To stupid people, hotness is an excuse to lack of manners." Rose and I chuckle at her sugary sweet smile. "As for the guys..."

"The guys fear him," Rose finishes. "The girls want him, which is why he can get away with everything around them, and the guys fear him enough to make sure Cullen's reputation around adults is maintained. As in, they don't talk shit about him." She rolls her eyes. "I don't know how he manages to keep it all up, but he does. Even when he shows up at school with cuts and bruises." My eyes widen at that. "Yeah, I don't know how many times I've seen that fucker with black eyes, a fucking limp, and split eyebrows. He gets into fights a *lot*." Wow, I never would've thought. Literally, I'm stunned. Yeah, he's a prick, a bully. But that he actually fights... "And don't get me started on his friends in Seattle."

"What about them?" I ask, all but *dying* to know more about the guy I share a wall with.

I honestly don't know where my curiosity stems from, but I remember feeling a similar need for answers yesterday and the day before. I just asked random questions, which he always seemed reluctant to answer. In fact, he dodged most of them. And then...well, I'm a glutton for punishment. As soon as I get high, he can treat me how he wants. Nothing matters to me. I'm nothing. When I'm high, there are no questions in my head. Just nothing.

"Oh, I don't know them personally," Rose says, taking a bite from her burger.



"Who does?" Charlotte counters dryly.

And Rose nods, swallowing before she continues. "That's true. I don't know who he's friends with in Seattle, but they're not good guys, that's for sure. I've seen him rough up a few guys in school, but not enough to give bruises, ya know? Sometimes, though, when he gets back from the city..." She trails off, shaking her head. "And instead of being smart and cut that shit out, he smirks and brags about who he put in the hospital. Fucking douche."

I sit back in my seat, letting the girls' words sink in.

A part of me is disgusted by him. He thinks so damn highly of himself that it makes my skin crawl. And the things I've witnessed so far...God, he can shove a guy against a locker just for accidentally walking into him.

According to Edward Cullen, you're considered lucky to breathe the same air as him. But there's something else... I can't put my finger on it, but there's just something about him, especially when he's at home, that makes him come off as...I don't know...jittery? I purse my lips. No, jittery is not the right word. Anxious? No, not that, either. Stiff. Yeah, kinda, but...*more*.

I sigh.

Whatever.

It's not like I care about him.

"All right," Charlotte says, and I look up from my soda. "Now we've told you a bunch of stuff." She grins. "Your turn."

"How's the sex?" she adds, waggling her eyebrows.

I chuckle and reach over to swipe a French fry from Rose's plate before throwing it at Charlotte.

"Oh, come on!" she cries out. "Don't tell me you're one of *those* girls." She tosses her hair over her shoulder and speaks with a childlike voice, "Ooh, sorry, but I don't fuck and tell."

I laugh at her, shaking my head in amusement.

~CYE~

When I get back to the Cullens', Esme is just serving dinner.

"Nice to see you again, Isabella," Carlisle says, taking his seat at the head of the table. "Esme told me you were out with your new friends?"

I chance a quick peek at Edward, who sits down across from me, and his eyes are downcast.

"Yes," I reply, facing Carlisle. "Rosalie Hale and Charlotte Whitlock."

He looks pensive for a short moment before nodding once...like he's approving. "They're good girls."

I expect a jibe about Rose coming from Edward, but he keeps quiet.

"Thanks," I say quietly as Esme offers me the salad bowl.

Dinner with the Cullens is weird. Tense, awkward, stiff. Esme asks about Carlisle's time in Seattle, and he starts talking about stuff in the medical field. I can't really say that I understand any of it, so I keep my eyes on the plate before me. There's nothing I can offer, anyway.

"By the way, Edward..." Carlisle clears his throat. "I spoke with Dr. Black from the hospital."

I fork a piece of chicken and bring it to my mouth, still surprised at the fact that Edward is volunteering at Carlisle's work. Sure, he said that he does it so that Carlisle and Esme will give him his own house, but... I don't

know, it just seems...odd. I mean, Edward doesn't exactly appear to be deprived around here. His car is luxurious, his clothes are designer label, and everything just screams money. I guess I just thought he'd get that house no matter what. Not that I've given Edward's future college experience a thought, but when I *do* think about it, it's just weird.

"Something wrong?" I hear Edward ask quietly.

I reach for my glass of water, glancing at Cullen in the process, and he looks like how I described dinner with this family—tense, awkward, stiff.

"Well, apparently there was a problem today?" Carlisle arches a brow and laces his fingers together on the table. He looks oddly calm. "Something about Dr. Black's son who was there to visit?"

I frown and look at Edward, wondering why Carlisle's just...I dunno... hinting.

Regardless, Edward seems to understand and nods with a dip of his chin. Nothing else, though. No words, no explanation.

Like I said: weird fucking family.

If it was tense before, this...I don't even know how I would describe this, but it's palpable.

"Is there any dessert tonight, darling?" Carlisle asks...Esme, I assume.

"Absolutely, dear," she replies sweetly. "I made pie. Lemon meringue."

I focus on my food, despite the lack of hunger.

All I want is to hide out in my room, preferably 'til graduation, and then I'm so out of here.

"Well, dinner was delicious," Carlisle goes on. "But I think I better stop here." He chuckles. "Need to make room for pie." Pie. Yeah, 'cause that's *just* what I want. *Ugh*. "Edward, I have some things I'd like to discuss with you. How about we do that while we wait for dessert?"

"Dad, I-I..."

"Now, son."

"Come on, Bella," Esme says softly. "Perhaps you could give me a hand in the kitchen?"

I guess dinner's over. "Um, okay," I respond dumbly. Carlisle and Edward disappear down the hall and up the stairs, and I help Esme clear the table before we head to the kitchen. Once there, she asks if I can whip up some cream, and since I apparently don't have anything better to do, I just nod and comply.

After pouring the cream into a bowl, I plug in the electric mixer and get started.

"Do you like strawberries, sweetie?" Esme asks over the noise of the mixer. She holds up a container of strawberries for me to see. "I thought they would go well with the pie."

Sure thing, Martha Stewart. "Strawberries are good," I answer with a small shrug.

She smiles widely.

I shake my head internally and return my focus to the cream.

*God, I miss my parents.*

A few moments later, the cream is done. "Anything else I can help with?"

"Oh, sure!" Again with the fucking smiling. "You could set the table-"

She's cut off by the sound of a door slamming shut. At least, that's what I think it was.

"Okay," she breathes out, nodding to herself. I frown, confused. And then the smile is back on her face. "You could set the table. You know where the plates are?"

~CYE~

Esme and I sit at the table for about ten minutes before Carlisle emerges. He smiles and adjusts his tie. "This looks like a feast," he says, taking his seat.

It's uncomfortable.

"It's a new recipe," Esme gushes.

Looking in the direction of where Carlisle came from, I wonder if Edward's ditching me. And, if he is, how did he get out of it? I wouldn't mind getting away myself.

"Where's Edward?" I ask.

Esme busies herself slicing up pie for us, and Carlisle looks confused. "He didn't say goodbye?"

What? "Uh, no?"

"Huh." He smiles at Esme, nodding in thanks for the pie, then turns to me again. "I guess he was in a hurry, then." He shrugs. "He told me a friend needed him."

*Oh.*

I look down at my plate, frowning.

"Dig in," Esme chimes in.

~CYE~

**You just took off? – Bella.**

**Where are you? – Bella.**

**Are you at the cabin? Call me. – Bella.**

**Can you pick up the fucking phone when I call? – Bella.**

**Dammit, Edward! It's been two hours now. – Bella.**

**I drove to the cabin. Surprise, surprise, you weren't there. – Bella.**

**I just called Emmett, and you're not with him or Peter. Where are you? – Bella.**

**Talked to your parents. They say you might stay over at a friend's house? – Bella.**

**It's almost two in the fucking morning. CALL! – Bella.**

**You know what? Fuck you, Cullen. – Bella.**

**Edward. Rose told me about your friends in Seattle. Are you there? Please call me. – Bella.**

**It's three AM now. I need to sleep. Can you just text me, at least? – Bella.**

~CYE~

I stifle a yawn, so goddamn tired, but I can't sleep.

The last text I sent him, about ten minutes ago, has gone unanswered, of course.

I can't relax.

So, I read. Or...I try.

But then, a movement in the corner of my eye makes me look up from my book, and I gasp, seeing Edward standing in the doorway to my room. My heart starts beating furiously. The next thing I register is his face.

"Edward! What *happened?*"

He shrugs, waving me off. "Can I come in?"

Staring at him incredulously, Rose's words from the diner come back to me. They go on repeat in my head, and I can't fucking believe why he would hang out with those people in Seattle. Then again, he's only been gone for about five hours, and Seattle is almost four hours away.

"If you tell me what happened," I grit out. He clenches his jaw in response, and I can feel my eyes soften. I can also feel my worry grow... for some reason.

*So much for not caring.*

"Fine," I sigh quietly. "You don't have to talk, but...can I..." I swallow hard, forcing myself to go on. "Can I...?" I can't continue, but with my weak gesture at his face, he appears to understand. He gives me a slow nod, and my feet carry me toward him.

He shudders when I trace his cracked lip with my finger.

"Sorry," I whisper. "We gotta clean it, Edward."

Gently, he pulls my hand away from my face. "It's okay. It's nothing." He tries to smirk, but it doesn't work. He flinches instead, though he tries to come off as cool and collected. "You should see the other guy," he chuckles.

I don't buy it.

There's a storm raging behind the humor in his eyes.

"Did you get my texts?" I ask.

He stares down at me for a beat or two before giving me a stiff nod.

I breathe out. "Why didn't you..." *Call me, text me, let me know that you were alive.*

Bursts of anger flashes through me, but nothing is directed at him. I'm mad at myself. For asking, for wondering, for practically stalking him, for giving a shit. I shouldn't care. This is Edward Cullen, remember? Grade A prick.

"Sorry," he replies lamely, looking down. "I, uh..." He meets my gaze again and tries to pull off another smirk. It doesn't work very well. "A few friends of mine from Seattle were in Port A, and we ran into some trouble..." He trails off, looking into space.

"Friends?" I ask in disgust. "You call them *friends*?"

He shrugs. "Whatever. I'm back now, all right?"

*Deep breaths.*

I rein in the fury. I swallow it down. "Come on," I breathe out. "Let's get that cleaned up." Grabbing his hand, I lead him across the hallway to the bathroom. "Sit down," I mutter, waving a hand at the toilet.



"Tinks, you don't have to-"

"Just let me do this, okay?" I snap.

Fuck, I hate how this boy gets under my skin. Or rather, that he's *beginning* to get under my skin. I don't want to care. Not about him, not about *anything* here in Forks.

I'm not a damn doctor, so I don't really know what I'm doing. I just grab a few tissues, dab them in cold water, and then position myself between his legs. I swallow hard, looking down at his bruised face. As carefully as I can, I swipe a corner of the tissue under his bottom lip.

"Maybe you should let your dad look at it," I suggest nervously, gently wiping away some dried blood.

"No," he replies flatly, quietly. "It's okay. I have some antibacterial gel in my room."

Who has that stuff in their rooms?

*Maybe people who want to become doctors.*

I chew on my lip. "Wanna go get it?"

"Tinks..." He sighs and rests his hands on my hips. "Don't...don't do this, all right?" My brows knit together, and he drops his forehead to my ribcage. "I'm fine," he mumbles. "I just need some sleep."

I say nothing.

Things are so far from "fine".

Internally, I'm struggling. One part wants to kick his ass for hanging out with losers, and another part wants to just fucking hug him or something equally lame. But I don't want affection in my life anymore. As soon as

you open up to someone, it's only a matter of time before they stab you in the back. And if you're *really* lucky, they will twist the knife a little bit, too. You know, for good measure and all.

"Um, I'm gonna hit the sack," he mutters, slowly detangling himself from me. I let him and ignore the side of me that is still aching for...*something*. "School tomorrow," he adds, like a quiet reminder. I stand still, numb, watching him as he stands. "Goodnight." With that said, he slips out the door.

When I hear his door click shut, I'm still standing in the bathroom.

It's weird; my mind is both silent and loud. It's hard to explain, but it's like I'm completely divided. I squeeze my eyes shut and fight exhaustion, confusion, and...*something else*. I don't know what it is, but it's making my chest ache. There's numbness and pain, loss and resignation. There's this gaping hole. Everything just *sucks* right now.

Past, present, future.



## Chapter 6

### He Makes a Promise

*Chapter song – Giving It Up For You by Holly Brook*

#### **EPOV**

Over the next several weeks, I'm barely hanging on. I guess it shows what a weak pussy I am. In one corner, I have Tinks and her watchful eyes. In another corner, I have Dad waiting for me to fuck up. In the third

corner, I have the people at school. They're easy enough to fool, though Emmett's beginning to notice *stuff*, but it's nothing I can't handle for now. Last but not least, I have the cabin, which is the only place I can relax. Tinks is usually there with me, of course, but all I need to do is get her high and then her questions cease. Oh yeah, her questions.

I sigh, falling back against my bed.

To her, the questions may be innocent, but they're not.

*Why are you hanging out with those dipshits from Seattle?*

*How did you meet them in the first place?*

*What is that you do when you lock yourself in your room every Sunday?*

*Why don't Emmett and Peter know your so-called friends from Seattle?*

*How come your parents don't react when you show up with bruises?*

I groan quietly in the darkness.

Another sleepless night. They come too often nowadays.

I can't answer Tinks' questions, obviously. Instead I find myself snapping at her. It's all out of control. Too many lines have been blurred, and it's all Tinks' fault. Had she not lived with us, she wouldn't know anything. She wouldn't be suspicious, but as it is, I can tell that she won't back off. Who knew she'd act like a goddamn interrogator? Can't she just...*stop*?

I've told her repeatedly to just mind her own fucking business, but the bitch won't relent. It started that night about two weeks ago. The day a kid named Jacob Black fucked up my face. Well, he did it indirectly. Or, hell, maybe I should blame Dr. Sarah Fucking Black for bringing her son to work.

*"Edward, could you just watch Jacob here for ten minutes?"*

*I look up from the charts I'm supposed to bring to Dr. Gerandy—the doctor who Dad will take over for soon—and I see a kid standing at the nurses' station. He can't be more than nine or ten, and...Dr. Black wants me to watch him? What. The. Fuck? Do I look like a fucking babysitter?*

*"His sisters—you've met Rachel and Rebecca—they're just finishing up their shifts and will be here in ten minutes, tops."*

*"Um..." I rub the back of my neck. "I don't know what to do."*

*The kid just stands there, staring at me.*

*Freaky.*

*Dr. Black smiles. "Oh, just keep him company. I'd do it, but I have surgery now. Like I said, it's just ten minutes." Looking down at her son, she says, "You'll behave, won't you, honey?"*

Jacob Black didn't behave for shit.

The kid took off as soon as his mom was out of sight, and I spent the next half hour tracking him down until I found him in a supply closet. By then, he had already trashed the fucking place.

Dr. Black wasn't mad at me. She was, however, pissed at the little shit she calls son. My dad sang a different tune, though. While Dr. Black had called Dad to apologize for Jacob, Dad took off in another direction.

I embarrassed him.

*"You can't even look after a ten-year-old child?" he asks angrily as soon as I close the door to his office. I swallow, praying that Tinks won't hear anything. They're downstairs; we're on the second floor. She shouldn't be able to hear. "Answer me, Edward!" I manage not to gulp as I face him.*

*"How the fuck do you expect people to put their lives in your hands when you can't watch a kid without losing him?"*

*"I..." I have nothing to say. Nothing will be good enough, anyway.*

*His smirk sends a chill down my spine.*

*We've stood like this so many times in the past—him, cool and collected, arms folded across his chest, and me... I'm just trying to look calm, even though we both know I'm not.*

*Don't fidget. Breathe. Stand tall. Chin up. Don't avert your eyes.*

*"Nothing to say for yourself?" he asks, taking a step toward me.*

*I ball my hands into fists, forcing them not to shake.*

*The hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention.*

*"Do you have any idea what this says about me?" he grits out. I swallow hard again, seeing the angry vein in his forehead. "My son, who is off to one of the most prestigious schools this fall..." He shakes his head at me. "He can't even look after an innocent child, but he's supposed to hold a scalpel?"*

*He takes another step.*

*I break out in a cold sweat.*

*Please, please, please don't let Tinks hear.*

*A breath. "It— It won't happen again, sir."*

*Dad barks out a laugh—a cold, humorless laugh. "Well, you're damn right about that, son!" He sneers at me. "After all, we know what it takes for you not to repeat a mistake, don't we?"*

*With a last step, he's in my face, and I squeeze my eyes shut.*

*When I was little, I cried. When I was little, I apologized and begged.*

*I don't anymore, because it never helped.*

*The first fist hits me square in the jaw.*

*I stumble back and bite the inside of my cheek to keep quiet.*

*Don't make a sound. Don't make a fucking sound, Cullen!*

*"How many times do I have to tell you?" he snarls, grabbing my arm painfully hard. "I need you at the top of your fucking game!" I flinch and cower away as he raises his hand again, but there's no escaping. He punches me, and I accidentally let out a whimper as my lip cracks. Fuck, fuck, fuck. The pain radiates through my body. "Shut the fuck up, you pussy!" he seethes in my ear. "God, what a fucking joke you are. What if your friends could see you now, huh?"*

*With a shove, he has me on the floor.*

*I land on my ass with a muted thud, and I cringe as I cup my jaw. It's definitely not broken, but it's gonna be sore for days. Fuck, I can already feel a headache taking up residency. Pounding, pounding, pounding away.*

*Dad towers over me, smirking again. "What if Isabella could see you now?"*

*"Dad," I croak. I can feel myself paling. "Don't..." Please, please, please don't.*

*He chuckles. "Oh, don't worry, son. I wouldn't want that pretty girl to know what a weakling my son is." The glare is back. I know what's coming. "I wish I had a son I could be proud of," he spits out, and then he kicks me in the stomach. I choke on a breath. He kicks again. All the air*

*leaves me in a whoosh, causing my lungs to burn. Tears sting behind my closed eyes, but I refuse to let that shit fall. Everything is aching and throbbing. I end up in a fetal position. My ears ring.*

*"Now, get the fuck out of my office," he snaps.*

*As fast as I can, I scramble to my feet, clutching my stomach.*

*I run up to my room on the third floor. I grab my keys, my wallet, my jacket. I'm fucking panting. "Jesus fuck," I cough. Gotta get out. Gotta get out. Thankfully, I can hear both Mom and Tinks in the kitchen, and I don't run into them as I rush out the door.*

*I avoid the rearview mirror as I peel out of the driveway, because I don't want to see my own face. I don't want to see Dad's handiwork, and I don't want to see the evidence of how fucking lame I am. Though, just because I can't see it doesn't mean I don't feel it. As I drive away from Forks, everything rushes through me. Shame, hatred, hopelessness, anger, blazing fucking fury, more shame, embarrassment...*

In the darkness of my room, I ghost the pad of my thumb across my bottom lip—the spot where Dad cracked it, the spot Tinks touched so fucking gently when I returned that night.

I exhale.

I remember her texts from that night. They're saved in my phone.

She tried to find me. It was almost as if she was...*worried*. Worried about *me*.

While I stood parked in some alley in Port A, just passing time, she wondered where I was.

That's new.

But back to the matter at hand where she's almost making me lose my goddamn mind: her questions started that night—when I got home—and she hasn't stopped asking since. All I can do, really, is snap at her. Be harsh. Tell her to shut the fuck up. 'Cause I can't avoid her. She's the one I lose myself in every now and then, and I need that. The cabin, the smoking, the fucking. *Her.*

A glance at the clock has me groaning into my pillow. I need to sleep, but I fucking *can't*.

Dad's questioning me tomorrow about the human body's process when you get sick—how the body fights a virus—and I can't afford to fail. I've been lucky, having only earned one beating since he returned from Seattle, and I don't want to change that. Thankfully, the topic is easy enough this time. We're covering different kinds of fever, one of which is a sign of the body pushing away viruses, and then we have hyperpyrexia, tertian fever, remittent, neutropenic...the list goes on.

Without looking, I reach for the nightstand where my phone is.

I leave on June 22nd.

Graduation is on the 9th.

Finals are two weeks before—little over a month from today.

*Definitely not going to the fucking prom.*

Deep breaths.

I'll be out of here soon.

~CYE~

I collapse on the bed, out of breath, and stare up at the ceiling.



I blink repeatedly.

"Fuck," I pant.

Tinks is next to me, also trying to catch her breath.

After Dad's questioning today, this was what I needed. Even though I passed with flying colors, it was still tense.

I'm fucking glad Tinks agreed to it, but now that we're done, I'm still not ready to leave. Tilting my head to the side, I watch her face, satisfied when I see a small, lazy smirk playing on her lips. It means she's still high, and maybe we don't have to leave right away. So, I sit up and discard the condom, and then I pull on my boxers and t-shirt before flopping back down on the bed again.

"Want more to smoke?" I ask quietly.

She releases a breath, turning her head in my direction. I smile softly, enjoying this look on Tinks. Carefree, relaxed. It takes a couple of years off her, and she looks noticeably younger. It makes me wonder just a little about what pain she's carrying at all other times. For some reason, I don't think it's just the death of her parents. There's more, but I don't know what and, like I've mentioned before, I have too much of my own shit to worry about.

"Sure," she sighs softly. "Light one up. I'm just gonna get dressed again."

I nod and reach down to where my jeans are on the floor. Back pocket. There are three more joints in the Ziploc bag, and I have two hidden in my room. Time for another trip to Port A soon.

Moments later, Tinks is back in jeans and a snug hoodie, a serene expression on her face as she takes a pull from the joint. I'm on my side, propped up on my elbow, while she's on her back, eyes on the ceiling. I

lick my bottom lip, tasting the sweet, yet strong flavor that the pot leaves behind. And I hate that I'm growing curious. I don't want to ask her what she's thinking about. I don't want her troubles. I don't want to know why she has nightmares or why she insists on scrubbing herself clean each night to the point where her skin is red. Oh, I've noticed. It started innocently enough—I just asked if I could fuck her in the shower. She said no before disappearing into her bathroom, and that was that. I went back to my room, and an hour later, I was on my way to restock the mini fridge in my room, only to walk out when Tinks left the bathroom with a small towel wrapped around her. The red blotches on her skin were enough for my dick to calm down.

The question was right there, on the tip of my tongue, but I held back.

After that, I've not-so-accidentally walked out of my room a few times, right after the water's shut off. And every time, her skin is red. Sometimes her eyes, too.

"It's not nice to stare," she says quietly, bringing me out of my haze.

"Here." She hands me the joint.

I take it and bring it to my lips. "I'm not a nice person." I inhale deeply and hold the smoke in my lungs.

I feel heavy in the best ways. Lazy, slow, empty.

Eyes glaze over.

"That's by choice, isn't it?"

My brows furrow. "What do you mean?"

"That you're not nice to people. It's by choice."

*Here we go.* I swear, she'd make an excellent shrink. "Just be quiet, Tinks."

She chuckles softly, facing the ceiling again. A sigh. "I like it when you call me that," she whispers, and pain clouds her features for just a second before it's gone again.

"Tinks, you mean?"

She nods slowly, accepting the joint again, and I smile and lean closer to her face. My lips ghost over her cheek, her temple, down her jaw line. While she holds her breath, I kiss her softly.

I kiss her for the sake of kissing her.

"Open your mouth and close your eyes," she whispers.

I do as told, feeling her mouth brushing against mine before she exhales smoke.

I shiver.

Bella Swan is soft-spoken and affectionate when she's high.

I find myself reveling in it.

There's a tugging going on inside of me, but when she brushes her fingers over my cheek, smiling a little into the kiss, the tugging ceases.

I don't understand my own body. Maybe I'm not a textbook case. Maybe I can't find answers about myself in Dad's books.

"Who knew Edward Cullen was a fucking cuddler?" she giggles as I nuzzle her neck. I'm too relaxed to tell her to piss off for that comment. Instead, I just snake my arm around her waist and hold her tightly. Eyes still closed. The outside world doesn't exist at this moment. I feel warm,

enveloped. New feeling. It's like when Tinks worried about me and sent me all those texts. I sigh contentedly, hitching a leg over hers.

Once the joint is gone, we stay in this position. It's quiet for several minutes, and I'm just savoring everything. Her fingers in my hair, her scent, her lips on my forehead, legs tangled.

"Do you remember anything from Phoenix?" she asks softly, quietly, wistfully.

I squeeze her to me, feeling that tug inside of me again. "Not really," I mumble. I was only five when we left Arizona. I know that we were neighbors with the Swans and that Tinks and I were close, but this is from what Mom has told me. From that time, I only have one feeling that I remember and one memory. I recall heat and soft grass under my feet. I remember the desert air. As for my memory, it has Tinks in it. I think we were three or four...

"I miss my parents, Edward," she breathes out, followed by a whimper.

Tugging, twisting, churning.

I screw my eyes shut. My throat feels thick. There's nothing I can do.

"God, they would hate me," she cries quietly, sniffing. I grind my teeth together, confused by her statement, but in too much pain to open my mouth. I'm torn. *Shut the fuck up, Tinks. No, wait. Tell me everything.* Life just fucking sucks. I don't want to carry her burden, but there's this urge to tell her that I'm here for her.

"Don't be stupid," I mutter, dropping a kiss on her shoulder. "They could never hate you."

From all the photos I've seen, it's pretty fucking clear that the Swans were good. Warm and loving and shit. I bet they hugged Tinks often. I bet they told her they loved her.

"I'm sorry," she sobs. Jesus fucking *Christ*, twist the knife a little deeper, will ya? Detangling myself from her, I sit up against the headboard and pull her with me. She ends up on my lap, curled into a little ball, and...and she just cries. Sobs. Gut-wrenching fucking sobs.

I just hold her, feeling useless, angry, defeated, weak, tired.

She keeps apologizing, and I don't know what the fuck she has to apologize for.

Her next words, though, stop my fucking heart. It's a broken whimper, screaming of defeat.

"I'm sorry for being a whore."

I freeze.

Tinks keeps crying, soaking my t-shirt.

My ears start ringing.

I let out a gust of air when I realize that I'm not breathing.

"*Tinks...*" I take a deep breath, wondering why the *fuck* she would say something like that about herself. I clear my throat. "What..." Another breath. *Jesus*. "*What* the hell do you mean?"

My heart is suddenly pounding.

Anger surges through me, along with confusion.

"Hey." I nudge her, but she doesn't respond. So, I force her. Gently but firmly, I grab her chin and tilt it up. Tears are streaming down her cheeks. Her eyes are bloodshot and full of pain. Her lip trembles. More tears. I clench my jaw. Anger takes over, but it's definitely not directed at her.

"Tell me," I grit out.

She is so gone. I don't know how it's possible, but she looks both numb and heartbroken. Her eyes go vacant. "It's just the truth." She sniffles and wipes away tears. "Actions and words...they all speak loudly." A sad smile is there then gone in a flash. "God, I was so stupid," she groans, and a fresh wave of tears spills over. "I thought I was in love." She shakes her head. I stiffen. "I thought it was real, but I couldn't have been more wrong. I was just his whore-"

"*Bella*," I almost growl. "Don't *fucking* say..."

"*What?*" she croaks. "It's the truth, Edward. He was my goddamn teacher." I blink. Shock, more confusion, rage. "And he played me like the stupid kid I was." She laughs humorlessly, and I'm beginning to lose it. "I take that back. Not 'was'. This wasn't even two months ago. I'm still a fucking kid," she mutters. "And when the truth came out, he just.... I was nothing. Useless, worthless. His little distraction since the fiancée lived so far away." Then she starts crying again, covering her face with her hands. "Everyone at school found out and started calling me home-wrecking whore."

*Fuck me.* I run a hand through my hair, tugging at the ends. Shit, her life is even more fucked-up than I thought. And this happened two months ago? Damn. *Wait.* That's pretty much when her folks died.

No wonder she escapes it all by getting high.

"Tinks..." I have no idea what to say.

"Don't." She shakes her head, grimacing. "There's nothing to say. It is what it is, and I am what I am."

I narrow my eyes at her. "You're not a fucking whore. Is that really what you *think*?"

Is she stupid?

She offers a one-shouldered shrug and averts her eyes. "I was blind, believing every word he told me. I was at his constant beck and call. When he wanted me, I was there." Her eyes meet mine. "And don't you get it, Edward? I'm the same with you. The only difference is that I'm aware of everything. I don't object when you want to film us, when you want to fuck me, when you want me to suck you off." I flinch as if she's hit me. "No, don't. I'm not saying this to make you feel bad. You give me pleasure, too, which you're very aware of. I'm just stating the obvious. I act like a fucking slut."

"Then don't do it!" I snap, glaring at her. I'm not fucking forcing her to be with me. I scoff to myself. I have *no* problem finding someone else to fuck. Hell, I still have my four go-to girls at Port Angeles Community College...though I haven't spoken to them since I met Tinks. And...

I blow out a breath, frustrated as the truth hits me.

Who the fuck am I kidding?

I wouldn't seek out another girl.

Why?

Fuck if I know.

*Goddammit*, I groan internally and close my eyes. There isn't supposed to be anything special with Tinks. She's just supposed to be a means to an

end. Casual. A temporary fuck 'til school's out. I don't want to care. She's supposed to be as meaningless as the other girls. I want indifference back in my life.

"Edward," she whispers, and I feel her fingers on my jaw. She scoots closer, straddling me, and I keep my eyes closed. It's not fair. None of this is. "I can't stop," she breathes out. I feel her sweet breath on my face. Closer, closer. I lick my lips. I feel myself relaxing again. "I don't *want* to stop."

Like a fucking pussy, I whimper when she kisses me.

Christ, I'm pathetic.

Craving, needing. Her. Bella. "Tinks," I murmur, kissing her slowly. I cup her face, sucking her bottom lip into my mouth. "I need you, baby."

She shivers and exhales shakily. "I need you, too."

~CYE~

The ride between the cabin and home is quiet. I wouldn't call it uncomfortable, because it isn't, but it's obvious that words have been left unsaid. There's a shitload I want to ask about the damn teacher she had a relationship with and if this is the Alec I heard her mumble about in her sleep, but I keep quiet. The indifference is permanently gone—it feels like it, anyway—but I'd be stupid to fish for even more.

"Edward?"

I give her a sideways glance, noticing that she looks nervous. "Yeah?"

"You...um, you won't tell anyone, right? About..." She releases a heavy breath. "About what happened in Phoenix."



I shake my head minutely, eyes on the road. "I have no reason to tell anyone about that. It's your business." I wouldn't mind having a go at the asshole who hurt her, but... "Your secret is safe with me," I say quietly.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

When I look at her again, I see relief. She chuckles softly, a bit wryly. "I'm sorry, by the way. For breaking down back there."

"No worries." I reach over and squeeze her hand. "You've gone through a lot."

"Yeah, but..." In my peripheral vision, I see her shaking her head and diverting her eyes to the window on her side. "These past few days have been too much. I've been all emotional and shit." Huh. I haven't really noticed. "I guess I'm having my period or something soon."

I grimace. "TMI, baby. TMI."

She rolls her eyes at me but smiles.

~CYE~

Slowly but surely, I'm growing used to having Dad at home more. I'm lucky he and Mom decided to eat out tonight, though, 'cause Tinks and I wouldn't have had as much time at the cabin if they were home. Alas, they were at some fucking dinner with a few of Dad's new coworkers. Not that it means I escape him entirely tonight, 'cause Tinks and I are currently on our way downstairs to say hello to my dear parents, who just got home. But I'd rather come down and say hi than have them come upstairs. I guess Tinks feels the same.

We find them in the kitchen where Dad is just opening a beer and Mom is putting on some coffee.

"Oh, you're still up," Mom says brightly upon spotting us.

Someone's had wine at dinner. Lots of it.

"We heard the garage door close," I say quietly, stopping in the wide doorway. "We were on the balcony." True. We were there studying for finals. Tinks made some joke about me studying and not paying Yorkie to do it. I didn't find it funny.

I try to look casual as I lean against the frame. "How was dinner?"

Dad answers, looking oddly happy. "It was very good, actually. Dr. Black is extremely satisfied with your work."

*Oh, sweet relief.*

I let out a breath I didn't even know I was holding. "That's...that's good."

For some weird fucking reason, my eyes begin to water.

The *fuck*?

I clear my throat and change the topic, totally ignoring Tinks' eyes on me. "Um, a Michael Patrick called earlier," I say to Dad. "He left a message; it's on the desk in your study. Something about a studio apartment? Anyway, the sale went through."

I assume Dad is buying—or *has* bought—another piece of property. It's a hobby of his, and he has houses, apartments, and condos all over the state.

"Excellent." He actually fucking smiles. Can't believe it. I don't think I've ever seen my dad smile. "I've been waiting for that call."

"Oh, is it for Edward, dear?" Mom asks him.

Dad nods, and I'm confused. "Yes." He faces me, still smiling. "I suppose now is as good a time as any." Mom looks positively giddy. "As we agreed upon earlier, you're leaving on June 22nd." I nod. Two days after my eighteenth birthday. I can't wait. "Well, this is your birthday present," he says, pulling out a rolled-up paper from his suit jacket. "I purchased a studio apartment for you. It's about twenty minutes off-campus, and it's in a very good neighborhood."

Oh, God. No. This isn't happening.

"It's already furnished..." Dad starts babbling. I swallow thickly, hesitating before looking down at Tinks. Shit. Yeah, she's frowning. At me. "You'll have plenty of time to settle in before classes start..." She also looks puzzled. I know why. I know that she's about to figure it out. "So, what do you think, son?"

My eyes snap to Dad's.

*Say something!*

"I..." I breathe. "Uh, thank you. It's... You shouldn't have."

Dad chuckles. "You didn't think a son of mine would be living in a dorm, did you?"

Actually, that's exactly what I thought.

Tinks, on the other hand, was under the impression that I was getting a big house with a pool...since that's what I told her I volunteered at the hospital for.

"We should celebrate," Mom says firmly, beaming like the sun...or someone who's three sheets to the wind. "Tomorrow. I'll cook your

favorite dinner and dessert, honey. Chicken enchiladas and mudcake, right?"

*Um. It's pizza and chocolate chip cookies, but thanks.*

"Sounds great," I reply, plastering a smile on my face. "I, uh...I'm gonna go to bed. Thank you, though. For the apartment. It's awesome."

Mom smiles widely. "Sleep well, honey."

"Good night, son," Dad adds.

I don't stick around.

On my way up to the third floor, I wonder if it's a good thing or a bad thing that Tinks stayed behind in the kitchen with my parents.

I also wonder how long it's gonna be before Tinks confronts me.

*I'm so fucked.*



## *Chapter 7* She Has Questions

*Chapter song – Brush It Off by Plan Three*

### **BPOV**

The morning after Edward received his birthday present—an apartment, *not* a big house—I'm not surprised to find that he's already left by the time I come downstairs. Last night, he refused to open the door when I

knocked. But like he refuses to give me answers, I refuse to give up. He's hiding something. Something big. I can feel it. There's a small voice in the back of my head registering and processing, but so far I have nothing. Well, I do have *something*: reasons to dig further.

Things aren't the way they seem.

His "friends" in Seattle.

His parents' dismissive behavior about Edward's bruises.

The way Edward acts around the house – rigid, worried, agitated...

The bullying at school.

His reputation.

The lie about why he's volunteering at the hospital.

His split personality.

His temper.

The fucking secrets.

And that's why I'm on my way to Charlotte right now. Okay, not exactly for that reason. Her car broke down yesterday and she called me earlier, asking if I could give her a ride today. However, if I want answers about Edward, I need to ask the people around him, and I'm starting with Charlotte. Since she's dating Peter—who is close to Edward—I'm pretty sure she can tell me *something*. A small puzzle piece. Anything. I'm not greedy.

When I reach the Whitlocks' house, I honk the horn, and it doesn't take many seconds before Charlotte runs out.

"Hey, girl." She grins and hops in. "Thank you for picking me up."

I smile and pull away from the curb. "No problem."

Taking a deep breath, I begin.

~CYE~

I ask Charlotte.

I ask Rose.

I ask Emmett.

I ask Peter.

I ask a few others.

As casually as I possibly can, I ask them about Edward's behavior. Throughout the day—at lunch, between classes—I fire off questions. When does he go to Seattle? Does he always return with bruises? Are his parents aware? How can people not notice? More importantly: how can people not *react*?

I ask.

Yeah, casually. But not casually enough. Stealth is not my middle name. I know Edward's going to find out about my inquisition. I just don't care, because as the questions leave my mouth, I begin to recognize the voice in the back of my head.

*Alice.*

And with each answer from Emmett, Rose, Charlotte, and Peter—though vague and always followed by a, "Why do you care about Edward so

much, Bella?"—the voice gets louder and louder. Emmett tells me as we walk to Spanish together that Edward spends every Sunday in Seattle.

*I call bullshit.*

That's the day Edward closes himself in. That's the day he never leaves his room. And Rose only spews out stuff about Edward being a conceited prick who doesn't deserve attention. Charlotte shrugs and gives me a noncommittal, "I don't know why he hangs out with those people. It's up to him. If he wants to get into fights, who am I to stop the bastard?" Lastly, Peter tells me that it's a lost cause—that *Edward* is a lost cause.

They're all in agreement. Cullen is Emmett's and Peter's friend. Rose and Charlotte are just there because they're dating Emmett and Peter. And... they don't really care why Edward acts the way he does. Since Edward's hardly known for spilling the beans, Emmett and Peter don't ask. Plus, they're dudes. They don't talk about feelings. Not my words. They're Peter's.

Safe to say, at the end of the day, I'm frustrated.

At the same time, I'm on an emotional rollercoaster. Don't ask me why, but I feel all weird.

As I unlock my car, movement registers in my periphery, and I look up to see Eric Yorkie reaching his car.

I move without thinking.

"Eric!" I call, running over to him. His eyes widen, as if he's scared that I'm going to hit him or something. But I'm not Cullen. "Can I ask you something?" I'm a little out of breath, and for some reason I feel a bit nauseated.

"Like w-what?" he stutters nervously. I narrow my eyes at him, and he glances at something behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I notice that it's *someone*, not something. It's Edward. He's standing by the doors to the school, glaring our way. Emmett and Peter stand on either side of him.

"You know what?" I face Eric again. "Just forget it."

There's no use, anyway. Not with Cullen nearby.

I need answers, but with him close, it's impossible.

I'll just have to think of something else.

Which I do when I get back to the house.

Before I can put my plan into action, though, I'm stopped in the hallway by a chipper Esme. She asks about school, forces me to try her homemade lemonade and cherry pie, wonders why I'm not changing my mind about college, and tries to convince me—all while smiling too widely—that education is "just so important". Not that I don't agree, but I'm not ready. I just lost everything in my life. The last thing on my mind is getting an education. Taking a year or two off isn't wrong in my book. And it's not like I don't have money to take it easy for a while. *Whatever*. I listen to Esme's motherly crap, and then I excuse myself to go study for finals.

"Sweetie?" she calls as I head for the stairs. "Carlisle and I are going out for dinner again tonight; I'm meeting him at work before. He's being interviewed for a medical research article within his field, and the writer is inviting us both out to a dinner in Port Angeles."

She looks so proud of Carlisle.

I shrug. "Okay. Have fun."



"Thank you." She smiles. "There's a casserole in the fridge for you and Edward. When he comes home, just put it in the oven."

"Um, all right," I respond lamely and then turn around again to go upstairs.

Cullen's room is my direction.

I've been with him several times when he has retrieved a joint or two from his stash, so I know that the little box is hidden behind a stack of DVDs, and I know that the key to the box is hidden underneath the left corner of his carpet. And since I spilled my guts to him when I was high, maybe he will do the same. It's worth a shot.

After grabbing a joint, I head back to my room and change into better clothes. Or rather, more *suitable* clothes...for what I'm about to do.

Weed and seduction oughta do it.

~CYE~

Three hours later, Esme is long gone, and I'm standing on the balcony between my and Edward's room as I watch his car pull in. Judging by the way he slams the door shut, I'd say he's having a bad day. Another one, that is. I'm willing to bet that both Emmett and Peter have told him about my questions today. But like I said, I don't care about subtle. I just want answers, because no matter what I do, the voice in the back of my head is still getting louder, and...it still belongs to Alice, that voice. Now, why would I hear her in my head? Why are warning bells going off, and why am I thinking so much about the best friend I lost years ago?

"*Bella!*" I hear Edward shout.

My guess is that he's on his way up here.

As I reenter my room, I can hear him stomping up the stairs.

*Time to do this.*

I remove my jeans and hoodie.

*"Where the fuck are you, Swan?"*

In my room, Cullen.

A few seconds later, he pounds on my door before pushing it open.

Oh, he's mad, all right.

"How was it at the hospital, dear?" I ask sweetly. His glare is pretty damn murderous. "Volunteering is good, isn't it? Especially since you're getting a big house with a pool for doing it."

"Don't fucking play with me, Bella," he warns in a low voice, threatening voice. Slowly, I walk over to my desk. It's where the joint is. "Stop asking questions, or I swear I will make you regret it."

I don't respond.

I just pick up the joint, making sure he sees it between my fingers.

He certainly sees it.

I grab a lighter from my desk drawer.

He eyes the joint, not saying a word. Even as I bring it to my lips he remains quiet. He does, however, look like he *wants* to say something. Yet, he doesn't.

"I got it from your room," I tell him, lighting it up. His jaw clenches as I take a pull from joint, and I can see his hands curling into fists at his sides.

I hold the smoke in my lungs, staring at him intently.

I exhale.

"Fuck," he whispers, running both hands through his hair and tugging at the ends. Suddenly, it's like he's looking for an escape. His eyes grow wide and pained. "Not... Fuck, not here, Bella. We smoke at the goddamn cabin. Not *here*."

I've come to notice that he calls me Bella when he's upset.

Otherwise, I'm always Tinks.

"What could go wrong?" I ask with a shrug. "Your parents are out."

With that said, I turn my back on him and sit down on the floor. The balcony door is still open, just a few feet away, and I lean back against the bed for support. Right in front of me, I have my closet—which has a mirrored door—and I can see Edward in it, standing by the door, watching me.

I want him to come closer. I want him to smoke. I want him to answer my questions.

Sex usually brings him closer, so...

With my head lolling back against the side of the mattress, I keep my eyes on Edward in the mirror as I slide my free hand down my chest. I'm only wearing a white tank top, no bra, so it's definitely not difficult for him to see my nipples hardening when I rub my fingers over them. At the same time, I take another drag from the joint.

"Edward," I sigh, a little need in my voice, and close my eyes.

He curses.

Slowly, deliberately, I pull my knees up, parting them, too.

White boy shorts in lace should work in my favor.

A soft whimper slips through my slightly parted lips as my hand reaches my pussy.

Outside the lacy fabric, I caress the length of my sex almost lazily.

When my fingers move under the fabric, I hear him walking closer.

"Take them off," he says quietly.

Smiling softly to myself, I place the joint between my lips and tug down my panties. Once they're off, I resume my position with my knees pulled up and spread.

His labored breathing near my face is warning enough, and I'm not startled when he takes the joint from my mouth. It fizzles as he takes a pull from it, and when he slides down next to me on the floor, I can't help but moan at the feeling of his arm brushing against mine. I'm sensitive and aware, eager for his touch—so eager that a brush of his arm sends a shiver through me.

I loll my head to the side, opening my eyes to watch him, all while slowly fingering myself. And I'm not surprised to see him focusing intently on the mirror, where he's watching my pussy. He exhales. Just like that, another shiver. Goose bumps follow, spreading slowly across my skin.

He gives the mirror a chin-nod. "The top, too."

And the top comes off.

He licks his lips, eyes flicking to me briefly. "Here." He brings the joint to my lips, his gaze so heated and dark.

I hold my breath, feeling my eyes glaze over.

As I exhale, his hand slides down my thigh, moving toward my wet pussy torturously slowly.

Eyes locked.

"Take off your clothes," I whisper, taking the joint from him.

His jaw clenches again, and he doesn't say anything, but he does obey, pulling his t-shirt over his head. I have to bite my lip to prevent myself from whimpering. His body gives away his age—he looks young—and though he's muscular and incredibly sexy, he's not built in the way older men are. Still, he's so goddamn hot. My mouth waters as he tosses the shirt aside and begins unbuttoning his jeans. Fuck. I can see his cock straining against the denim. And off. He pushes his jeans down his hips, muscles flexing as he lifts up.

"Boxers, too," I breathe out.

Another pull; I hold the smoke with a breath.

With a muted slap against his abdomen, his hard cock is freed from his boxers.

I exhale.

"Mmm..."

"Jesus, Tinks."

I'm Tinks again.

I smile lazily.

He leans in, kissing the corner of my mouth. "Give me." I do; I bring the joint to his lips, watching hungrily. My lips taste sweet, just like I know his lips taste the same.

While holding his breath, he nuzzles my neck and moves his hand closer to my pussy. When he finally reaches it, I watch in the mirror again. His large hand and long fingers cup me, his middle finger lining up with my wet slit.

Exhaling, his sweet breath wafts over me. "There's only one place I want to be right now," he murmurs in my ear. I shudder violently, nodding when he asks me if I want to know where that is. Yes, yes, yes, please tell me. God, I'm so desperate. I whimper again, this time because he adds pressure to his middle finger. Oh, fuck.

He moans quietly. "Knuckle-deep in your pussy."

"Yes."

He doesn't wait. In one smooth push, two fingers disappear into my pussy, causing pleasure to shoot up my spine. I arch into his touch, needing, craving, always fucking wanting. If he told me to jump, I'd ask how high. It's pathetic, but I can't stop. These moments mean something to me.

After taking a couple more pulls from the joint, I drop it in the glass of water I have on my nightstand. And then we're all hands. He finger-fucks me deeply as we make out devouringly, tongues tasting, teeth nipping, lips locking.

"Let me fuck you."

Any time. "Yes..."

"Get up," he commands quietly, holding out his hand. I take it, struggling a little to stand up, and then he slides into my spot. "I want you on my lap." Fuck, yes. "Facing the mirror." Fuck, yes, yes. He grips his cock, pumping it roughly in his hand, and I position myself over him, one leg on each side of him. Then down, with my knees on the floor. "What a view," he murmurs huskily.

My back to his chest, I sink down on his cock.

*Wasn't I supposed to ask Edward questions?*

Meh.

The position is feels amazing, and our hands are free to roam. He doesn't have to hold me up since I'm on me knees, which means I control the movements without difficulty. Just a small lift, and then down again. His hands snake around my torso, reaching my tits. His breath is hot and labored against my neck.

"Watch, baby."

I do.

Our eyes meet in the mirror, and we watch as his cock fills me slowly, over and over, and his mouth, both soft and firm on my skin, feels so good. Moans escape me; I keep watching. His cock is slick from my wetness. I feel stretched and filled, and when I push my knees out further, spreading more, I can take all of him. Oh, my God. So hot, warm and wet. I swivel my hips, he moans, I cry out, he tweaks my nipples, I push up, he breathes, I slam down again, he groans. And our lidded eyes never stray from the mirror.

"Fuck, look at you," he rasps. "So spread out for me." His words make me moan, and it's true. "Those wet lips parted for my cock... You're *soaking* me, baby."

My breathing stutters; more pleasure travels up my spine, and I push my tits into his hands, to which he gropes them roughly and expertly. He kneads, pinches, and massages as I sink up and down his cock. My inner walls clench around him, his throaty moan proving that he feels it.

"I want you to taste it," he begs in a moan, and I moan, too. "Please, Tinks... Fuck, I want you to suck me."

Never saying no, I scramble off his lap and kneel beside him. He stands up, his profile and prominent erection visible in the full-length mirror.

"Fuck," he breathes out, holding the base of his cock. "Come here. Lick it."

Placing my hands on his thighs, I lean forward and lick the underside of him, not stopping until I can wrap my lips around the head. More licking, a little suckling—that makes his hips buck—and I moan for him. He likes that. Humming, too. His hands move to my head, fingers threading through my hair. *Yes, yes, yes.* I nod for him. *Fuck my mouth.* And he does. He thrusts slowly and deeply, groaning when he hits the back of my throat.

"Not gonna last," he grunts, picking up speed. "Jesus...you like that, Tinks? You like sucking off your own juices from my dick?"

I want him to come, so I cup his balls and tug, twisting his sac gently in my palm, all while humming around him.

"Fuck, I'm coming," he moans. Suddenly, he's pushing jerkily and quickly into my mouth, a firm hold on the back of my head. "Oh, God... Swallow, baby; swallow my cum."

Hollowing out my cheeks, I suck him as hard as I can. I hold my breath. He explodes. I swallow. His salty taste fills my mouth in four thick streams, his cock pulsating as each release seeps out of him.



Once he's done, he starts panting.

"Fuck me sideways," he gasps, slipping his softening cock out of my mouth. "Get up on the bed. I want to lick your pussy."

With a needy whimper, I do as told. I need to come so fucking badly, and I can always count on his fingers to get me there. I doubt he has gone down on a girl before me, because the first time he gave me oral, he was definitely inexperienced. He went down on me hungrily, moaning and lapping; it was like licking pussy was new to him and he had found the cure for cancer or something.

Since then, he's definitely gotten better with his tongue, but his fingers... That's where the real magic is.

As soon as my back hits the mattress, Edward follows and gets comfortable between my parted legs. His hot breath against my pussy makes me quiver. His fingers come next, teasing and pushing, making me beg.

*"Please..."*

He chuckles.

He likes it when people need him.

"You wanna come, Tinks?" he mutters, exhaling over my clit. I shiver and nod and fist the covers and whimper.

Then, fucking finally, he gives me what I want.

He licks softly, sucking on my clit, and his fingers, three of them, slam into me.

I almost arch off the bed.

For several minutes, he goes from licking and lapping persistently to teasing me with just the tips of his fingers and soft kisses. He draws arousal from me, moaning quietly against my heated flesh. But when he speeds up, speeds up, speeds up without faltering, I know that his teasing is over. I'm moaning and writhing on the bed, constantly on the edge, but not quite yet falling over. Until I do. He sucks my clit into his mouth, flicking his tongue over it, simultaneously curling his fingers upward inside of me. It pushes me over right away, and I stop breathing and the orgasm washes through me.

Before I'm even down from my orgasmic high, Edward reminds me that a teenage boy's recovery time is close to nothing by shoving his cock inside my pussy.

I cry out hoarsely, shock, pain, and more pleasure coursing through me.

"*Fuck*," he grits out, lips brushing against my temple. My fingernails dig into his shoulder blades as he pulls out slowly. "I'm sorry. I couldn't wait..." He slams in hard. "Need more..."

He fucks me frantically, pushing me down hard on the mattress with each thrust. His hands are rough, his mouth the same, and his breaths come out in harsh pants in the crook of my neck. In return, I spur him on by letting my fingernails dig deeper. My teeth nip along his shoulder, alternating between erotic and painful. At the same time, my heels are pressing into his ass cheeks.

"God-fucking-dammit!" he moans, fucking, fucking, fucking. "Can you come again?"

No.

I love what he's doing, but I'm not close. "Just come, Edward," I whimper.

He lets out a labored breath, rolling his hips. "*Close*..."

Cupping his face, I cover his mouth with mine in a wet kiss.

He groans and kisses me back passionately.

Harder. Deeper.

Lips, teeth, tongue, hot breaths.

I moan. "Cullen..."

Faster.

He shakes his head. "Please, baby."

He grinds his pelvis against my clit.

I kiss jaw, up to his ear. A breath. "*Edward.*"

"Shit."

He comes with a strangled grunt, eyes squeezed shut, forehead creased.

.

.

.

Rolling off me, he ends up on his back, eyes on the ceiling as he catches his breath.

And when I shift, I can feel wetness between my legs.

I close my eyes and purse my lips.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.*

"We didn't use a condom," I choke out.

The fucker next to me chuckles, still out of breath. "I know. Fucking amazing."

A wave of nausea hits me hard, and before I know it, I'm rushing toward the bathroom.

Edward doesn't follow.

.

.

.

When I get back to my room, he's back in his boxers and jeans and is spraying air freshener everywhere.

"What're you doing?" I croak, reaching for my hoodie. I put it on and walk over to my closet, picking out a pair of sweats. "I'd like to breathe, you know."

"We smoke in the cabin," is all he says, and when he's done polluting the air, he sets the can down on my desk and flashes me a smirk. "Thanks for the fuck, but I gotta go. Got some studying to do."

He leaves.

And I fucking failed. *So much for getting answers.*

Now what?

The voice keeps nagging at me.

~CYE~

Just as I finish making a sandwich in the kitchen, I hear the front door open and close. *Dammit*. I was hoping not to run into Edward's parents, but it's safe to say that won't happen now.

Grabbing a Coke from the fridge, I hear footsteps coming from two different directions—the stairs and the hallway. Looks like Edward's coming down, too.

How convenient; they all end up in the kitchen.

"You two are still up," Esme states, giggling. She looks...drunk. "Oh, I think I'd like a sandwich, too."

I frown to myself, nibbling at the end of my own sandwich, and watch as she starts pulling out ingredients from the fridge.

"How was dinner?" Edward asks his dad. I look over at him, and I'm not able to let anything go. I think about Alice again, and I process and register. I see how uncomfortable Edward appears to be, how he keeps his hands in his pockets, how he shifts his weight from foot to foot, how he refuses to leave the doorway...

"It went well," Carlisle responds pensively, eyes on his son.

Edward swallows, nods, and looks away.

Carlisle keeps staring at him.

Sipping my Coke, I narrow my eyes at the two.

"I, uh..." Edward clears his throat and points a thumb over his shoulder. "I should go back to studying."

"Finals or the assignment I gave you?" Carlisle asks, taking a step closer.

For a second, Edward's eyes meet mine. It's so brief, but I could've sworn I saw panic.

No way.

Why would I see that?

Shit, I'm taking this too far.

"Your assignment," he responds quickly.

Carlisle takes another step, tilting his head slightly. They're equally tall, but it still *feels* as if Carlisle is taller. *Now, how that is possible...*

"I see." It almost looks like Carlisle is taking a whiff of the air. "Well, the test is in three days, so you probably have a lot to do."

Man, this family is weird.

*Completely and utterly fucked up.*

"Yes, sir."

My brows knit together. *Sir?*

Carlisle hums.

*Alice is usually eager to get changed when we go swimming with school, but today she's the last one to enter the locker rooms. All the girls in our class are talking loudly while changing into their swimsuits, and it's not until they're walking out that Alice starts to undress.*

*I wait for her, 'cause she's my best friend.*

*Maybe she's having a bad day. It's happened a lot since her dad left a month ago.*

*But when she pulls off her shirt...*

*"Alice," I gasp. "What happened to you?"*

*Her arm is full of bruises.*

*"Oh, that?" she chuckles, though it sounds weird and her eyes are glassy.*

*"I'm so clumsy. I-I walked into a door."*

*I frown, 'cause...the bruises...the way they're shaped...*

I'm slammed back into reality when Carlisle says, "Let's go upstairs to my office, Edward. I have a few things I need to discuss with you."

My eyes widen; I exhale shakily.



*Chapter 8*  
Barely Hanging On

*Chapter song – Lullaby by Nickelback*

~oOo~

***The lyrics basically represent Bella's point of view in this chapter***

*Well, I know the feeling*

*Of finding yourself stuck out on the ledge*

*And there ain't no healing*

*From cutting yourself with the jagged edge*

*I'm telling you that, it's never that bad*

*Take it from someone who's been where you're at*

*Laid out on the floor*

*And you're not sure you can take this anymore*

.

*Please let me take you*

*Out of the darkness and into the light*

*'Cause I have faith in you*

*That you're gonna make it through another night*

*Stop thinking about the easy way out*

*There's no need to go and blow the candle out*

*Because you're not done*

*You're far too young*

*And the best is yet to come*

.

*Well, everybody's hit the bottom*

*Everybody's been forgotten*

*When everybody's tired of being alone*

*Yeah, everybody's been abandoned*

*And left a little empty handed*



*So, if you're out there, barely hanging on...*

.

*Just give it one more try to a lullaby*

*And turn this up on the radio*

*If you can hear me now*

*I'm reaching out*

*To let you know that you're not alone*

*And if you can't tell, I'm scared as hell*

*'Cause I can't get you on the telephone*

*So, just close your eyes*

*Oh, honey, here comes a lullaby*

*Your very own lullaby*

## **EPOV**

When Dad closes the door behind us, I steel myself.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that he smelled the pot on me. Maybe on Tinks, too, though she stood farther away from him in the kitchen. Showering and changing clothes obviously wasn't enough.

In the past, when I smoked at home, I always made sure there were several days 'til Dad came home. It was always when he was away on business. Mom never gave a shit—if she could smell it and recognize it, that is.

"You reek," he tells me, and my spine is already rigid.

He stares me down.

"Does Isabella smoke, too?"

*Don't ever lie, Cullen. He'll see through it.*

I clench my jaw.

"No, sir. Not that I know of."

He smirks and takes a step toward me.

*Chin up. Look him in the eye.*

I stand still as he leans closer and closer, stopping when I can feel his breath near my ear.

"Have you fucked her yet?" he whispers.

Panic. Nausea.

Swallowing hard, I push both down. "No, sir," I choke out.

"Tsk, tsk, you goddamn liar," he hisses.

There's no warning this time. Just as his words are out—and sending a chill down my rigid spine—he shoves me into a wall. *Jesus fuck.* By mistake, I let out a whimper when the back of my head bumps into a picture frame behind me. I'm fighting dizziness and pain at the same time as I try to brace myself for more. He's coming at me, a livid look in his eyes, and there's nothing I can do about it. He punches me hard in the face. Not once, but three times. My eyes are closed, my teeth are clenched together, and *everything* hurts. *Don't cry, don't fucking cry.* Again and again, he hits me. I can feel something warm oozing down from my eyebrow. I've been through it before. I can stitch it up. No problem. More. Again. Harder. Then I'm on the floor, gasping for breath. My hands

clutch my stomach. He kicks. There goes a rib. The pain is radiating through me, making it difficult to breathe without choking and coughing. I try to pull up my knees to protect myself, but it's fucking futile. He's relentless.

"How fucking stupid are you?" he snaps, sounding out of breath. "Not only are you doing drugs, but you're fucking the girl who just lost her parents."

*He will stop soon.*

*He will stop soon.*

I hear him laugh. "I'd feel sorry for her if it wasn't for the fact that she's a nosy little bitch."

I wheeze a breath, afraid that I'm going to panic. A panic attack would only make it harder to get air into my lungs. So, I try to breathe. Breathe through the pain. Breathe through the pain. And then he's kicking me again. I cry out in pain when his shoe makes impact with my chest. The cry is followed by tears and coughs. Fuck. No air. No air. Can't breathe. More dizziness.

"Make sure she keeps her mouth shut," he snarls in my ear, grabbing me by the collar of my shirt. I choke. "If she starts spreading...*lies*...about our family, I will make her pay for it."

*Please stop.*

"Don't you get it, Edward? I have eyes and ears all over Forks."

*Oh, God.*

For the first time in years, tears are streaming down my face, but I don't care. I'm too busy trying to relax my muscles in order to breathe. Ripples of pain making their way through my body are almost enough to cripple

me, but I can't give up. I'm supposed to be out of here in just a few weeks. I gotta get through it. Gotta get out.

Dad's next words are spoken calmly, but I can barely hear them over the ringing in my ears.

"Your mother and I are going to a banquet in Houston next week. We'll be gone for three days, and if I discover that Isabella's been snooping around..." He trails off, but the threat is clear.

He drops me back down to the floor.

I breathe. Small and quick breaths. They're all I can manage.

"And enough with the fucking drugs. Are we clear?"

"Yeah," I whimper like the pathetic pussy I am.

"Good. I've told your mother that I'm spending the night at the hospital, so I'll see you tomorrow. Come by my office and I'll check on that rib for you. It's probably broken."

With that said, he walks out.

He always leaves me in peace in his study when I've broken something.

Rolling over, I end up on my side in a fetal position—a position I'm all too familiar with. *God, it hurts.* I can barely open my left eye, my chest hurts with each breath, my eyebrow probably needs stitches, at least one rib is cracked, and same goes for my bottom lip. As usual, shame washes over me, and even more when I realize that I can't stop crying. I feel weak and defeated. *Lame. Powerless.*

*Worthless.*

*Knock, knock.*

*"Edward?"*

"Oh, *God*," I croak, and another round of overpowering pain surges through me. I hold my breath, hoping like hell that Tinks won't fucking enter right now. Squeezing my eyes shut yet again—while ignoring the pain in and around my eyes as I do so—I hug my knees harder to my body. I'm shaking, I realize, and my ribs ache even more in my rigid position, but I can't bring myself to relax. It's physically impossible.

*"Isabella, he's studying. Perhaps you should go to bed. It's late."*

*"Are...are you sure? I thought I heard something..."*

"Just go," I whimper, knowing very well she can't hear me.

*"I assure you, he's fine. He has an important test to study for, so I allowed him to use my office. Now, off you go. I have some work to do at the hospital, so..."*

I listen over the ringing in my ears and the headache that pounds away; I listen for a long time.

Nothing.

It's quiet.

I don't keep track of the time I spend on the floor. I just breathe through the pain and try to gather strength, so far without luck. All I know is that it's completely dark out and that the moon is high outside of Dad's window. The house is silent, except for my occasional...*noises*...as I try to get up.

Eventually, I manage.

The sun is about to rise when I force my legs to carry me upstairs to my room.

The tears have dried, but the shame is still there. And the pain.

Knowing that Tinks is in the next room, I'm aware that I have to call in sick tomorrow. There's no way I can pull off a lie now about seeing my made-up friends from Seattle. She's just...too close. All the fucking time.

When I crash on my bed, I have to push down sobs. I still have a hard time breathing properly, and crying won't *fucking* help. But just as I crashed on the bed, I feel everything crashing down around me, and I'm so sick of the pain. Everything in my life is tumbling down. What was once me in total control, is now...rubble. It's exhausting keeping track of every lie, and with Tinks living so close, it's only a matter of time before all is revealed. The question is if I can hold it together 'til graduation. Not that I know of Tinks' plans, but I'm pretty sure her plan isn't to stick around. At least I hope it's not.

~CYE~

A couple hours later, I send a text to Mom and tell her to call in sick for me. She's at the shelter in Port A, which means I already know it's Tinks when there's a knock on my door. But I don't respond. She will just have to go to school by herself. She'll probably seize the opportunity and ask people about me—like she did yesterday. Fuck, when Emmett told me that Tinks was asking him about me...I thought I was gonna smash someone's face in. And then, when I got home from volunteering at the hospital, Tinks distracted me, and succeeded only 'cause I think with my fucking dick. I have myself to blame, really. Had I not gone for it, I wouldn't have a fractured rib right now.

"*Edward, please open the door!*" Tinks calls...again. The bitch just won't quit. "*Aren't you going to school?*"

Christ, I'm so fucking *tired*.

Pulling the covers over me completely, I try to drown out the world. Close myself off. Breathe in, breathe out. With my fingers, I trace the damage on my face. My eye is swollen, as is my jaw, and... I just... I don't know what to *do* anymore. I get that I won't ever be good enough for Dad, and truth be told, I'm not even sure that I care. For years, I held out hope. I worked my ass off to impress him, and when that didn't work, I started working even harder. Only, I stopped doing it to impress him. I did it just to keep him at least a *little* satisfied...which didn't work, either. I still bust my fucking ass, and yet nothing's changed. I've lost count of how many times I've broken bones. I don't remember the last time someone told me I'd done good...or whatever.

Do my parents even love me?

Judging by the photos I've seen of Tinks and her folks, I'd say no.

I'm pretty sure at this point that Mom knows, too. If Tinks is suspicious after living here for less than three months... Yeah, Mom has to know, and...*fuck*...that *hurts*. She's my goddamn *mom*.

I squeeze my eyes shut when they start to burn.

*Man the fuck up, Cullen. Don't be a pussy.*

~CYE~

As soon as I know that Tinks has left for school, I have to humiliate myself by calling Dad and ask him if he can stitch me up at home. There's just no way I can get out of bed. It hurts too much. Luckily, I've been through this before, so I know how to clean the wounds without moving around too much. Plus, I have a kit that I keep near the bed. The only thing I can't fix myself is my rib, which no one can really "fix"—I just have to be careful about twisting my body or carrying shit. Gotta let it heal. Again,

I've been through it before. And Dad tells me, snickering a little, that he'll be home tonight to give me a checkup.

I thank him and hang up the phone, glad that I don't have a shift at the hospital until after the weekend.

By now, I just feel empty.

I study to pass time, and when I can't take the growling from my stomach anymore, I manage to make my way across the room to my mini fridge. A can of Coke and a bar of chocolate will have to do for now.

Then back to studying.

And later that day, when Tinks comes home from school, I ignore her again. I also ignore the little voice in my head that tells me to open up to her. Why I even have that voice is beyond me. Maybe Tinks is a good person—I actually think she is—but it doesn't matter. I'm on my own 'til I can leave this hellhole.

When Mom knocks on the door around dinner time, I grimace at the pain shooting through me as I push myself off the bed—the bed that is full of textbooks. But she tells me through the door that she has dinner for me, so I force myself to go on. And...I want to see her. I want to look her in the eye and search for traces of knowledge.

I've never told her anything, and I don't know if Dad has, either. A part of me hopes he has. Not the truth, of course, but a lie—one that is similar to the one I tell my friends. Could that be it? Does she think I hang out with the wrong crowd?

Before I open the door, I take a quick look in the mirror. While I've cleaned off the blood, my face is still a warzone. Bruises and cuts, my own stitches, and the entire goddamn rainbow. Aside from that, I'm also



limping and unable to keep my back straight. So, wearing nothing but a pair of sweats and a hoodie, I open the door for Mom.

I stare at her.

She's smiling at the plate she's carrying. "Here's some dinner, honey." I keep staring, not moving an inch. "I figured you'd still be a bit under the weather, so I brought it up here." A bit under the weather? Really? "Um, should I call the school for tomorrow, too?" she asks softly. She's still looking at the motherfucking plate. "Perhaps you should take it easy another day or two."

*She knows.*

I grit my teeth as my fucking eyes well up.

Funny, it feels like I've been kicked in the gut all over again.

"You know," I choke out, traitorous tears spilling over. "You *know*, Mom."

At that, her head snaps up. Her eyes grow wide; not at the sight of my face, but from my accusation. "W-what?" she stammers, and I avert my eyes as I blink back more tears. Jesus, what am I, a fucking girl? "I don't know what you're t-talking about, honey."

"Save it," I whisper hoarsely. I shake my head, both at her and at myself, and grab the plate. "Just...fucking save it."

I close the door.

I don't eat the food, which makes me nauseous, and after dry heaving into my toilet, I push down a *few* bites of food. Small sips of water. Some more food, then more, then more, and then the plate is empty. I ate it all too quickly, and it doesn't take long before I'm on my knees in front of the toilet again. Between retching, I gulp for air. Everything aches. My mom

knows. Breathe. Breathe. I throw up again, feeling weaker than before. My mom knows how Dad treats me.

As I take a sip of water, I end up choking and coughing as I wallow in self-pity.

I just want this to be over.

~CYE~

Dad leaves without a word after my checkup.

I study.

Every once in a while, I glance at my phone on the nightstand.

It's been going off once every half-hour, and I know it's Tinks. In a sick way, my mood changes for the better whenever it vibrates. Because it means I'm on somebody's mind. Which is also the reason I haven't read the messages yet. I'm pretty sure she's furious, and I'd like to pretend that her texts are full of concern. It's nicer that way.

But before I go to bed, I can't hold off anymore. I need to see what she's written.

**Open the fucking door, Cullen! – Bella.**

**Are you deaf? – Bella.**

**For fuck's sake, just answer me! – Bella.**

**We need to talk – Bella.**

**PLEASE – Tinks.**

**I'm worried, Edward. Please talk to me – Tinks.**

I smile, ignoring the stinging cut on my lip. *She's worried.*

**Are you going to school tomorrow? – Tinks.**

**I won't stop – Tinks.**

The last text causes me to close my eyes in resignation.

*I won't stop.*

*I won't stop.*

*I won't stop.*

That's what I feared, and...

I swallow hard.

It means that *I* have to stop her.

If she finds out the truth...I don't wanna know what Dad will do.

"Fuck my life," I whisper to myself.

~CYE~

The weekend drags on, and Tinks' messages continue to pour in. On Saturday, she's at some party with Rosalie and Charlotte, but she doesn't stay long. Just a few hours after she left, she's back, first knocking on my door and then settling for more texts.

I doubt she believes that I'm sick.

On Sunday, I don't know what she's doing, but I have more important things to do. Dad comes to my room and questions me about the assignment he gave me earlier this week, and though I pass with flying colors, all I get is a grunted "okay" before he walks out again.

Mom knocks once then leaves, and when I open the door, there's food.

I sleep a lot.

And study.

And stare at the calendar on my phone.

And...when Monday rolls around, I know that my time is up. At eight AM, Mom and Dad leave for Houston, and the sound of a flushing toilet—about an hour later—tells me that Tinks never left for school. So...three days without my parents. Three days where Tinks doesn't have to tiptoe around my dad; she can just knock on my fucking door without stopping. Which she starts doing. For about twenty minutes, and then, through the door, she says that she's going to get a "goddamn screwdriver or something to fix that motherfucking lock".

Like I said, time's up.

I need to silence her, and it fucking hurts.

*"Edward."*

She's back.

*"Please."*

I can hear the tears in her voice, which makes me bury my face in my pillow.

*"I know you can hear me," she croaks. "So, before I remove this lock, I'm gonna tell you something." She pauses. "Because I want you to open this door willingly."*

Silence.

All I hear is my own breathing and her sniffles.

*"I was the one who found her," she whimpers. I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't want to hear whatever she's going to say. "Alice. My friend. I was the one who found her."*

Fuck.

*"She said she was sick."*

Double fuck.

*"After school, I was bringing her homework, and..."*

I grit my teeth.

My eyes sting behind my closed lids.

*"I found her in the garage, Edward. She'd been dead for hours already. She just hung there."*

Please stop.

*"I was only fifteen."*

God, just stop *talking*.

*"Did you know that not all people who hang themselves die of asphyxiation?"*

Yeah. I do know. Dad gave me an assignment once to study suicide... *alternatives*. It was last year, I think.

It all depends on the "jump", and if the fall is hard enough, it's more likely that you sever your spine. It's called "hangman's fracture", and I aced that test when Dad presented his questions.

"Her neck was broken, Edward," Tinks cries. Right. Cervical fracture. I read about that. Morbidly, idly, I wonder which one or ones her friend fractured. There are seven cervical vertebrae. Did it hurt? Was there time for pain? *"You may not kill yourself, but there's something you share with Alice, and I refuse to sit on the sidelines a second time."*

I stop breathing.

*"I know Carlisle's abusing you."*



*Chapter song – I Remember by Stabbing Westward*

## **BPOV**

I don't know how long I sit on the floor outside of Edward's room, but it's a long time. I'm exhausted.

The last thing I want to do is use tools to open his door, and I'm stalling. I will do it, but I don't want to. I want him to open it for himself. So, I just sit here. Images from when I found Alice's body swirl around in my head, taunting me, and I'm starting to believe that I'm a masochist, because the face changes then. It's no longer Alice I'm seeing, hanging there. It's Edward.

My stomach lurches, though I don't have to go to the bathroom this time, which almost shocks me. These past few days...I don't know how many times I'm thrown up. And it's that asshole's fault, I'm sure of it. Fucking

prick, that Carlisle. I mean, really...did he expect I wouldn't notice? Ever? Come on. Oh, and Esme, that *fucking* whore. Carlisle abuses Cullen, and Esme lets it happen.

I saw Carlisle's knuckles after he left his office, after he left Edward behind in there. They were bloodied and bruised.

"Edward," I croak. "*Please.*"

No response.

Suddenly, it gets to be too much. The death of my parents, having no one to talk to, this with Edward, not feeling safe in this house, Alec's betrayal... hell, even Alice. Yeah, it was years ago that it happened, but with Edward... It feels like every wound is ripped open, and the floodgates open along with them.

Sitting there on the floor, I sob into my hands.

Tears stream down my cheeks, and I've never felt this sense of *hopelessness* before. It makes my chest ache at the same time as it feels completely empty. My stomach rolls, and I scream out, the sound muffled by my hands.

"Tinks."

My head snaps up, my eyes go wide, my mouth pops open, my breath gets stuck in my throat.

And I crumble again.

I hadn't heard the door open, and now a part of me wishes it never did.

"Edward," I whimper, bottom lip quivering. He looks so beat up, so broken.

Inside and out.

He can't blame his supposed friends in Seattle this time.

It's all on his dad.

"Don't fucking cry," he whispers, though his own eyes are full of unshed tears. "Stop, Tinks." He shakes his head, staring down at me. "Don't be weak."

*Weak?*

Fuck that.

Standing up, I approach him cautiously. I make sure to look him in the eye, as opposed to all the cuts and bruises on his face.

When I raise my hand to touch his cheek, he shakes his head again. "Don't touch me," he breathes out, and then he walks back into his room. Only this time, he leaves the door open. I take that as an invitation and enter behind him. My eyes are quick to scan the room, and for some reason I half-expected to see something different. Don't know why I thought that, but everything looks the same. Immaculate aside from a few books on his floor.

"What do you want?" he sighs, sitting down on his bed. He tries to pull off a cocky smirk. "You wanna fuck?"

I stare at him blankly, feeling sorry for him. I don't necessarily pity him, but I'm sorry for the parents he has. He deserves better. And he can try to brush it all off or hide it, but he will also fail. It's right there in his eyes, and I know there's a lot hidden behind his I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude.

There are so many things I wanna say in response to what he just said.

*Can you even get it up?*



*Stop pretending, Edward.*

*Let me in.*

*I can help you.*

*When did Carlisle start hitting you?*

*Why don't you report it to the police?*

*No, I don't wanna fuck. Want a hug instead?*

*I'm sorry.*

I say none of those things.

"Want some breakfast?" I ask quietly, wiping away the last tears. We have three days before his folks return. Plenty of time to talk serious. But not now. I doubt he'll go for it, anyway. His defenses are up, ready to shove me out of the way.

"Are you fucking with me?" he chuckles incredulously. "You're asking if I want *breakfast*?"

For a second, I see hurt flash across his features, and it takes a while for me to understand. Then I do. I think about Esme, and how she most likely sweeps everything under the rug around here. Edward thinks I'm doing the same. I see his face, and I ask if he wants food.

He's so wrong. I won't ignore this.

"I told you, Edward," I whisper as I walk over to him. I stop when I'm right in front of him, and I touch his cheek gently. He doesn't flinch away this time. "I won't stop."

With his shining eyes locked with mine, he swallows hard. "You should."

I take a step back and hug my middle. "I can't." I take a breath. "Come on, I'll make pancakes."

He hesitates. "I..." Then he looks down and shakes his head. "I can't leave the room."

I frown. "Why?"

When he looks me in the eye this time, all I see is pain. Different kinds.

"It hurts to walk," he admits, and my insides constrict painfully. "Um..." He swallows. "My leg, and...uh, I have a cracked rib."

My right hand flies to my mouth. "Oh, God." I squeeze my eyes shut.

Before I lose the contents of my stomach, I run out of his room and into the bathroom across the hall.

"Tinks!" he chokes out.

My eyes burn as I throw up. I gag repeatedly and gulp for air.

Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God.

"Oh, *God*," I cry.

Carlisle broke his fucking *rib*? What kind of sick animal *is* he?

And Esme...

I could *kill* her.

All that neglect.

No wonder he's a bully in school. He gets pushed down at home, so he makes sure he's the one doing the pushing around with others.

"Tinks." And then I have arms around me. "Christ, baby, stop this. Don't cry."

I shake my head and wipe my mouth. My attempts to shove him away are weak, especially when I don't know where I can put my hands. He just told me he couldn't leave his room 'cause it hurt, and now he's here, comforting me on the bathroom floor. No. He's the one who should stop.

"He broke your rib," I sob into his neck.

"Shhhh, it's okay, Tinks," he responds thickly. "S'just a small fracture."

*S'just a small fracture.*

*S'just a small fracture.*

*S'just a small fracture.*

I heave into the toilet again.

Just a small fracture? Does that make shit better?

"Listen," he murmurs, clearing his throat. "Are you sick? 'Cause I've heard you in the bathroom for days now."

I look up, seeing a glass of water and a hand towel in his hand. I accept both and take a few sips of water as I try to think of an answer. An answer that doesn't have the words "are", "you", and "stupid" in it. But that's the thing with Edward Cullen. You never know where you have him. He's usually cruel, mean, condescending, and ruthless. Then, when he's the one who's hurt, he comforts you? Makes no sense. And, as for his bully persona, it doesn't apply to me for some reason. While he's been crude, tactless, and harsh at times, he hasn't pushed me down. In fact, he has even had his sweet moments. When we're at the cabin, for instance. He's very affectionate. I even called him a fucking cuddler.

"I'm fine," I mutter hoarsely, and it's the truth. Physically, anyway. I don't feel nauseous anymore. It's weird. Nausea hits me hard sometimes, but then it's just gone. I raise a brow at him. "How are *you*?"

He gives me a small rueful smile. "Peachy."

*Beautiful liar.*

I squeeze his hand. He squeezes back.

Things aren't fine. Things aren't peachy. We both know it.

But I guess we're content to act for a moment.

"You said something about breakfast?"

I nod quickly. "I'll bring it up here, all right?"

"Thanks." He grimaces as he tries to stand up, so I help him. "It's okay. I got it."

*Of course you do.*

~CYE~

Monday goes by quickly. We chill out in Edward's room, doing...nothing, really. We watch some TV, we eat junk food and a bunch of candy, we veg out...Edward sleeps a lot. And I think of options. Some are bizarre, like... we could empty the house of money, jewelry, technology, and then drive away in our cars. We could sell mine. Or maybe his Aston, 'cause my Porsche is bigger. I dunno. But Edward's parents would be able to find us, wouldn't they? From the license plates. Yeah, so we should sell both cars. And then we'd run.

Other options are realistic. We could go to the police.

One option is tempting, but so wrong. We could kill Carlisle and Esme.

I shake my head. Stupid thought. I'm weird.

Tuesday also goes by quickly. Too quickly.

I want to talk to him, but he insists on studying for finals.

I pretend to do the same, sitting at his desk.

He sits in his bed. Books strewn all over. The cookies I made him earlier are on his nightstand. They're chocolate chip, and I know they're his favorite. I remember. A glass of homemade lemonade, too. I'm no cook, but my mom taught me to bake chocolate chip and how to make the best lemonade.

I sigh and tap my pen against my notepad.

"Study, Tinks," Edward says quietly, and I look over at him. His eyes are focused on his books, but I see the small smile on his lips.

"I can't," I say, pouting. "I'm bored." Now he looks up. "I need a distraction." I roll my eyes, 'cause I can see that his mind goes straight for the gutter. He can barely walk, but he thinks he can fuck? Please. "Not that," I chuckle, and he just shrugs with an impish grin. "Let's talk."

"No," he says right away.

Hard nut to crack. "Not about...*that*," I lie. "About something else." I tap my chin. "Did you always want to be a doctor?"

Slowly, as if he's hesitating, he shakes his head. Eyes focused on the bedspread. "Still don't," he admits. "Never did."

And I get it. It's Carlisle's decision.

He controls Edward in every aspect, it seems.

Killing Carlisle and Esme doesn't feel so wrong, after all.

"What did you want to become when you were little?"

He cracks a small grin, but he won't face me. "Um...a carpenter? Something with woodworking." His grin fades. "It's stupid, I know. I was just a kid."

I frown. "Why would that be stupid?" But he doesn't have to answer. "Let me guess. Your dear father told you it wasn't good enough."

He doesn't reply.

"Hey, Jesus was a carpenter." I smile cheekily as he finally meets my gaze.

"Right," he chuckles silently. "I'll be sure to tell Dad that."

And my smile is gone.

~CYE~

For dinner, I make pizza with help from a simple recipe I Googled. He tells me pizza is his favorite, and we eat it together in his room. He asks for seconds and thirds, which makes me feel giddy. He also asks for more lemonade, and I feel warm.

"What's with the goofy smile, Tinks?"

I duck my head. "Nothing."

He burps. Then laughs. "Sorry. Um, thanks for dinner. It was really good. You should be a chef or some shit."

I kiss his cheek, and then I take the plates downstairs.

My good mood vanishes when I reach the kitchen, though, because I see the calendar on the fridge. Tomorrow's date is circled, and inside it says, "We'll be home at ten PM. ~Mom".

I knew they were coming back tomorrow, but to see it like that only reminds me that I don't have much time left.

I want us to leave.

With that thought, I run up the stairs again.

He's on the bed, like he was when I left, and he's resumed his studying.

"He hits you, Edward," I say bluntly, a little out of breath. Three floors in this house, is all I'm saying. Edward's head snaps up. "I can't avoid this anymore." I wave a hand between us and take a few steps further into the room. "I already did it with Alice—I refuse to do it again."

His jaw clenches. "It's not up to you."

"So, you're just gonna let him break your bones?"

"I've survived this since I was five fucking years old, *Bella*; I think I can handle a few more weeks."

For the umpteenth time, my stomach rolls.

Since he was *five*?

He laughs mirthlessly. "Forgot to tell ya that, did I? Yeah, he's...done that since I was five. Whatever."

"*Whatever*?" I repeat in disbelief. I swallow down bile. "Edward-" I choke, and my eyes well up. "He belongs behind bars." Or six feet under. "But you're just gonna let him go on."

He shrugs. "I'm leaving in June, and..." He averts his eyes. "I'm used to it. I can take a punch."

"And that's fucked up!" I shout. "Listen to yourself!"

He smirks. "Fuck you, Bella. You don't know what the hell you're talking about, so I suggest you just drop it."

"I can't—I *won't*." I shake my head.

"You can and you will," he argues. "We're talking about a few goddamn weeks. Then I'm out of here. Just...just close your eyes or something. Pretend you don't know what's going on."

Just close my eyes.

Yeah, not happening.

"I'm not gonna kill myself," he laughs through his nose. The laughter dies, and what's left is a glare. "I'm not some pussy. Only weak people take the easy way out."

I ignore that and refuse to welcome Alice's image in my head. "Your eyes give you away, you know."

He stares at me, acting indifferent—a bit condescending, even—but I won't give him the satisfaction of having the last word.

In those eyes, I see so much pain that it's physically painful for *me*.

How can he not want...revenge or something?

"You want out," I say. "And—"

That makes him explode. "Of course I do, you bitch!" he screams. I flinch as he gets off the bed. His eyes are murderous. "You're blind," he grits



out, advancing slowly. "You grew up with the loving parents, the smiles, and all the *fucking* bullshit." He points to his chest. "I didn't. And you know what that means?" He towers over me. "It means you don't know shit," he whispers. "Aw, look at that. You're gonna cry now? You're gonna cry just because I raised my voice? That's strong." While I try to control my goddamn emotions, he smiles menacingly, making me feel insignificant and small. Weak. "I don't need a savior, Bella. And if I did, I sure as hell wouldn't go to *you*."

I squeeze my eyes shut.

He chuckles. "That right there. Good girl. Keep your eyes closed. I'll be outta here in no time." He steps away. "Fucking pussy."

*Don't let him bully you, Bella.*

My eyes flash open.

I take a deep breath.

"If you don't leave with me tomorrow, I will take down Carlisle myself," I tell him firmly. He blinks. I see amusement then rage. "We could leave." And now I'm pleading with him. Fuck. "Hear me out, Edward. We can pack up our shit and just go. I have my parents' money coming as soon as I'm eighteen. We could sell the cars-"

He cuts me off with a laugh, which seems to hurt his ribs. "Will you listen to *yourself*?" he wheezes out through laughs. "How fucking naïve *are* you?"

"I'm seventeen fucking years old, Cullen!" I scream. "I'm sorry for not being some mastermind!"

My chest heaves.

My vision blurs.

"I'm *trying*," I choke out. "To...to do the right thing."

He gives me a blank stare.

"I won't quit." I'm down to whispers. "If you don't do it, I will. He belongs in prison. Shit, so does your mom."

Without another look at him, I leave his room.

~CYE~

I wake up in the middle of the night, and I'm not alone in my bed. Edward is behind me, holding me to his body in a tight grip.

"Edward," I mumble sleepily, unable to turn around.

"I'm awake," he mumbles back and loosens his hold on me. I can feel his breath on my neck. "I'm sorry. About before."

I don't want his apologies.

The only thing I want is for us to leave.

Turning around in his arms, I look up at his face.

I can see that he's been crying, but I choose not to comment.

"Please," I breathe out.

He knows what I'm pleading for.

"It's not that simple, Tinks," he whispers. "I can't just run."

"Why?" I don't care about the tears forming in my eyes. I don't care if that makes me weak. "We could disappear. I—I..." I take a breath. "I always wanted to go to Alaska."

In the darkness, I can see his grin, but I can also see the emotion in his eyes.

"Alaska, huh? I thought you hated the cold."

I do, but I remember seeing pictures... "Never mind," I mutter, looking down at his chest. "It was stupid."

He sighs and squeezes me a little.

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"You mean a lot to me, Tinks."

I smile, shiver, and revel. Regardless of how much I've struggled against Edward, he means a lot to me, too. He means so much that I've come to realize my feelings for Alec never ran as deep as I thought.

I lift my chin. "Ditto, baby."

He smiles softly and gives me a sweet kiss.

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"I have one memory from Phoenix," he says quietly, a small smile playing on his lips. "We were...I don't know...maybe three or four." I reach up and smooth out the crease between his brows. "I was chasing you around."

I remember, too.

"You kissed me," I whisper, closing my eyes to...get closer to the memory, maybe. I don't know. But I see it clearly. We were running around in my backyard. I recall giggles. I remember Mom bringing us cookies, and...I remember Edward kissing me. His hands were covered in chocolate from the cookies, and I smile to myself, also remembering how I scolded him for getting chocolate on my dress.

The last I remember is that he tickled me 'til I smiled again.

"Yeah. I did." He sighs and kisses me on the forehead. "Sleep, baby."

Falling asleep is easy. I'm in his arms, and everything feels better.

At this point, I have no idea that his walls will be back in full force tomorrow morning. Another thing I don't know is that Edward Cullen will crush me to pieces. He doesn't know this yet, either. But he will. Soon.

Tomorrow, in fact.

## **EPOV**

Waking up the next morning is like turning over a new leaf. Or perhaps returning to an old one—one where I was in control.

Last night, it was so easy to get lost in the sweet bullshit Tinks said.

But I know it's impossible. Dad would never let me get away and...a life on the run?

No, thanks.

And the idea of pressing charges makes me cringe.

Everyone would know.

Without waking up Tinks, I leave her room.

She's made it perfectly clear that she won't give up, meaning I have to stop her, and the question is how. I don't want to hurt her—I...I really don't. Fuck. I've never felt...

I'm pretty sure I'm in love with her.

It's too bad my life sucks. I have everything planned for me. Pre-med, med-school, residency...

I need her to back off, and as an idea strikes, I doubt that I'm really in love. Because what I'm thinking...are things you don't do to the people you love. But if it gets her to stop, if it makes sure Dad won't come after her...then I don't see another way. I have to protect myself, but most of all, her. Dad has worked hard to get to where he is. He won't let Tinks get in the way. And he'd ruin her.

Sitting at my desk, I log on and hit up Google.

Finding her old high school shouldn't be too hard.

Turns out, it's not.

Their school webpage is packed with info.

I find plenty of stuff on Facebook, too.

*Alec Devin?*

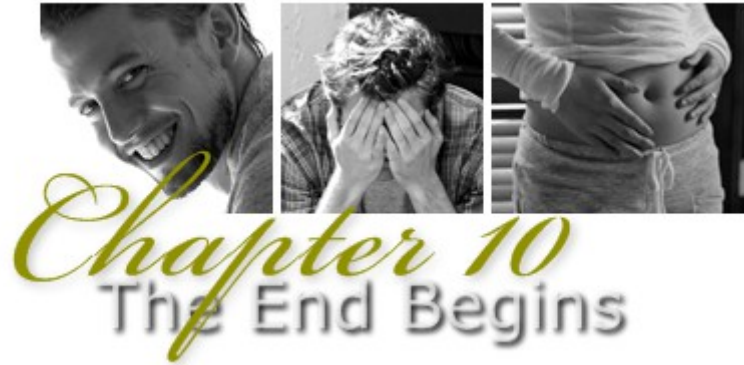
Former teacher where Tinks went. He's engaged to a Tanya Novikov, according to Facebook, and mentioned fiancée has a sister named Irina. Tinks has mentioned her.

I stare at the screen.

In case Tinks decides to talk, I need to make sure she's not reliable. People can't believe her.

It's funny, 'cause it feels like I'm dying, yet I don't stop myself from picking up the phone.

*I'm sorry.*



*Chapter song – A Bad Dream by Keane*

## **BPOV**

When I wake up on Wednesday morning, it takes ten minutes before my good mood is ruined.

Edward and I never settled anything last night, but I was still under the impression that we were either leaving or reporting Carlisle to the police. But that won't happen, seeing as Edward isn't home. I search the entire house, but he's not there.

Good mood—effectively ruined. Like I said.

He did leave a note, though. On the fridge.

*I'll be back around ten tonight – Cullen.*

I stare at that note for a long time.

One, his parents will be back around the same time.

Two, he signed the note with "Cullen". Not Edward.

I don't know why that bugs me, but it does. We're Cullen and Bella when we fight. Otherwise, we're Edward and Tinks. That's just how it is.

I sigh to myself, and then my stomach growls. I'm not a little hungry—I'm suddenly *starving*. I also notice that I don't feel nauseous this morning. That's good. Opening the fridge, I help myself to what I need to make a couple sandwiches, and by the time I stuff my face with the first one, I hear the doorbell.

"Ugh." I leave my sandwich behind with one longing glance and then head to the door.

I'm more than a little surprised to see both Rose and Charlotte on the other side. 'Cause it's Wednesday—they should be in school. So should I, but I've called in sick.

"You don't look sick," Rose says flatly and enters.

My eyebrows rise.

"I bet Cullen doesn't look sick, either." Charlotte gives me a smirk and enters, too.

If only she knew how sick Cullen looks.

"What're you doing here?" I ask, following them. We end up in the kitchen, much to my joy, so I take my seat at the kitchen island again and give my delicious sandwich my attention. "There's more if you're hungry." I wave a hand in the direction of the fridge.

"So, this is how you rich kids live," Rose comments, looking around. And it hits me that they've never been here. Edward never allows people to visit, and I know why. "As for what we're doing here..." Her eyes land on me again. "Remember the party last Saturday?"

*How could I forget.*

I spent two or three hours complaining about my shitty life. We were actually all complaining. Charlotte whined about her entire family moving to Texas—where they are originally from—and it happens to be where Charlotte's attending college this fall. She just didn't think her family would follow her. And Rose bitched about Emmett; he wants her to go to a local college, but she can't wait to get out of here. She's going to UCLA, and while she's ecstatic about that, she's also going to miss Emmett.

I talked about Cullen ignoring me, about my tits hurting, about the upcoming finals that I dread, and then I went home and tried to talk to Edward again...only to be met by nothing.

"Fun times," I answer with my mouth full. I throw in a sarcastic smile for good measure. I chew and swallow then walk over to the fridge and grab sodas for us. "So, what about it?"

Charlotte grins wryly and leans close to Rose. "Doesn't Bella just look glowing?"

The hell?

"Definitely." Rose smirks and eyes me up and down. I feel a little self-conscious, so I tug on the hem of my t-shirt and smooth out my yoga pants. "They're bigger, aren't they?" She jerks her chin at my boobs, and my eyebrows shoot up again.

"Oh, yeah." Charlotte nods and takes a sip from her Coke. "I bet they're still sore. Right, Bella?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I splutter.

Bitches have lost their minds.



"This is an intervention," Rose says solemnly, holding up a small bag. "We think it's time you stop living in denial."

Charlotte hums in agreement. "Denial isn't only a river in Egypt, girl."

I frown. "Yeah, I never got that one, 'cause it's *the* Nile. Not de Nile."

They shrug.

"Whatever." Rose waves me off. "I hope you need to pee." And then she tosses me the bag, which I almost don't catch. "'Cause it's time to see if Cullen knocked you up."

I drop the bag.

I drop my jaw, too.

Pretty sure I go pale.

~CYE~

I cry—no, I sob. And scream out in agony.

I'm a mess.

I'm on the floor in the downstairs bathroom.

I'm pregnant.

*Pregnant.*

"It will be okay, hun," I hear Rose say softly.

I shake my head no and keep crying into my hands. It won't be okay. This is too fucked up. I'm not even eighteen yet, and I'm supposed to be a mother? And don't get me started on the boy who's the father. Oh, God. Edward. We fucked up. We've been so goddamn irresponsible.

"Um, sweetie..." Charlotte sits down next to me on the floor. "Do you know how far along you might be?"

"Oh, God," I croak, again shaking my head, because I have no idea. I also have no desire whatsoever to think about it. I just want this misery to go away. Haven't I suffered enough? First Alec, then my whole school believing whatever lie Irina let circulate, then losing my parents—both my parents, on the same day, as they were on their way to pick me up...then this whole Cullen mess, and...now I'm pregnant? Pregnant. With a fucking kid?

"Have you had unprotected sex more than once?" Rose asks hesitantly.

I want to vomit.

Who knows how many times we've screwed without a condom?

Edward never gave a fuck, and I was too high to do more than a little complaining.

Even when Edward pulled out before he, he...

We haven't been safe at all.

I start sobbing again.

"And you're not on the pill or anything?" Charlotte whispers.

Another shake of my head.

I've been meaning to get on the pill, but I haven't. When I left Phoenix, I stopped taking it, 'cause I saw no reason for it. With Alec out of the way, the last thing I needed was another guy in my life. Ugh. Little did I know then...

"I fucked up," I cry.

"Oh, Bella," Rose murmurs and slips her arm around my shoulders. "Don't put all blame on yourself. It's Cullen's mistake, too."

Trust me. I know. But none of that matters now. I'm pregnant.

Rose speaks again, still in a quiet and soft voice. "There...uh, there are options...of course...?"

I know what she's talking about, and for some reason, the word "options" makes me reach for the toilet. The nausea is overwhelming and painful, and I heave into the toilet over and over, even when it feels like my stomach has been completely emptied. I break out in a cold sweat and I'm shivering, but at the same time it feels like I'm on fire. My eyes burn, my chest burns, my skin burns. Everything is crawling inside of me.

For me, I realize, there is only one option.

I can't take a life when I've lost so many around me.

Alice. Mom. Dad... Before that, there were my grandparents... Everyone close to me just seems to drop dead.

No. I can't go with...*options*...as Rose put it.

I can't.

~CYE~

When Carlisle and Esme return that night, Edward still hasn't come home.

I tell them about his note on the fridge and that's that.

I don't want to be in the same room as them, so I excuse myself quickly and go up to my own room.

I should study, but that's the least of my concerns, to be honest. Instead I find myself thinking about the future—my immediate future—and I've never been so glad that graduation is only weeks away. Of course, there's also dealing with Edward; I have to tell him. I have no idea how he's going to react, but I doubt it'll be a positive reaction. All he wants is to get out of here, which I can't fault him for, but his next step is college. Regardless of what he wants for himself, he's dead set on following in his father's footsteps and becoming a doctor.

*Carpenter.* That's what he wanted to be when he was little. But Carlisle put a stop to that, of course. Fucking asshole.

I shake my head, clearing it. I can't afford to waste time. There's so much to do, and, and...I'm only seventeen! How the hell am I supposed to make smart decisions? While money won't be an issue—at least once I turn eighteen and get my money that Mom and Dad left behind—there's still so much more than that. There's no plan, no course of action—at all...and I barely even know what's right. This is supposed to be the time in my life where I should be able to make mistakes and then learn from them and move on. But you can't move on from a baby. *Jesus Christ.* A baby. I place my hands on my flat stomach. A *baby*. With Edward Cullen as its father?

*When it rains, it really fucking pours.*

I let out a shaky breath and fall back on my bed.

I stare at the ceiling with silent tears falling down my temples.

Not that I'm taking anything for granted or assuming I know, but I'm pretty certain Edward won't...um, want...*that*. A baby. With me. No. There's no way. His whole existence is fucked up; he's miserable and hurting. He's violent and always defensive. *Offensive*. But does that mean he will ask me to go with...*options*? One side of me says that he will, and

not only that, but he has every right to. We're only seventeen and we come with so much baggage. And the other side of me whispers, "Maybe this will be his salvation. Maybe this will make him want to escape this hell."

That's obviously the girl in me whispering that bullshit. The little girl in me who still holds out hope for rainbows and fairytales, who hasn't come to terms with the loss of Mom and Dad...the girl who lives in a fantasy in order to get away from real life...the girl who wishes all of this was just a bad dream.

So...when will I wake up?

Ironically, I close my eyes and fall asleep.

~CYE~

When I get up the next morning, everyone is gone except for Esme.

"Good morning, sweetie!" she greets with a wide smile. "Breakfast?"

My stomach churns at the thought, but like a flip of a switch, the churning stops and I'm hungry. Still, this house—and Esme, that fucking...I don't even have words for her—makes my insides scream in protest. I just wanna get out of here. So, with a forced smile, I decline and say that I should get going.

"I'll pick something up at the coffee shop," I add quietly before leaving.

On my way over to Sue's Coffee, I'm numb. Still in shock, maybe. I don't feel a thing, nor do I *think* about anything. I just let it all go.

That little dreamer in me is still waiting for me to wake up from this nightmare.

I think she's in for a rude awakening.

"Good morning!" Sue says warmly as I enter her coffee shop. The difference between her and Esme is that Sue is genuine. She's sweet and kind, and I can't blame Rose and Charlotte for loving this place more than the diner. However, Sue closes around four—for some reason—which is why we usually end up at the diner after school...unless I'm off with Edward, that is.

"Good morning," I say quietly then clear my throat. There's only one customer in here besides me, a man in his late twenties, I'd say, and he's sitting in a corner booth, reading a newspaper. I don't recognize him, which I find a little odd. After a few weeks of living in Forks, I felt like I'd seen every face at least once and knew their routines. Because the few times I come in here for coffee before school, it's always empty. However, when I leave, I often run into Sue's husband. Then, when I leave the parking lot, a police cruiser drives in at the same time. See? Everyone here comes and goes like clockwork.

"What can I get ya, honey?" Sue asks.

I give the menu on the wall behind her a glance and settle for an iced tea.

It's funny, 'cause it's not until after I've ordered that I remember reading something about pregnant women not being able to drink coffee. Or maybe it was Mom telling me? Eh. Random. Whatever.

"What flavor?" she asks next, smiling softly. "We have lemon and peach. Oh, and do you want decaf or-"

I nod right away. "Decaf, thank you." Damn, I didn't even know there was usually caffeine in that shit. "Um..." I chew on my lip. "Peach sounds good."

She nods and gets busy. When some timer goes off, she speaks again, though it's not to me. "Mr. Whitlock, your bagel is ready."

*Mr. Whitlock?*

I've met Charlotte's father and this guy sure isn't him. But Whitlock can't be the most common last name, can it? Surely not here, anyway. So, I sorta assume it's a relative of Charlotte's.

He approaches with a kind smile, and I definitely see the resemblance between him and Charlotte's dad, though this guy is a lot younger.

"Thank you, ma'am," he says in a warm Southern drawl, one that's more pronounced than Charlotte's father's. This man... He's handsome and looks so...*nice*. Hospitable. Charming. With blue eyes and dirty blond hair—a little curly. His smile is crooked and sweet. "And I've told you to call me Jasper," he adds with a wink.

*Jesus.*

Sue actually giggles. Then she turns to me as she sticks a straw into my iced tea. "Here you go, honey."

With an awkward smile, I pay for my beverage then haul ass, ignoring the fact that I'm still hungry.

~CYE~

As I arrive at school, I frown to myself when I don't see Edward's Aston. Since he wasn't at the house this morning, I figured he'd left already. Now I'm not so sure. He always parks in the same spot, and he's never late for classes. Ever. Well, at least not when Carlisle's home. I've skipped a class or two with Edward before, but only when Carlisle's out of town.

It also hits me that I haven't actually seen Edward in almost twenty-four hours, and I can't be sure that he even came home last night. After all, I fell asleep.

For a second, fear rushes down my spine when the thought of Edward being with his friends in Seattle sneaks into my mind, but then I let out a bitter chuckle. He doesn't *have* any friends in Seattle. It was all a fucking charade. It still is. It's Edward's excuse whenever he comes to school with bruises and, and, and...fuck. Will he even *be* here today? Shit. Probably not. His ribs still hurt; it hasn't even been a week since it happened. It, being Carlisle's goddamn beatdown. God, I could just kill that bastard.

With a curse, I leave my Porsche, backpack and iced tea in hand.

School is boring. There's talk about prom and summer plans, signing of yearbooks and graduation parties.

It doesn't concern me. I don't give a crap. It actually feels like I'm walking in a haze, interacting with classmates on autopilot, answering teachers with as few words as possible, giving emotionless expressions or just not bothering to respond at all. Well, I respond to teachers, but certainly not when some girls ask me to shopping with them or when a dude asks where I'm hiding Cullen this morning.

It's not until lunch that I perk up a little from my numb state, and it's because I see Charlotte in the cafeteria. A friendly face, thank God. Not that others aren't friendly, but Charlotte is a friend. Can't say the same for the rest. Again, I don't care—never bothered. I clicked with Rose and Charlotte when I moved here, and I was satisfied with that. I stayed with them.

Once I've paid for my lunch—a chicken salad, a slice of pizza, an apple, a turkey sandwich, and a soda—I walk over to where Charlotte's sitting alone.

Her smile is both careful and wry. "Hungry?" She gives my tray a pointed look.



"Shut up," I say flatly, picking up my pizza slice first. "Where's Rose?"

She nods in the direction of the windows, which are facing the parking lot.

Looking out, I spot Rose and Emmett, and it seems like they're in a heated argument.

When Rose is pissed, she tends to speak with her hands. Maybe she was Italian in her past life.

"Know what it's about?" I ask, chewing.

She shrugs and picks at her own chicken salad. "Probably the same old shit." Ah. And that would be Rose's future departure to UCLA. "By the way, how are you today?"

My turn to shrug. "Not ready to deal with it." In need of a topic change, I remember this morning. "Hey, do you know a Jasper Whitlock?"

"Um, yes?" She frowns, confused. "He's my uncle—on my dad's side."

I figured it was something like that. "I saw him at Sue's this morning. Accidently heard his name." I wave it off dismissively. "I guess he's visiting?"

She grins. "Yeah, but he wasn't supposed to come until tomorrow. Huh. Well, I can't wait to see him again. He's so cool."

I smirk. "Not bad to look at, either."

"Slut!" she giggles. "That's my uncle!" I shrug and get back to eating, and Charlotte goes on. "He told me he wasn't able to come to my graduation—something about a seminar...I don't know." She shakes off the thought. "I said it wasn't a big deal, but he wanted to come, so he offered to visit earlier."

"Nice." I nod then unwrap my sandwich. 'Cause that pizza slice disappeared. Just like that. "Seminar? What does he do?"

Frankly, I don't really care, but I'd talk about molecular science if it guaranteed that the word "pregnancy" never came up.

"Um, I don't know if there's a title to his profession," she chuckles and scrunches her nose. "It's something about women." My eyebrows shoot up and Charlotte lets out another giggle when she realizes how that sounded. "Nothing kinky!" she laughs. "No, but, uh...he has this house in Memphis—that's where he lives—and he takes care of women who're escaping abusive husbands...something like that." My stomach is suddenly tied in knots; the topic just hits too close to home. "He's really a doctor—a pediatrician. He finished his residency a couple of years ago, but then there was a case—a woman and a son who came in... I don't really remember the story, but my uncle changed his mind. He wanted to help women who were in that situation or whatever." She waves it off like it's no big deal. "And since my grandfather left Dad and Uncle Jasper a lot of money when he died, Jasper used that to start Whitlock House." Now she smiles, pride evident in her voice. "He takes in women from all over the country, pretty much—never turns anyone down. If the house is full, which it often is, he pays for their hotel."

I'm amazed. While the topic is still a sensitive one, I can't deny that I kinda wanna know more. "But how can that go around? He just gives...?"

She nods. "Donations. Jasper will live comfortably for the rest of his life on a part of his inheritance, and then there are donations to help run the foundation."

"Wow," I mutter, awed. "That's so...so selfless."

"It definitely is." She smiles softly and is about to say something more, but a commotion in the cafeteria causes us to look up.

## **EPOV**

When I pull in to the school parking lot a little before noon, I have to push down nausea over and over.

I park in my usual spot, but I don't make a move to get out of the car just yet. Instead I keep my hands on the steering wheel. My forehead drops to the wheel, too. And I breathe. My ribs hurt, but that's surprisingly easy to ignore. Other pains are bigger.

"It's for the best," I breathe out to myself. What I'm about to do...it's for the best. Tink- *Bella* has made it perfectly clear that she's not giving up. She's going to run that mouth of hers...so *I* have to shut her up. I have to make her unreliable. No one can trust a word she says. Plus, if this ensures she won't talk...

I'm selfish. Heartless. I realize this, but I can't *stop*. I've tried to see this from different perspectives—I've tried to spin this into looking like I'm doing it for *Bella's* own good. But that's bullshit. I've suffered through this hell for almost thirteen years; it's time to stop it. It's time to get *out*, and...that won't happen if *Bella* talks. Authorities will be involved; people will find out. They will know that my own father beats the shit out of me, they will know that my mother allows for it to happen, they will know that I've been too weak to stand up for myself.

*The eight-year-old boy sits huddled in a corner as his father yells at him for being a weakling. Edward hates his daddy's office, because when he's in there...it just hurts. He knows he's done wrong, but right and wrong isn't always easy to separate.*

*"I've told you to stop this!" Carlisle shouts. He forcefully grabs Edward's arm and pulls him up. "Stop acting like a baby, and start behaving like a boy!"*

*"I'm sorry!" Edward sobs. "I'm s-sorry!"*

*All he did was pick flowers to his mommy. His friend, Lee Stevens, had helped him while they were waiting for Mrs. Stevens after school.*

*Edward liked the yellow flowers particularly, and he had picked so many of them, hoping they'd make Mommy happy. Because she's sick—has a cold or something. And she's in bed.*

*Then when Mrs. Stevens had dropped off Edward at home, he'd entered the kitchen just as Carlisle and Dr. Liam—a friend of Daddy's—were hugging. Edward had been so happy, wanting to show Mommy the flowers, but Carlisle had been furious and led him into the study.*

*"Shut up!" Carlisle barks out. His grip on Edward's arm is beyond painful, and Edward can't help from whimpering. Unfortunately, this only fuels Carlisle's anger. "This is what I'm talking about!" he snaps at his son. "You play with fucking dolls, you pick flowers, you whimper like a goddamn girl, you wet your bed, you—you just need to fucking stop this shit, Edward!" he screams.*

*Edward squeezes his eyes shut and waits for the blow to come.*

*It very often does.*

*I gulp.*

*My chest heaves.*

*I'm so fucked in the head. Sometimes I feel like I've deserved all this crap; Dad's words of humiliation have stuck. And sometimes my hands shake as I want to kill my own parents for what they do to me. I don't know right from wrong, up from down. All I know is that I see a way out and that Bella stands in the way.*

"Okay." I nod. "Okay." Internally, I keep chanting all this.

With a few deep breaths, I leave the car.

Royce and Laurent, two...*acquaintances*...from Port Angeles are parked on the other side of the road.

There's not a lot they won't do for a quick buck.

"Cullen!" I hear someone shout, and I turn around to see Emmett walking toward me.

Rosalie's following. "Emmett, don't!" she screams. "You promised you wouldn't tell!"

My eyebrows rise.

"This isn't some kindergarten bullshit, Rose!" he yells back at her. "He fucking deserves to know!"

I roll my eyes, wondering what petty crap they're arguing about now.

Just as Rosalie cries out that it's Bella's story to tell, Emmett reaches me, looking furious.

I can see that his eyes take in the bruises and cuts on my face, but he doesn't mention it. I suppose it's old news. He most likely thinks I've just had another weekend in Seattle.

"Your chick is pregnant," he grits out. "Can you fucking believe that?"

My brows furrow. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

He lets out a frustrated breath and gives me an impatient look. "Bella. She's knocked up."

I stare at him blankly.

The words sink in and I shudder.

*Pregnant.*

For one second, something warm and sensational rushes through me, leaving my body tingling.

I release a shaky breath.

Then I shake my head quickly and bitterness seeps in. Followed by rage, disbelief, and pain.

I start laughing. Hard. Without humor. I ignore the throbbing in my ribs.

Emmett looks at me like I've gone insane. Rosalie looks wary.

*Pregnant.*

And my laughing ceases. "That BITCH!" I scream out. My cold eyes meet Rosalie, and I point a finger at her. "Where the *fuck* is she?" I know what this is. This Bella's attempt to make me leave with her—a reason for me to leave everything behind. God, she's fucking *stupid*. She just won't let things go. So, she fakes a goddamn pregnancy? Un-fucking-*believable*.

*Fuck, please tell me this is a bad dream.*

"Tell me where she is, you useless cunt!" I shout at Rosalie.

Uncharacteristically, she begins to stutter. "I-I don't know. I g-guess the cafeteria?"

I nod once before I'm off.

Storming through the halls, not caring who's following, though I'm pretty sure it's several people, I make my way toward the cafeteria. I'm ready to give her the push to get the fuck out of Forks.

This little stunt will backfire on her. When I call her out on this bullshit, it will just add to the pile I'm already building to make people avoid Bella fucking Swan like a plague.

"Hey, man, don't do anything stupid," I hear Emmett say nervously behind me.

"Fuck off," I spit out. "And don't fall for her shit. She's lying."

With a hard shove, I push open the doors to the cafeteria, which causes them to slam against the wall.

"Cullen, stop!" Rosalie pleads.

I ignore the bitch and zero in on Bella, who happens to look up as I find her.

I shake my head at her, approaching slowly, and everything hurts.

The story of my fucking life.

## **BPOV**

Besides the fact that Edward looks murderous as he walks toward me, I also notice that Rose is following and that she's crying.

"What the hell?" Charlotte mumbles, confused.

I'm confused, too, and a little relieved to see Edward again. But why does he look livid?

"Who the fuck do you think you are, huh?" he bites out when he's about ten feet away. I frown at him before scanning the audience he's attracted. "Remember when..." He chuckles. "Remember when you told me you're nothing but a whore?"

My eyes widen, a breath gets stuck in my throat, and I'm not sure whether I'm blushing or paling.

Leaning over the table, he dips down and whispers in my ear. "I warned you, *Bella*. You have no idea what I'm capable of, and now you'll experience it firsthand." With that, he backs away and smirks. By now, I'm pretty sure all the blood has left my face, and I'm still so fucking confused. "I will destroy you for what you've done," he finishes quietly.

I choke. "Ed-Edward?"

He just shakes his head then leaves.

And I'm left behind, while everyone around us whispers and looks in my direction.

"What was *that* about?" Charlotte whispers in disbelief.

"I..." I can't find my words. And I have no idea. But since I can't speak, I just give her a helpless look, my eyes still wide after all that just transpired.

"Bella, I'm so sorry," Rose says tearfully, and I didn't even know she was standing next to the table. "This is all my fault."

It's like I'm in a daze again, and I slowly shake my head, not understanding.

"Um, girls, let's skip the next class," Charlotte decides, eyeing the crowd that's only now thinning out. "We can go outside and talk."

So, fifteen minutes later when the bell rings, Rose, Charlotte, and I are sitting outside at one of the picnic tables, and Rose has just finished telling me what she's done. But in my honest opinion, I'm not even mad at her. She just divulged about my pregnancy to Emmett—who is her



boyfriend, after all—and she had no idea that Emmett would react the way he did. And while I agree wholeheartedly that it wasn't Rose's fucking business to tell Emmett...like I said, I'm not mad. It's not my biggest concern right now, because Edward is. Emmett told him that I'm pregnant, and...then Edward acted the way he did in the cafeteria.

I swallow hard, knowing that telling Cullen wouldn't be easy, but...this... this is worse than I expected. He was so cold and furious.

He will destroy me for what I've done?

My eyes well up and it feels like I've been kicked in the gut.

Oh, God, everything is just too surreal.

"Bella, I heard Cullen say something about you lying," Rose adds, still teary-eyed. "Maybe it's just shock?"

"What do you mean?" I croak. I realize that I'm crying, too, although I'm not sure exactly why.

"Hey, isn't that Royce King?" Charlotte asks suddenly.

Following her gaze, I see two guys entering the school.

I don't know Royce King—only that he and two guys named James and Laurent are the local "thugs" in Port Angeles.

Whatever.

"Yeah," Rose mutters. "I guess they're here selling weed or something. Anyway..." She looks at me again. "I think it'll work out once you've sat down with Cullen and explained everything. I'm just sorry—"

"Stop apologizing," I sigh. "What you did was fucked, but you're supposed to be able to tell your boyfriend things in confidence—I get it."

To be honest, I'm just worried sick that Edward *isn't* going to behave like a grown-up once I've explained everything.

I can't think about the future right now, 'cause I don't even know how today will play out yet.



*Chapter song – Hate Me by Blue October*

## **BPOV**

When the bell rings, Rose, Charlotte, and I make our way inside the school again. Skipping one class every now and then—I don't care...but to skip when you're just going to sit around doing nothing...on school grounds...yeah, that doesn't really make sense. Plus, I have English Lit now, and I need to pay attention to keep the C I have.

"Talk to Cullen later, all right?" Rose says softly, squeezing my arm gently. "And I'm so sorry for telling Emmett—"

"Enough with the apologizing," I return with a grimace. Really, I know she didn't mean any harm. "Go on. You have PE now." I jerk my chin in the direction of the gym. "We're fine, Rose. Go."

With a sigh and a sad smile, she leaves us.

Charlotte soon follows, 'cause she has chem. "Call me later, hun?"

I nod. "See ya."

At this point, I have no idea that I won't see Rose again for a long time.

But I will see Charlotte very soon.

Students are crowding the hallways after leaving their classes, and I bump into a few on the way to my locker.

It's not until I reach the hall where I have my locker that I realize that everyone has gone silent.

I stare at several faces, confused, and once they notice I'm there, they're quick to look away and whisper.

In my old school in Phoenix, gossip died fast. Here? Not so much. I guess they're still gossiping about Edward's outburst in the cafeteria.

"Oh, my God, do you guys hear that?" someone gasps.

Automatically, I train my ears and listen for anything.

Which is when I hear moaning.

"Shit, is that Mrs. Williams?" another girl giggles, and many of us turn to the door that leads to the faculty lounge. 'Cause the thing is, the moaning comes from the speakers in the ceiling. And Mrs. Williams is the lady who always barks out announcements at Forks High. So...I can't help but wonder if she's screwing some old man and has forgotten to turn off the mic. Hey, maybe she's sitting on the button.

I almost crack a smile.

But then I catch something on the wall next to me.

It's written in all caps with a black marker.

WANNA KNOW WHO ISABELLA SWAN REALLY IS?

I frown and ignore the dread creeping up my spine.

The moaning gets louder, and...oh, God. It's me. On the speakers—it's *me*.

And Edward.

*"Fuck, Bella...suck me harder—damn...you're so good."*

I swallow thickly, feeling eyes on me.

*"That's it, Tinks...so deep."*

I vaguely register the teachers who are running toward the faculty lounge.

At the same time, I see more writing on the walls.

A WHORE IN PHOENIX, A WHORE IN FORKS

SHE GIVES IT TO EVERYONE

The blood leaves my face and my knees almost give out.

*"Fuck me, Edward!"* More moans echoing in the halls—moans I know come from the times Edward's recorded us. *"Harder! Oh, God!"*

Hit by nausea, I cover my mouth with my hand.

*Not again. Not again. Not again.*

Whispers and cackles surround me as I somehow reach my locker.

More writing.

JUST DON'T TRUST HER!

ONCE YOU STOP FUCKING HER,

## SHE WILL FAKE A PREGNANCY

"I don't care!" a grown-up yells—maybe a teacher. "Kick that door open!"

More moans and groans.

I feel dizzy and slow. It's surreal.

"Oh, you guys weren't in the cafeteria earlier?" I hear Jessica Stanley giggle. "Cullen didn't want Bella anymore, so the bitch told everyone she's preggo with his kid."

"Bella?" someone laughs behind me. I'm still staring at my locker. In disbelief. Or rather, I don't *want* to believe. I don't want this to happen to me once again. "Hey, if Cullen doesn't want you, I'm here. Hell, there's probably a line forming right now!" More laughs.

My bottom lip quivers, and I can feel my face crumble.

Slowly turning around, I see countless students looking at me.

And Edward's one of them.

He's smirking, and I can practically read his mind. *I told you I'd destroy you.*

"Sorry, Bella," he chuckles, that cocky smirk still on his face. "I guess I'm not as gullible as the teacher you fucked back in Phoenix. You know, the teacher who had to quit his job?"

I swallow, realizing that it's not working. My throat keeps closing up.

"Oh my gosh, you fucked your teacher?" Jessica cackles.

"Mr. Cullen and Ms. Swan—my office!" Principal Banner shouts just as the moaning stops.

Edward speaks up again, glare intact. "You're *nothing*, Swan."

I shake my head slowly, my eyes still glued to Edward's. There's something in his eyes, something raw...something forced. I underestimated him. I didn't take his threats seriously. I should have. 'Cause...right now...

*Consider me destroyed, Cullen.*

One traitorous tear spills over as I take a step forward. My shaking hands go for my backpack, and a few steps later, I'm standing in front of Cullen with my pregnancy test in hand. Well, one of the tests. I took four.

Principal Banner barks out our names once more just as I slam down the pregnancy test in Edward's hand.

"Go fuck yourself," I say, my voice unfortunately cracking.

Then I run.

It feels like I've been stabbed every-fucking-where.

Like I've been cut so deep, like I've been gutted.

## **EPOV**

I ignore so much as I watch Bella run away.

I ignore the searing pain in my chest, the stares from classmates, Principal Banner's orders, the ache in my ribs, the nausea...everything.

Banner doesn't have shit on me—I'm not worried about that. Firstly, the security cameras will show Royce and Laurent, not me. And I know those two have taken the tapes already. Secondly, no one would ever have the balls to turn me in. I'm a Cullen, for fuck's sake. But I have other worries, one of whom is running away. Not that there's anything I can do now.

Mission accomplished. When she returns to school tomorrow, she will be the joke. No one will trust a word she says. But I still worry—or...maybe that's not the right word. Because when I look down and see the pregnancy test in my palm, it feels like I'm *dying*.

*She didn't lie.*

"God," I choke out.

She's pregnant. She's *pregnant*?

Is it mine, though?

Fuck that. I know very well that we've only been with each other since she moved here.

Two pink lines for a positive result. Positive...yeah, if you want a goddamn kid. But this isn't about wants. This is about what could ruin my life more than it's already ruined. Children don't belong in my family; they get shattered. Besides, I'm too fucked in the head to embrace the warmth surging through my body again—like it did when Emmett told me about Bella's pregnancy...which I instantly took as a lie. Instead I remind myself that if Dad found out...

No use in going there. It doesn't take a genius to know that he'd go freaking ballistic.

But...a *baby*...

Looking up again, I don't even know that I'm moving until I hear Banner yell after me.

I keep running.

"Tinks!" I shout. I push open the doors and see her hurrying toward her car. "Bella, stop!"

For some reason she does. She turns just as I reach her, and there's so much hurt in her eyes.

I really broke her.

I swallow.

I think hard. Really, my mind races. Pregnant, she's pregnant. I thought she was on the pill like most other chicks...but I never fucking asked her. And she always bitched when I hit it raw. So...right, pregnant. She didn't lie. *She didn't lie*. I look down at the test in my hand, then back up to Bella. Tinks. Oh, God.

"What do you want, Cullen?" she cries angrily.

I open my mouth to speak, but I don't know what to say.

I close my mouth again.

*What do I want?*

No. It's not about what I want. It never is. Well...what I want is to get out of here. I want and need to get away from my father, even though he will always be a plane ride away. At least it's better than what I have now. So, that's what I need. And want. To leave.

I've suffered since I was five fucking years old.

Don't I deserve my break?

I stare down at Bella...my Tinks. Nah, not mine. She needs to leave, too. Do I deserve her? Hell no. Can I make things up to her? No, I've taken too much from her. Still, it's not about that. I can't take off into the goddamn sunset and "do right by her" and raise some fucking kid. I'll fuck that up, too. Fucking up is what I do. And like I said, children don't belong in my family. I won't ever have kids. I don't *want* kids.



But...

No. No buts.

"Jesus Christ." My eyes tear up, but I blink that shit away. I take deep breaths. I look at her. Dead in the eye. I almost want her to give me the answer, though I know she won't. "Abortion," I blurt out, my throat closing up. Her face falls more. "You can't..." I shake my head and force out the words. "You have to get rid of...*it*."

I've already made her think I hate her; I've already shattered her.

I'm rotten. Inside and out.

"This is what you want?" she breathes out.

I swallow, preparing myself for another grand performance.

Her eyes well up.

And when she repeats her question, I know that I have to answer.

I clench my jaw. "Yes."

*Don't. Fucking. Crack.*

I can practically see her heart breaking. It's *gutting*.

The crease on her forehead, the one showing despair, turns me into a coward and I avert my eyes.

"You want me to...to..." She can't even say the word. A sob catches in her throat, and this is it. The proverbial nail in the coffin. After this, there will be *nothing* left.

Pushing down my self-hatred and nausea, I flash her a smirk.

"I'll pay for it, of course," I say, shrugging. "But..." I chuckle. "Did you really think I'd want a *baby* with you, Bella?" I laugh in her face. She has no idea that I'm dying on the inside. "Be real, for fuck's sake. I'm *Edward Cullen* and you're...well, *you*." I dip down a little and smirk again. "You're *nothing*, Bella. Fucking *worthless*."

Unable to get another word out—unless I want to throw up—I bring out my wallet and empty it of cash.

It will be enough for the...the abortion.

*Fuck.*

My insides churn painfully.

"Edward," she whispers, and I clench my teeth together as I force myself to face her. Tears stream down her cheeks. I swallow bile.

"*What?*" I exhale harshly.

Her last words are soft, shallow, but they couldn't cut deeper.

"I hate you."

With that said, she turns to leave.

*I hate you.*

*I hate you.*

*I hate you.*

It's suddenly impossible to breathe.

My vision blurs.

I watch her retreating form until she's out of sight.

*Don't worry, baby. I hate me, too.*

Suddenly, she walks back to me, and I push down a fucking sob...like I'm some pussy.

Which I am.

"One last thing," she says thickly, almost breathlessly. I grind my teeth together, so close to a breakdown. "Do you know who you are?"

My brows furrow.

Again, her voice goes soft. Even her eyes go soft, and I see pity in her stare.

"You're your father—you're Carlisle, Edward."

The air leave my lungs.

Then she's gone. She hops into her car and pulls out of the parking lot.

My chest heaves.

A strangled noise slips through my lips, and I can't stop the emotions from escaping me anymore.

"Cullen!" I hear someone shout behind me. I think it's Emmett, and suddenly I need to break something.

I turn around slowly, clenching my fists at my sides, and watch as Emmett runs over.

With my insides screaming, with the bitter taste of loss in my mouth, and with hatred directed at the world tightening my muscles, I let my next victim come closer.

"Mind explaining what's going on?" he asks, reaching me.

Break something...

So, I break his face. My fist flies out and connects with Emmett's jaw, and I don't stop there. I hit, I punch, I scream, I bully.

"Fight back!" I scream. But he doesn't fight back. He's on the ground, blood trickling from his nose and cut lip, and he takes it all. "Fight back, you pussy!"

*You're your father.*

*You're your father.*

*You're your father.*

"Fuck," I choke out, falling back on my ass.

I hide my face in my hands and end up rocking back and forth—right there, on the ground.

For the first time in my life, I see why Alice...Tinks' friend...why she ended her life. I see it. I get it.

What have I done?

## **BPOV**

Numbness takes over again as I drive toward the Cullens'.

It's almost a relief.

I feel empty and drained.

As I drive on the dirt road that leads to the house, I know one thing, though.

I'm not staying. Fuck finals, fuck graduation, fuck it all.

Killing the engine, I leave the car and enter the house, too dead inside to wonder why I see Esme pacing in the hallway.

I stop short, but I don't process anything. I don't care.

"Bella!" she gasps, walking over to me quickly. And she's holding up a pregnancy test. "I found this in the bathroom down here."

I stare at her blankly.

I guess I forgot it there? Not so clever, I'd imagine, but whatever.

"You're pregnant," she whimpers, face crumbling. It's the first time I've ever seen something genuine on her face. "Is..." She hiccups and wipes her cheeks. "Is it Edward's?"

I should probably react.

"Yes," I mutter flatly.

She lets out a sob. "Oh God, no."

I almost roll my eyes.

The only thing I want to do right now is go upstairs and pack my photo albums and other stuff from Phoenix. I have the debit card Carlisle and Esme gave me, which is for an account where I know there's about three thousand dollars. I plan to take it all out. Then, when I turn eighteen in a few months, I'll get the money my parents left me. I'll get by some way. Somehow. And that thought brings a little relief into my system. It's small, but I feel it in the next breath I take. A little lighter, a little easier.

"You have to get out of here, Bella," she cries, causing me to tilt my head in curiosity at her. Her black mascara-induced tears stream down her usually composed face. "If Carlisle finds out..." She snuffles and chokes up a little. "He will take it out on Edward," she whispers.

Is she fucking with me?

"Since when do you care?" I ask, still in a flat voice.

It's like something's died in me.

Esme's only reaction is to look away, something she's used to doing.

Always looking away.

"Well..." I chuckle dryly. "Don't worry. I'm on my way. Just give me twenty minutes." I leave her there and walk toward the stairs.

Once I reach my room, I pull out my three suitcases from under the bed.

I pack in a frenzy.

My heart starts pounding.

Swallowing becomes difficult, and it feels like I'm on the verge of a full-blown panic attack.

"Not yet," I breathe out to myself. "Not yet, not yet, not yet."

Gotta get out, gotta get out.

My lungs feel smaller, my chest feels heavier.

A wave of nausea hits me, followed by dizziness.

"Not yet," I keep chanting. "Not yet."

I'll break down later. But not yet.

If I close my eyes then open them again, will all this be gone?

All the times Edward has told me to close my eyes...to pretend I don't see, to relax, to let him take over, to embrace whatever high I've been on...

Closing your eyes is easy, but the reprieve it brings is brief.

You can't keep looking away.

You can't keep pretending forever.

As I fight the impending explosion inside of me, I vaguely register a familiar voice downstairs.

Charlotte?

Screaming?

*"I said get the fuck out of my way, Mrs. Cullen! I know she's up there! I saw her car!"*

I gulp, almost shattering the picture frame I'm holding with newfound inhuman strength.

Through blurry vision, I see Mom and Dad smiling at me in the picture.

*I'm losing it.*

No, no, no, no, no, no.

I hear someone stomping up the stairs.

I try to breathe.

While I try, words echo in my head. Words coming from loved ones, words coming from hated ones.

Mom...every day, basically. *"I'll always love you, sweetheart."*

Dad, from when I was little and he was teaching me to play poker. *"That's my baby girl! Renee, honey, c'mere and see what Bella got!"*

Alice, a few days before I found her dead body. *"I'm lucky to have you as a best friend, Bella."*

Alec, when I thought he loved me. *"We just need to keep this quiet for a little while longer."*

I gasp for air, realizing that I'm on the floor, still clutching the photo frame.

I hear the students at my old school in Phoenix.

*"You dirty fucking whore!"*

*"Manipulative bitch!"*

*"Lying slut!"*

*"Fucking skank!"*

*"Home wrecker!"*

And Edward...

The boy I unfortunately tried to help.

Split fucking personalities.

*"You mean a lot to me, Tinks."*

*"I will destroy you for what you've done."*

*"You mean a lot to me, Tinks."*

*"You're nothing, Bella. Fucking worthless."*

Nothing but a whore, right?

Gullible. A gullible whore.



"Bella!" I hear someone cry. Sounds like Charlotte. "Honey, come on. Wake up. Oh, God. I'm gonna kill that son of a bitch! Can't believe what Cullen did to you." She shakes me, and I try to focus on breathing. "Bella, please wake up!"

A few failed attempts at speaking at least tell Charlotte that I'm aware of her presence.

"Fuck," she cries. "Dr. Cullen's at the school for Edward, Bella. He's not happy. I came here as soon as I heard the rumors of what happened."

I breathe.

Gotta get out.

"I..." I swallow. I'm trembling. I feel cold. "...need to leave. Charlotte, I need..."

Opening my eyes slowly, I see her nod her head. "Anything. I'll help you. You should've seen the look in Dr. Cullen's eyes when he came to pick up that piece of shit." She shakes her head. "There's something seriously wrong with this family, isn't there?"

Understatement. "You could say that."

I struggle for a moment, but in the end I manage to stand up again—with Charlotte's help.

"My car broke down again," she admits, rolling her eyes. "So, I called my uncle. He's right outside. I hope that's okay."

"I don't care," I croak, eyeing my suitcases. "I just need to get out of here before Carlisle and Edward get back."

She nods quickly, a slightly panicked look in her eyes. "We should probably hurry, then. Principal Banner was talking to Dr. Cullen when Uncle Jasper picked me up, but they might get here soon."

So, we hurry.

We drag my packed suitcases down the stairs and head straight for the hallway.

"Bella," I hear Esme say, sniffing, as she comes from the kitchen. "Here."

I pause while Charlotte walks out the door.

I'm a little surprised when Esme hands me a wad of cash. "There should be two thousand," she croaks. "I'm sorry—this is the only way I can help you." I still plan on emptying the debit card account they gave me months back. They owe me that much, for fuck's sake. "I doubt Carlisle will make an honest effort to find you." I raise a brow at her; she really stated the obvious. Of course he won't try to find me. I'm just trouble for him. "I..." She lets out a breath. "I know you don't believe me, but I love my son."

I stare at her. "You're right. I don't believe you at all."

A part of me wants to punch her, slap her, pull her hair, break her bones, kill her. That part of me wants her to know what Edward goes through—*has* gone through...since he was five years old. But I don't. Because if I did that, it would be for Edward's sake. And he doesn't deserve anything from me.

He can go to hell.

So can this godawful woman. "Burn in hell, Esme," I tell her, and then I'm out the door, too.

I walk away.

If I'd stayed, maybe I would've heard Edward's cries as Carlisle beats the shit out of him for making a spectacle of the Cullen name at school. Maybe I would've heard Edward's screams into his pillow when Esme tells him that I've left for good. Maybe I would've heard Esme starting her car to take Edward to the hospital for a broken nose, a punctured lung, and a fractured jaw. And I would've witnessed once again how Carlisle gets away by having Edward blame his friends from Seattle.

But I don't hear all this, because I'm long gone.



*Chapter song – Getting Over You by The Used*

## **EPOV**

*December 21st*

After entering my apartment, I dump the mail on the hallway table and shrug out of my jacket.

I'm sick and tired, both literally and figuratively, having suffered a fucking cold for two weeks or some shit like that. Then again, I'd take the cold any day if I didn't have the other crap making me sick. Like the trip I have to make to Forks tomorrow—a trip I've dreaded for a month now.

*Because I really feel like spending the holidays with Mom and Dad.*

I haven't been to Forks since June 22nd—the day after my eighteenth birthday.

My folks have visited twice, but those were thankfully only quick visits.

I thought I was gonna feel better by now.

Turns out, I don't. Instead I feel worse.

I barely function.

I eat, sleep, study. That's it, and...everything is a chore. Even eating and fucking *breathing*.

My body hurts. It feels like something is eating me from the inside, making me more rotten and sick with each day that passes. And it's all her...Tinks. No goodbye, no nothing. Not that I deserved it, but... Fuck, it just hurts. I *miss* her. God, I miss her like crazy. Just last week, I saw some brunette on campus, and I could've sworn it was Bella. I fucking chased that broad, only to find out it wasn't Tinks at all.

With a heavy sigh, I walk to the kitchen and grab a Coke from the fridge before I return to go through my mail.

Bills, bills, junk, invitation to a medical seminar, bills, junk, and...

A letter. Looks personal.

I frown and take a sip from my Coke as I turn over the envelope, but there's no return address. I only see that it's from Tennessee.

Setting down the soda on the hallway table, I open the letter...and draw a shaky breath when I see it's from Bella.

My heart starts pounding furiously.

~Edward

*I'm writing this letter for selfish reasons, as I don't want a guilty conscience hanging over my head. You know those bad movies where a man reunites with his long-lost love after years, only to find out the chick's been hiding their child? 'Cause they had sex on prom night or something equally lame? Or maybe you don't know those movies. Whatever.*

*You have a son.*

A strangled choking sound escapes me, and my hand starts to shake, making it difficult to read.

"Oh, God..."

*Nathan was born on December 10th, a couple weeks early. He's a fighter, a wild little thing. Healthy. You'll find two photos of him in the envelope.*

*What you won't find is my address, not that I'm sure you'd even want it, but you will find an email address, however. So, if you want to meet your son or ask me questions, you can contact me. Then we'll take it from there. After all, you have rights.*

I press my fist to my mouth to prevent more noises.

I sniffle and blink back tears.

A son—a baby boy.

*You've put me in a tough spot, Cullen, 'cause I still wanna rip your fucking balls off—no lie, I hate your guts—but you've also given me Nathan. So...I named him Nathan Anthony—Anthony after you and my dad. Honestly? Your godparents were better than mine. I just wish yours were still alive. But that's neither here nor there.*

A traitorous whimper slips through my lips, regardless of the fist still pressed tightly to my mouth.

And I wish the same. Bella's parents—my godparents—should be alive.

But life isn't fair, is it?

*I hope you got what you wanted, Edward. Otherwise, all the work you put into breaking me was for nothing. All that effort...yeah, for your sake, I hope you're happy.*

*~Bella.*

*PS: Seriously. Feel no obligations toward Nate. That comes from the bottom of my heart.*

With tears streaming down my face, I let out a scream and crumple the letter into a ball before I chuck it at the door. But as soon as it lands on the floor with a muted thud, I rush for it again. The photos, the photos, she said there were photos. *Oh, God.* Photos, photos, photos.

I kneel on the floor and frantically smooth out the letter but find it empty. There's nothing, and then it hits me. The envelope, not the fucking letter. So, I scramble over to where I dropped the envelope and, with trembling fingers, I fish out two small photos.

"Fuck," I whimper pathetically. The first photo is of a newborn baby lying on Tinks' chest. I presume it was taken right after labor, and the thought—all this—it makes me cry harder. She's so beautiful—they both are. Her hair is a mess, she's wearing a hospital gown, she looks so exhausted—her eyes are even closed—but...the soft smile on her lips...

"Christ," I breathe out thickly.

And the baby is so tiny. I can see Tinks' hand on his little back, and hell, Tinks herself is small. Still, her hand covers his...Nathan's...back.

Despair mixed with relief causes my knees to give out, and I end up sitting on the floor again.

*She never had the abortion.*

*She kept the baby.*

I start sobbing for what I threw away.

After pulling myself together at least a little, I pick up the second photo.

It's just Nathan in this picture, and it's clear that this is a more recently taken photo. It's a close-up, taken on what I guess is a changing table, and he's wearing a diaper and a tiny blue shirt. There's a light blue baby cap next to him, but he's not wearing it, which is how I can see the reddish brown hair on his head.

That sets off another round of uncontrollable crying.

*I have a son.*

"I'm sorry," I cry into my hands.

I sniffle and wipe my face with the sleeve on my shirt, and I tilt my head back against the wall behind me, eyes trained on the ceiling. I can't ask for strength, because that never comes to me. Dad's right; I'm weak. Always have been. So, instead of...I don't know...doing something good, maybe, I find myself filling up with rage and blind hate. It's all directed at my parents. They fucked me up. It's their fault.

Blaming someone else is always easier.

And I snap—before I go online to reschedule my flight. I can't wait 'til tomorrow night. I have to go now.

I have to...I have to...I have to get some shit off my chest. It's long overdue.

Approximately three hours later, I board the flight that will take me back to Washington.



*Chapter song – Bad Father, Bad Son by Von Benzo*

*...Bad father gets bad son...*

*...Life takes love*

*Breaks almost everyone...*

*...Kill all the joy*

*I'm sorry, but*

*I was just a boy...*

*...My face in a smirk*

*'Cause life is a joke...*

*...Hope I get free some day...*



## **EPOV**

As I walk through Sea-Tac—toward the car rental counter—with my luggage in hand, twenty-four hours before I'm supposed to be here, bad luck is evidently on my side.

"Cullen!"

See? Bad luck.

Sighing, I turn around only to come face-to-face with Emmett. And Rosalie. Correction: a glaring Rosalie. But I'm used to that. After Tinks left Forks, Rosalie and Charlotte had to be restrained by their boyfriends because they wanted to charge at me. Ridiculous.

Whatever.

"Emmett," I greet with a chin-nod and bump my fist to his.

He grins. "You going home for the holidays, too, huh?"

"Yeah. I hope to catch the last ferry..." I trail off, eager to get away. Not that Emmett's not cool; we're still friends, I guess. He's always been there. Huge as a beast, docile as a kitten.

"I just picked up Rose," he says. "I have a car..." He gives me a pointed look. "What do you say? It's been a while, man."

I don't need to look at Rose to know that I'm not welcome in the car, but fuck her.

"Sure," I agree.

~CYE~

Emmett fills the silence in the car with mindless chatter about Forks, and it almost upsets me to see that he's over the moon to have Rosalie close again. 'Cause it's clear that Rosalie loves California. She doesn't say much, but when she mentioned her roommates earlier, she was sporting this shit-eating grin.

I'm content not to speak. Instead I just sit in the back and watch the trees fly by.

I don't close my eyes.

I haven't been able to close my fucking eyes in months. Well, I have, but sleep only comes when I can't fight it anymore. Because whenever I close them, I see Tinks. I see her eyes, the look she had after I crushed her to pieces. And I know...I know that if I closed them right now, I'd see Nathan, too.

*Nathan.*

I sigh, but it doesn't bring relief to the weight on my chest. No deep breaths, no sighs, no screams bring relief.

"Heard anything from Bella?"

I clench my jaw, knowing that though Rosalie asked Emmett the question, she did it because I'm here.

"Uh...no," Emmett stammers. "Why would I?" Valid question. "Maybe Charlotte has?"

Rosalie sighs. "I called her last week in Texas, but she said she doesn't know where Bella is."

I swallow the lump in my throat, I blink away the stinging in my eyes, I ball my hands into fists.

"You, uh..." Emmett again, this time in a quiet voice, as if I can't hear him, as if I'm not sitting in the backseat. "You think she has a baby now?"

*Fuck.*

It feels like the two photos tucked in my wallet catch on fire.

"I don't know," Rosalie answers thoughtfully. "But I'd like to think so. I can't see her going through with an abortion."

My knee starts bouncing.

It feels like I'm a time bomb waiting to explode.

"I wish she hadn't cut me out of her life," she whispers next, sadness in her voice. "I mean...I get it, I do—she wanted to get away from everything, start fresh, but...I don't know."

With trembling fingers, I pull out my wallet then the photo of Nathan where he's on the changing table. I keep it hidden behind Rosalie's seat, making sure that I'm the only one who can see it, and I do, even though it's almost completely dark in the car. I spent the entire flight staring at the two photos. They're practically burned into my memory.

My breaths are shaky and irregular.

My knee keeps bouncing.

My eyes sting.

I trace the lines of Nathan's pouty little mouth. My thumb brushes over his tummy. I gulp and swallow hard. No relief comes. My chest hurts. My hands break out in a cold sweat. I can feel it beading on my forehead, too. I want to see his eyes. I want to see Tinks' goodness in them. I want to make sure he's not like me. *Fuck.* I rub my chest with my fist, hoping to calm down. It doesn't work. It doesn't work. Nothing ever works.

"Cullen, you okay?" Emmett eyes me in the rearview mirror. "You look...I don't know."

I grimace and look out the window again. "I'm fine."

The rest of the ride is quiet, thankfully.

But my mind isn't. Every fiber of me is screaming and protesting.

I want answers from my parents, but I've never been brave enough to actually demand them. I want to know what I've done to deserve all those broken bones. I want to know why my own mother never stood up for me. I mean...I know I'm nothing but a sack of *shit*, but aren't mothers obligated to love you? To protect you? To make you feel safe? I also want to know what I did to trigger Dad's first fist to my face. He never laid a hand on me in Arizona. It started when we moved to Washington—when I was five. I remember it so vividly, Dad coming home from his first day at his new job, and he was just livid.

Suddenly, everything I did was wrong. I was a little pussy, a weakling, a mama's boy.

"Cullen." Emmett's voice startles me. Deep breaths. Christ. "We're here."

I look out the window, seeing my folks' driveway.

Right.

We're here. Fuck. My pulse quickens.

And I bolt out the door, barely muttering a thanks for the ride.

Later, when I look back on this, my quick escape most likely saved my life. Because I forget my luggage in the trunk, and it will give Emmett a reason to come back in the morning, just in time to call 911.

But I don't know that right now.

The house is silent when I enter, and after a brief look outside, I see that Mom's car isn't here.

I guess she's grocery shopping- No, that can't be it. It's almost midnight, for fuck's sake.

Now I'm lost.

What do I do?

What am I really doing here?

Am I brave enough?

Resigned to wait 'til tomorrow to do...whatever I'm going to do, I head up the stairs.

But I pause on the second floor when I hear Dad in his office.

Shouting.

The familiar dread creeps up my spine, causing me to go rigid.

*"Thirteen fucking years, Liam!"* I hear him shout angrily. *"I told you from the beginning, and nothing has changed! You have to wait!"*

I frown.

It's been a while since I saw Liam, one of Dad's friends in Seattle. He's also a doctor, and I know they worked together when I was little and we were new in Washington.

*"You will do no such thing! You will keep quiet! You will not ruin everything I've created!"*

I stand frozen in place, only having heard Dad this pissed when I'm on the receiving end.

But when I hear the phone slam into a wall...or maybe against the floor... instinct kicks in and I haul ass. Not upstairs. I run down instead—with my heart stuck in my throat. He's definitely in a bad mood, and he loves to take it out on me.

A few moments later, I find a hiding spot in the garage. I'll just wait here.

"Fuck, I'm a pussy," I pant. I'm actually hiding. *Hiding*. Only weaklings hide.

The garage is freezing cold, but I stay there.

All night.

I stare at the photos again.

I have to push back sobs when I see that the bottom left corner of one of the pictures has been bent.

I try to smooth it out, but it doesn't work!

"I'm sorry," I whimper. "I'm so fucking sorry."

In a desperate attempt to make sure I'll always have the photos, I snap off a few shots of them with my phone.

~CYE~

When I hear Mom's car pull in, it's almost seven in the morning.

I stay hidden, but I still see her as she gets out of her SUV.

I also see the yellowing bruise under her eye.

*Guess Dad found a new punching bag?*

I should probably feel something. *Anything*. Hatred, justification, remorse, pity, anger, rage, sadness...

There's nothing. I just watch as she takes a bag from the car and leaves the garage.

*What am I waiting for?*

I don't know.

I do know that I'm good at cowering in a corner.

That can't go on, though. I'm so sick of this. I'm so *tired*. And confused. I don't know what to do, but... I want to grow up. I want to be free. Free from my parents, free from the shit inside of me. I'm sick of the lies. It's wearing me down, and I know that I can't hold it in any longer.

It feels like...

*Do or die.*

I don't want to die.

I want a life.

I want a second chance. Or a first. Whatever. I *want*.

Not that I have any clue about how I'll achieve anything, but aren't there mind-fuckers for that? Yeah. I could—I could go to a fucking shrink or something. Maybe. I don't fucking know. But this ends now. I...I need to man up. *Deep breaths*. I can tell them it's over. Right? I can go in there and say that I'm out—that I'm never coming back. No. Goddammit. I couldn't do it when Tinks begged me, how am I gonna do it now—when I'm all alone? Christ, I *ruined* her. And now I'm thinking she's right?

I rub my cold hands over my face and roll my shoulders.

My back is killing me.

A failure, that's what I am. It's what I've heard all my life. But...growing up, I obviously saw that other kids weren't treated like I was. My friends weren't afraid of going home. They're still not. Unlike me, they look forward to going home and celebrating the holidays with their families. And in school...I don't know how many times I've heard that violence is wrong. So, why has my dad beaten me? What have I done to deserve that?

*Shit, I'm just all over the place.*

I breathe. It's still heavy. No relief.

What do I want?

I want answers.

I want to kill my own parents.

I want Dad to hit Mom while I just watch and let it happen. I want to torture Dad and laugh in his face.

*"You're your father—you're Carlisle, Edward."*

*"You're your father—you're Carlisle, Edward."*

*"You're your father—you're Carlisle, Edward."*

I swallow but find it impossible. A strangled sound slips through my lips, and my vision becomes blurry.

Tinks is right. I'm no better than Dad.

Suddenly, it's almost impossible to breathe at all.



If I've turned into the person I loathe more than anyone, how can I ever deserve good shit in my life?

*You can fight to be better.*

I wheeze out a breath.

I don't know *how* to be better.

And that's my parents' fault.

Rage fills me again. Rage is good. Rage, I know. Rage, I can deal with.

I leave the garage, fists clenching at my sides. Up the steps, into the house, toward noises, toward the kitchen. There's Mom. Freshly showered with makeup covering her bruises.

I swallow.

How many of those bruises have I had?

How many times has Dad punched me in the face?

"Did it hurt?" I blurt out.

She yelps and clutches her chest, looking scared shitless as she spins around to face me.

"Edward!" she gasps. "You're—you're home early."

I grit my teeth and walk toward her slowly. "Did it hurt, Mom?" I ask quietly. There's nothing good in me anymore. It's all *rotten*. "Did it hurt when he beat you?"

Her eyes flick around the kitchen, almost as if she's looking for an escape.

*Am I scaring her?*

"Answer me!" I seethe. Standing before her, I tower over her much smaller frame, the disgust and hatred festering inside of me. "What did you do to deserve it?" I look around, spotting the breakfast she's about to prepare. The kitchen table by the windows is already full of delicacies; only the fanciest stuff for us Cullens. I also see the lit candles in the windows, perfectly framed by new, Christmassy red drapes. Christmas decorations littered all over the place, creating an illusion of a warm and happy home... I see the paper cut-outs I made when I was a kid. Snowmen, Santas, angels... Shit like that should probably bring back nice memories. I look back at Mom. "Do you remember when I made those?" I point to the decorations next to the candles. "Do you remember what Dad said when he saw them?"

They were too girly. I was a fucking pussy for making angels with paper and glitter glue.

That Christmas, I found out for the first time how annoying it is as a child to wear a sling.

I was seven years old.

"So, what did you do, Mom?" I ask again, ignoring the tears streaming down her face. "Why did he hit you? You must've done *something*."

My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I ignore it, not giving a fuck.

"I...I..." She gulps and takes a step back. I follow. "I fell."

I stare at her, incredulous.

That's not even a little believable.

"You have to do better than that," I tsk. "A word of advice. Make up fake friends and tell everyone that you fight them." I grin widely. It's like I don't have any control over my own body. An out-of-body experience. "It

worked for me." I nod. And then I explode without warning. "That's what I did for years!" I scream.

She flinches and lets out a pitiful sob.

If Dad wasn't up yet, he should be now.

"You wouldn't want the good people of Forks to find out that your husband abuses you, would you?" I tilt my head and study her. "That's why we keep quiet, you know. The both of us—we care too much about what others think." When I say that I'm a pussy, I'm not fucking around. I mean it. Had I only reached out for help, I wouldn't be here now. Dad would probably be behind bars, and Mom...well, I don't fucking know. "I'm fucked-up because of you." I tap my temple and nod. I feel crazed. "If you were a good mother, if Dad was a good father..."

Maybe I would be with Tinks and Nathan now.

Or maybe Nathan wouldn't exist...

*Oh, fuck. God, no.*

I push that thought aside.

And then it's as if everything happens in slow motion. I see the look of horror on Mom's face, I hear the gasp escaping her mouth, and I'm then forcefully yanked backward by a painful grip on my neck. I land on the floor, pain shooting its way through me. It leaves me gasping for air, and the hurt is so great that I'm momentarily immobilized and confused. But when I manage to open my eyes, I see Dad hovering over me, dark circles under his murderous eyes.

"Carlisle!" I hear Mom scream.

The blows come before I can take a breath, and what seemed like slow motion earlier is now the opposite. He hits me repeatedly, and I never get the opportunity to either defend myself or strike back. My jaw, my eyes, my mouth, my nose—he punches me everywhere.

"You're ruining everything!" he shouts, sounding animalistic. I gulp for air, but the breath gets stuck in my throat when he plants his foot to my ribcage. "Back the fuck off, Esme!" I try to curl into a fetal position, but Dad is relentless. Pressing his knee down on my chest, he keeps me pinned to the floor. "You're supposed to shut that fucking mouth of yours!" he practically *growls* through heaving pants. "Fight back, you pussy! Fight back! Show me that you're a man, Edward!"

Blood trickles down from cuts all over my face. My nose is broken; it's bleeding, too.

With the next blow to my face, his last words begin to go on a loop in my head.

*"Fight back, you pussy! Fight back! Show me that you're a man, Edward!"*

I remember screaming similar words to Emmett several months ago.

He didn't fight back. He took every punch I delivered.

*"Fight back, you pussy! Fight back! Show me that you're a man, Edward!"*

Everything crashes down on me—the past year's events—hell...my entire fucking life. I've taken each punch, only to push down an outsider in order to feel strong.

*"Fight back, you pussy! Fight back! Show me that you're a man, Edward!"*

I don't know where my strength comes from, but for the first time in my life, I manage to get away from his fists. Taking shaky breaths and

ignoring the pain radiating through my body, I get up on two feet and face my monster of a dad.

He's wearing that smirk.

And he has his back to Mom, which is why he doesn't see when she charges at him. She only gives a weak punch to his side—I almost want to chuckle—but it's enough for him to falter for a second. And it's my chance. It's my chance to let my own fists speak. So, I slam into him, and I don't wait, I don't hesitate. I scream, I curse, I hit, I kick, I pull, I twist, I fucking sob. Thirteen years of taking his shit for no reason, I finally hit back.

I don't register the insistent vibrating of my phone.

I don't register my mom's feeble attempts at pulling me off Dad.

What I do register is Dad's crazy laughter.

He laughs as I make him bleed.

He's fucking *deranged*.

"Stop it, Edward!" Mom sobs in the background. Only, it's not really in the background. She's trying to stop me, and it makes me snap...as if I hadn't already lost it. Without giving my next move a single thought, I use all my strength to shove her away from me. I hear her crashing into the kitchen table behind us, but I'm too gone to care.

Dad chokes on blood.

I don't stop.

I'm high on adrenaline.

It's not until I smell smoke that my aching arms fall to my sides.

I look over my shoulder, paralyzing fear washing over me as I spot Mom on the floor under the kitchen table.

In a puddle of blood.

My stomach rolls.

I see the edge of the kitchen table...I see the splatter of blood where she must've hit...

My eyes land on her still form again; I see that the blood is pooled by her head.

A shallow breath. "Oh, God..."

And the smoke...the candles...Christmas decorations...drapes caught on fire...

I'm suddenly moving again, but not by my own force. It's Dad again.

*Did I just kill my own...?*

I want to scream, cry, beg. I want to crawl over and see if she's okay, but I can't do shit. I try, I struggle, but I'm completely crippled by fear, devastation, and pain. Confusion. I gag. I taste blood. I smell fire. I grow weaker and weaker. The commotion is too much for my brain to process, and I go back to what I've done for the past thirteen years—I take what Dad gives me.

"See what you've done, Edward!" Dad screams.

My head lolls from side to side on the floor as he strikes over and over again.

"You've killed your own mother!"

"No one knows how to shut up!"

"You're all weak!"

"Everything is ruined!"

It feels like my life seeps out of me.

Eyes already swollen shut, I give up.

My last thought is only about how sorry I am.

Darkness takes over, and I never see Emmett coming to the rescue.



*Chapter song – The Bully by Sia*

## **BPOV**

### **January**

*1...*

*2...*

*3...*

*4 years later*

"Bella, stop looking at me like that!" Jazz laughs with his mouth full.

I shake my head, disgust evident in my expression, and watch as he stuffs his face with whatever Olivia gives him. I'm definitely amused, and Nate and Olivia can't stop giggling. At the age of one, Madison is more squealing than giggling.

"Look, Mommy!" Nathan giggles, green eyes full of mirth.

"I'm looking, baby." I chuckle behind my hand as Olivia pushes a fork of mashed banana into Jasper's mouth, which wouldn't have been so bad had his mouth not already been full of potato chips and grapes. "God, that's gross, Jazz."

But this is Jasper we're talking about. He's a clown, and he lives for children's laughter. It doesn't matter whose kid it is. He wants smiles on people's faces and goes to extreme lengths sometimes to get his wish. This time it's his own daughters and my son.

"Daddy, this also," Olivia says seriously, holding up a handful of gummy bears.

Little Olivia turns three today, so the wide coffee table here in the common room at Whitlock House is packed with candy, ice cream, chips, sodas, and cookies. With some sneakiness, Jasper's wife and I managed to put some fruit on the table, too.

"Bella!" I hear a little voice call, and then I feel a tug on my leg. Looking down, I see Thea—a girl who lives here with her mother.

"Hey, sweetie," I say, picking her up. She's three years old, too, but very small for her age. When Jazz opened the third Whitlock House six months ago—this one in Alaska, where we live now—Thea and her mother were the two first who moved in. Thea was malnourished and rarely said a word, and Heidi, her mother, was severely beaten up. They were both on the run from Heidi's abusive husband. "What'cha got there?" I ask, tickling



her tummy. She giggles and squirms in my arms as I poke at the ice cream stains on her shirt. "Are you saving that for later, hmm?" I give her cheek a noisy kiss. "Where's Mommy?"

Heidi and Thea are leaving next week. They're ready to stand on their own feet, and Heidi is excited to move into her own apartment in Juneau. Before she got married to that bastard who beat her, she lived with her parents. So, this is really her first very own apartment. I'm happy for her.

"In our room—she's packing lots of bags," she says, and then she wants down again. "Jazz, I wants to feed you, too!"

I sigh happily and take a seat on the couch, content to watch the kids force-feeding Jasper with sugary foods.

Moving here was the best decision ever. When Jasper told me that he wanted to open another Whitlock House, Alaska was my idea, and he asked me if I wanted to run it. Safe to say, I did, and it's what I do today. What we didn't expect was that Jasper would fall in love with this place, but he did, so he lives here, too. With his wife and two daughters. Jada is a nurse here in Anchorage now, and she loves Alaska just as much as Jazz does. Same goes for their daughters—Olivia and Madison.

Of course, Jasper travels a lot. Between the Whitlock Houses in Memphis, San Diego, and Anchorage, he's a busy man. He also goes to medical seminars and arranges benefits often, and he does lectures at universities across the country, too. Yet, he still manages to make everyone happy.

That day, when Charlotte came for me in Forks, Jasper didn't hesitate to bring me to Memphis. I opened up to him and Jada, his girlfriend at that time, and they gave me a home. They also gave me a family. Therapy, too, obviously, which I haven't quit to this day, but I don't go as often. One visit a month now helps me to keep my head straight, but back then...God, I was a mess. I didn't know left from right, and I suffered from

anxiety and nightmares for months before I started getting better. Actually, it was Nathan who set things in motion. His birth was my turning point.

I started fighting for his sake, and when it came to that point, I started fighting for my own sake, too. I moved forward. I haven't gone to college or anything, but maybe I will some day. Regardless of what I do, I'm not taking another job. Jasper trained me to do what I do today, so if I take the next step one day, I'll probably study psychology. Hell, the only thing I've done—school-wise—since I left Forks was to get my GED. Both Jazz and Jada insisted on it.

"Mommy!" Nate's voice brings me back to the present, and I let out a startled laugh as he runs into my side. Had I not been sitting down, I would've fallen over. My little guy has serious strength in him.

"What's up, baby?" I ask, ruffling his hair a little. "Oh, for the love of..." I chuckle and see how messy he is. I'm willing to bet he's got more ice cream and chocolate sauce on him than in his belly. "You are so taking a bath as soon as we get home."

Nate and I live a few blocks over in a two-bedroom apartment. Jasper and Jada live another few blocks away, but in a house. However, we spend most of our time here at Whitlock House. Right now, nine women and seven children call this house home, and aside from me, we have five employees working here. Someone is always here and security is tight. The majority of the women who seek help aren't locals; they come here because it's so far away whom they're escaping. Distance makes them feel safer.

"I took a bath yes'day." Nate tilts his head and pouts, looking so fucking cute that I could just eat him. It's a face I've seen countless times, and not just on my son. He's a carbon copy of his dad, and I did spend a lot of time with Edward when I was little, after all.

I ignore the pang I always feel in my chest at the thought of Edward and focus my attention on Nate again. "So, you wanna go to preschool tomorrow with chocolate on your face?"

He gives me a toothy grin. "Yes! Can I? Please, Mommy?" He clasps his hands together, like he's praying.

"No way, baby," I laugh and shake my head. "What would Miss Chelsea say, huh?"

My kiddo's got a crush on his teacher.

As if on cue, he ducks his head and blushes, much like I did when I was a kid.

*So adorable.*

"Bella?" I hear Lisa call. She's one of the on-call therapists here at Whitlock, and my guess is that she's just had a session with Monica—a woman who moved in here last week. Lisa's also the woman I speak to once a month.

Looking over my shoulder, I see her standing in the doorway to the common room. "Yeah?"

"Mary's looking for you—she's at the front desk."

I nod and put down Nathan. "Go attack Uncle Jazz; I'll be right back, okay?" I kiss his forehead, and he nods before bouncing off. It's my day off, but I told Mary—our assistant—to get me if she heard from Charlotte. She's been trying to call me for days, but I've missed her every time, and when I've called her back, she's been out.

It's been a while since I heard from her, actually. Maybe a few months. We're still close, but she lives in Texas with her family and new boyfriend—not Peter—so it's not like we see each other often.

"Thanks," I tell Lisa as I pass her.

We don't want anyone to feel like this is anything but a real home, so we have worked to make this house look and feel...*normal*... There's a large kitchen that we all share. Same goes for the common room, laundry room, a small room where we have computers...but we still have a front desk. It's manned 24/7, and it's where Mary sits. Or Maggie, who has the night shift. It's where we sign people in, where any of the women who live here can come—at any hour of the day—and get help or just talk. Companionship is important.

"Did she call?" I ask Mary, leaning my elbows on the counter.

She smiles and brushes her brown bangs to the side. "No, but your laptop dinged with an email."

"Oh." That's not as interesting, but since I'm here, I might as well check it. So, I reach over the desk and grab my already open laptop. Sure enough, there's an email waiting.

And my eyebrows shoot up.

*Sender: Edward A. Cullen.*

"Holy fuck," I breathe out, feeling my throat closing up.

Without giving it a thought, I bring the laptop into the office behind the front desk and sit down on one of the couches there.

*Why now? What could he possibly want?*

Setting the laptop on the couch, right next to me, I pull up my leg so I can face the screen properly. But I don't click on the email yet. I can't.

*Subject: Please read.*

I shake my head, angry, disbelieving, stunned, confused...curious.

Last time I saw him, he refused to look me in the eye. It was during the trial, and everything—every little part of his life—was being aired out. He was humiliated and embarrassed, and I knew an approach of any kind from me would be shut down, but...still. I guess I expected *something*. To be honest, I'm not sure I would've said anything in return if he *had* spoken to me; I was so crushed. He pushed me down; he shattered me. I hated him. Still do.

Thinking about it, I guess it's that he didn't ask about Nathan that hurt the most. He knew then that he was a father...

I remind myself over and over again that it was a horrible time in his life; his mother was dead—by his hand, no matter how accidental it was—and people were finding out that he'd been abused for thirteen years. The media were pretty lenient—I'm sure money was involved to ensure that—but there were still witnesses. People were called in to testify, and everyone obviously learned the truth.

I don't have all the details, but I know enough. I know that Edward finally found the balls to confront Carlisle and Esme—though I wonder where that fucking courage came from, seeing as it was nowhere to be found when I begged him for the same—and I know that it ended in a goddamn mess. Fists were flying, accusations were thrown, and Esme ended up dead. Both Cullen men also ended up in the hospital, bruised and fractured.

Emmett had saved the day when he drove over to the Cullen house that morning to deliver Edward's luggage, which he had forgotten in Em's car.

And Emmett had witnessed how Carlisle was hitting and kicking an unconscious Edward.

Christ, then all the rest followed: the whole mess with a man named Liam O'Shea, Carlisle being insane, hospital drama, police reports, charges, the trial, getting that call from Edward's lawyer after tracking me down, flying to Seattle, being a nervous and broken wreck, dealing with the hatred and pity I felt for Edward, giving my testimony, hearing about more deaths...

I don't even want to think about it.

Biting my thumbnail, I glance at the screen again.

I take a deep breath.

I hate him. I pity him. I'm thankful for Nathan. There's also an ounce of understanding; Edward didn't know better, so he went too far in order to make sure I didn't spill the beans about his horrible family. There's hurt. There's loss. There's guilt. I feel betrayed; I opened up to him and told him everything about my past...only to have it thrown in my face...where everybody could see and hear, which they certainly did. I want to see him suffer, I want to slap him, I want to hug him, I want to spit in his face. So many conflicting emotions, and no amount of money and therapists can fix that.

I've started to let go, though. I'm actually happy in my life right now. Okay, there's a sense of...I don't know, *something*...that irks me...but I can't put my finger on it. Whatever. I'm still happy. I'm young. I'm healthy. And I'm the mother to an amazing little boy. I have hope.

So, why does he have to fuck with my life?

"You know you're gonna read it," I sigh to myself.

My finger hovers over the touchpad.

Ugh. I shake my head and click on the email.

—Bella

*I'm probably the last person you want to hear from, and I don't even know if you still use this email address, but I have to try.*

Okay. Shit. Deep breaths, Bella.

*I've wanted to contact you several times over the years, but it was never the perfect time. Or, if I'm being honest, I was a coward. No surprise there. Anyway, my therapist asked me weeks ago what my plans were after my probation was up—if I wanted to start fresh somewhere—so I talked things over with Emmett, and he suggested Alaska.*

I frown, one hand over my heart, said heart stuck in my throat.

Jesus Christ. Alaska?

Oh God, no. No, no, no, no.

*You always wanted to go there, too, or is my memory fucked up?*

*So, that's where I'm going. I bought a cabin there, in the middle of fucking nowhere—near Sterling—and I can't wait to jump on that plane tomorrow. All I want is peace and quiet. After seventeen months in prison and seven on probation, I need to get away.*

Whoa—*prison*? Edward's been in prison? For *what*?

I take another deep breath and find myself holding it as I read on.

*I swear I have a point with this email—don't delete it yet.*

*I'm not asking for forgiveness, because I know I don't deserve it. But I want you to know that I am sorry. I'm sorry for pushing you away and for*

*the things I did to you. Nothing can ever take that back, and I'm sorry for that, too.*

*I won't blame my upbringing or that I was only a kid; I did wrong, and I knew it at the time. I panicked and destroyed the only person who ever gave a shit.*

I scream and curse internally for so many reasons. This is just too much.

Exhaling shakily, I try not to think about how Edward looked in that courtroom almost four years ago. He was beyond shattered.

*I thought I hit rock bottom when Mom told me you had left for good. I don't know why I expected you to still be there, really, but...I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed. Anyway, then I thought I'd hit rock bottom when Mom died. Turned out I was wrong again. It wasn't until after a year of therapy that I hit my ultimate low. See, while I knew I acted badly, I never really stopped to think—I didn't pause to use my fucking brain. At least not long enough to see how I'd actually affected the people around me. I didn't care.*

"Yeah, no shit," I mumble.

*I saw myself as a god in school, when I was really a goddamn executioner. I was feared, not respected. And you couldn't have been more right when you told me I'd become Carlisle. The only problem was that I didn't realize just how right you were until it was almost too late.*

*I quit therapy after that first year. I fled, 'cause it didn't help me. It only made me feel worse and worse. Each session brought clarity, and nothing will ever hurt more. To know and understand what a bastard I was...*

Truth hurts, doesn't it, Edward?

*Well, I wasn't in prison for no reason.*



*I won't go into all that, 'cause it's no use. Just know that I'm more sorry than you'll ever know, Bella. I treated you horribly, and I wish I could take it back. I wish I'd made the right choice back then. I know I would've had a better life today if I did. Maybe I'd be with you now. And Nathan. The pictures you sent me of him...I don't even know what to say. God knows I'm paying for my mistakes. The guy I shared a cell with in prison always talked about his four kids, and it hurt like nothing else when I couldn't share any memories of my own.*

"Christ," I breathe out, feeling my eyes well up. I look away from the screen, steeling myself, hardening my heart. This isn't happening. This isn't happening. All these years, I just assumed he didn't *want* Nathan. I mean, how could I *not* think that? He threw money on the ground for the abortion, and he never tried to contact me. And...at the trial...ugh. Fuck this. I draw a breath and push forward.

*I want to ask you questions, like where do you live, how are you, did you go to college...but I'm not really expecting answers, so I'll hold off on the questions. Though, my guess is that you live in Tennessee? I don't know. I just remember that's where you mailed your letter from four years ago.*

*Four years...Christ. Nathan's four. It's incomprehensible.*

*I don't know what else to say, but I'm sitting here trying to come up with more stuff, like I wanna keep writing, keep the letter going. How fucked up is that? Never mind. I hope you read this, and I hope you're happy, Bella. Like I said, I don't expect an answer, but if you do want to write back, you can find my new address at the bottom. I'm moving to Alaska tomorrow, like I mentioned, so... I also added my phone number. Just in case. Or you can use this email address.*

*My hope is for some kind of contact, of course; it hurts not knowing Nathan. But after everything I've done, I will respect your wishes. If you don't want me in his/your life...*

*Fuck. I hope, with time, you can let me see him. Please. I'd be on the first flight, and if you'd want me to move closer, just give me the word.*

*I'm getting ahead of myself.*

*I'm sorry.*

*—Edward*

I stare at the screen.

My eyes well up.

And I scream. "JASPER!"

~CYE~

I pace in the office as Jasper reads the email again. Or maybe it's his third or fourth time reading it—I don't know.

My heart is pounding erratically, tears threatening to spill over, and I realize that I'm nervous as hell.

"What should I do, Jazz?" I choke out, never stopping my pacing. "He thinks I'm in Tennessee! But I'm not." I shake my head. "I'm right here—in Alaska. Just a short flight from Sterling." You don't drive in Alaska. I've learned that. You fly. Everywhere. Everyone here is a fucking pilot. Oh, God. "And he wants—he wants..." I wave a hand at the laptop Jasper's holding. "He wants to know Nathan." I stifle a sob and cover my mouth with my hand.

When Nate was three, he asked about Edward; he asked about his daddy.

I don't ever want my son to feel hatred toward *anyone*—it's a feeling that leaves you dark on the inside. I won't have that. I refuse. My boy is happy and carefree; I don't want him to feel angry or sad. Or, God forbid,

abandoned. So, I did what I thought was best and told him that his father wasn't feeling well. You try and explain that to a three year old and not make it sound like Edward had caught a bug or something. I dare you. I'm not sure it worked the first time, but Nathan has asked a few times after that, and with each time, I think he understands more and more.

Last time was about four months ago.

"Mommy?"

*I look away from the stove and down to Nate, my smile faltering when I notice the little frown on his face. So, I squat down to his level and squeeze his hands. "What is it, baby?"*

*He hesitates, not because of whatever topic is on his mind, but because he's thinking about his words. "Um...is my daddy sick?"*

*I puff out my cheeks, having expected this question to come up again. Releasing my breath slowly, I try to think of a new approach—one that helps him understand.*

*"Katie at school say her daddy's sick wiv cold," he mumbles, scrunching his little nose. "He sneeze lots."*

*I smile sadly. "It's not really like that, sweetie." I pause, choosing my words carefully. "When—when..." Fuck. "When your daddy was little, only a few years older than you are now, he wasn't very happy." God, this isn't working. Deep breaths. "What I mean is...he was very lonely and sad." As much as I want to tell him that Edward's parents were at fault, I don't want Nathan to hate Carlisle and Esme just yet. Some truth will seep out—I wouldn't have it any other way—but there are limits. No matter who he hates, hate is bad. I'm sick of hatred. It grows inside of you until you either crumble to pieces or destroy someone else. While I will always*

*despise Carlisle and Esme, I have nothing to fear. It's not like Nate will ever meet them. They're both dead and gone. May they burn in hell.*

*I go on. "And when your daddy got older, he was still sad. He also got angry." Nate frowns in confusion. "Do you remember when Cheeky died before we moved here?" Cheeky was Nate's hamster, a godawful little thing that loved to bite me. He was docile and fucking cuddly with Nathan, but as soon as I got near... Anyway, the tiny monster got sick and died after a few months, and Nate was so upset. "You were so sad that you got mad?"*

*He nods slowly, blushing. "I kicked my toys," he whispers.*

*I nod, too, remembering. It was such a tantrum; he almost turned his room upside down. "Your daddy was like that, but worse. His mommy and daddy weren't very nice, so Daddy was often sad and angry. It wasn't easy for him."*

*Desperate to get to the point, I continue. "When I met him, we became friends," I lie. "But he still wasn't happy, and..." I take a breath, gathering my nerves. "Then when I found out I had you in my belly," I poke his tummy, making him smile, "I was so excited." Okay, not really true; I was scared for my life. But Nathan still turned out to be my blessing. It was love at first sight. "But Daddy had been sad and angry for so, so long—that," I wet my bottom lip, "it was almost like he was sick. He couldn't help it."*

*"He's sick now also?" he asks, confused.*

*I nod slowly, again choosing my words carefully. Fuck, this is hard! "I'm not sure—I haven't seen him since you were a little baby—but if he was better, he'd want to see you." I nod firmly and grin. "'Cause you're awesome, you know?"*

*He giggles when I tickle him, and though I can see that he's still confused—hell, I'm not sure my words made sense to myself—he will have to wait 'til he's older to understand better. Maybe then he'll understand when I tell him that constant hurt and anger will make you sick.*

I'm brought back to reality when Jasper speaks up.

"Want me to call your lawyer?"

I tilt my head up at the ceiling, already knowing the answer. I can't keep Edward from seeing Nathan, but I can, however, do my best to protect Nate. Edward won't come near my son until I know Edward's better. Not only that, but I refuse to let Edward into Nate's life if it's just temporary.

"No," I sigh, turning to him. I palm my forehead, feeling a headache settling in. There's just too much to process—too many questions, too many emotions. Honestly, I never expected I'd have to deal with Edward—ever again. And now this... "Ugh!" I let out a noise in frustration. "Why did Emmett suggest Alaska to him?" It's a rhetorical question at first, but when I think about it some more, I find that I really fucking want the answer. I mean...he couldn't possibly know, could he? No way. Only Charlotte knows, and she lives in Texas—her whole family does. Which means Charlotte has no ties whatsoever to Forks anymore. Emmett doesn't have a clue I live here, and even if he did, why would he want Edward to move closer to me? Plus, I thought Edward moved back to Baltimore after the trial, but what the fuck do I know? I can only speak for myself, and I wouldn't want to live near Forks after everything that happened.

"If you want, I can check up on him," Jazz offers. "It's your choice, of course, but if I were you..." He grimaces. "It's just that you don't know him anymore." He points at the screen. "From what I read, he hasn't been very upstanding. Probation? Seventeen months in prison? Just...tread carefully."

I huff and sit down next to him, crossing one leg over the other and folding my arms over my chest. "Oh, I will definitely tread carefully. And you know what?" I'm suddenly seething. "How dare he? How fucking dare he send me a letter like that? There are no answers; only shit raising more questions, not to mention suspicion." I scoff and shake my head. "And the Mr. Nice Guy act? Please." I roll my eyes. "Edward Cullen is not a guy who says 'sorry' for *anything*."

Jazz sighs and purses his lips before looking at me hesitantly. "Based on what you've told me, then no. But he could've changed." I give him an incredulous look, and he holds up his hands. "I'm just trying to look at this from both perspectives, honey."

"Yeah, well, you're supposed to be on my side," I snap, instantly feeling bad. "Fuck. I'm sorry." I scrub my hands over my face.

"Don't mention it," he chuckles quietly and rubs my back. "I can't even imagine what's going through your head right now."

I let out a humorless laugh. "*I barely know.*"

I've come a long way since I left Forks behind, and hell will freeze over before I let Edward ruin things for me again. Thanks to extensive therapy and surrounding myself with true family, I've been able to struggle free from the bullshit in my past. I've dealt with my parents' deaths, the guilt I harbored for leaving Edward behind—despite what he did—being pregnant at seventeen, having a baby at eighteen, and then everything that followed during the trial. I was only in Seattle for two days, but it was enough. And I heard everything through Charlotte and Jasper after that.

"Want me to get Lisa for you?"

I shake my head and look down at my hands resting on my lap. "No. I just need to process this. I need..." I blow out a breath. "I need to think before I go to her."

Last month, I spoke to her about Riley, and that's just laughable right now. Suddenly, after Edward's letter, the least of my concerns is the man who wants more from me. Riley, that is. I met him two months ago when I flew to Juneau with Heidi to look at apartments there—he's a pilot. He gives me those girly butterflies in my stomach, but I'm not ready for what he wants. He's already talked about wanting to meet Nathan, and that right there is a big red flag for me. No way. Not happening. Not when Nathan is so confused about his heritage, and not when I'm not a hundred percent sure about how I feel. I mean, we've been out on a few dates and he's very charming, handsome, and nice, but... There's a but. There's something holding me back, which strengthens my resolve to go at a painfully slow pace. Nathan comes first, and I come second. After that, there's family and work. I'm in no position or place in my life to go nuts and fall crazy in love. It's not even what I want.

"I'm just gonna take Nate home," I say tiredly. "Gonna give him a bath and watch a movie with him. I don't know. I just..." I make a face.

Jazz grins wryly and is about to say something, but Mary speaks up from the doorway. "Sorry to disturb, guys, but Charlotte's on the phone for you, Bella."

I nod at her and tuck away the part of me that wants to scream, *"I'm tired and I wanna hide out under my bed for a week!"*

Instead I give Jasper a parting smile then follow Mary out to the front desk.

"Bella Swan speaking," I say automatically into the receiver.

"Hi, hun, it's Charlotte."

I smile. "At last. Thought I'd never track you down," I joke.

She chuckles, though it sounds a bit forced. "Yeah, we're both busy women. How's everything?"

"Good." The answer comes out before I even think about it. But I don't have the energy to take it back, 'cause then I'd have to tell her about a certain email I just got. "And you?"

"Um...it's good. So, listen...I, uh, I was in Forks recently...actually."



*Edward's chapter song – Learn You Inside Out by Lifehouse*

*Bella's chapter song – Over You by Daughtry*

## **EPOV**

Once Emmett and I have unpacked everything in the cabin, I grab two beers and my smokes before I join him out on the porch. It's freezing cold, so I make sure to grab my jacket, too. Taz, a six-year-old black Lab I adopted a few months ago, follows me out.

"Here." I hand Em one of the Heinekens and sit down next to him. "Fuck, it feels good to be done."



Since Emmett's afraid of flying, he left Washington a couple of days early and drove up to Sterling with my new Range Rover—a car packed with my shit. And Taz, obviously. I asked Em how he's gonna get home, but he didn't give me an answer. I know why, but it'd be nice to hear it anyway. Alaska is really the worst possible state for him to be in, since he refuses to fly, but I reckon Washington is even worse for him right now.

"Are you gonna buy a gun or something?" he asks, looking out at the woods surrounding us. "'Cause, dude...there are a shitload of bears in Alaska, and Taz is more bark than bite. You should get a cool Beretta."

I crack a smile and light up a cigarette. "I'm not allowed," I say wryly.

He tilts his head at me, confused.

"All part of being a convicted felon," I sigh.

What I did was messed up, but at least I didn't murder someone. I gotta count my blessings, right? I mean, had that man—Liam—not killed Dad, maybe I would've. Who knows?

I shake my head, getting rid of those thoughts. "I'm not allowed to carry a 'firearm capable of being concealed on my person'. Some shit like that. But I'm definitely getting a shotgun."

If I see a bear here, which I likely will at some point, I'll shoot it, and then I'll probably piss my pants.

"Huh."

A comfortable silence follows, both of us thinking about our futures, I guess. I can only speak for myself, but I'm pretty sure Emmett's mind is spinning. After everything with Rosalie, I doubt Em wants to return to Forks anytime soon.

*Can't blame him.*

Washington sucks, and I'm glad to be gone. Alaska's home now.

My cabin is far from big, but it's more than I need. Three bedrooms upstairs, two baths—one on each floor—a kitchen, a living room, and a laundry room. Aside from the laundry room and the bathroom, the downstairs is pretty much a wide open space, only sectioned by a few dividers. For instance, a counter separates the kitchen from the living room on one side, and on the other there's a miniscule hallway where the front door is.

There's a shack behind the cabin, too, which I'm pretty sure will turn into a workshop soon enough. It's about time I follow my own dreams, right? So...woodworking it is.

Nothing is set in stone, but it's not like I'm in a rush. I don't need the money, and after...*everything*...I just wanna take it easy and live in peace. Maybe walk around the property with Taz or sit down by the fucking fire—I don't know. But I won't grow bored in a long, long time. I have a kitchen packed with food, drinks, and snacks, a cabinet in the living room full of DVDs and Xbox games, and shelves in my bedroom loaded with books.

I also have Emmett—a dude I've treated like shit and taken for granted in the past. I'm the lucky son of a bitch who he forgave too easily, but I'm making up for what I've done.

He was the only one who visited me in prison. And after New Year's, he went with me to IKEA in Seattle—'cause I don't know shit about what you need in a house—and that's just what Emmett does. He's there for people, big issues or small, and now it's my turn to give back.

I hope letting him stay here indefinitely is a start, at least. 'Cause he shouldn't go back to Rosalie. But that's just my humble opinion.

"Did you call that guy in Anchorage?" Em asks. "Charlotte really recommended him."

I exhale some smoke through my nose and shake my head. "Nah, my old counselor in Seattle hooked me up with some dude in Kenai. It's closer." Anchorage is little over two hours away by car, but Kenai is only twenty minutes away. And since I'm seeing my new therapist once a week, I'd prefer not to go too far.

When we first got to talking about where I'd move, Emmett and Charlotte were all about Anchorage. Apparently, Charlotte has an uncle who lives there, but it took a while for me to settle on Alaska, period. 'Cause I had my eyes on Tennessee. It didn't make sense to me to move so far away if my ultimate goal was to have some sort of relationship with my son. But then the realistic, albeit cynical, side took over. Because why on earth would Bella *ever* let me see him?

I could demand it; I could take her to court, but I'm trying hard not to be selfish. It would hurt not only Bella, but Nathan. Plus, I want him to be able to choose to spend time with me. I'd hate to see him upset just because I'm there.

So...I took Emmett and Charlotte's advice and bought a cabin in Alaska. It's peaceful and quiet, which is just what I want, and that's also the reason for not going with an apartment or house in Anchorage. I want to be away from civilization.

"Wait, so you have no business whatsoever in Anchorage?" He frowns.

I frown, too, wondering what's so great about Anchorage. Aside from finding a place to live there, Charlotte also suggested where I could buy my fucking groceries, where I could get the cheapest gas for my car, where I could find a therapist, and what neighborhoods were the best. If

she's so in love with Anchorage, maybe she should leave Texas and move there.

"It's more than two hours away," I defend, flicking my cigarette off the porch. A heavy blanket of snow is covering the ground, and I hear the little sizzle as it puts out the smoke. That's how quiet it is out here.

"What's the fucking deal with that city, man?"

I'm annoyed, but at least it's better than fury. Had this conversation taken place four or five years ago, I would've bashed his head in by now. But anger management works, so...

"Nothing, just..." He grimaces and sighs and huffs and squirms in his seat.

I let out a frustrated breath. "*What?* Spit it out, Em."

"Fine! I don't think it's good that you close yourself in." He scowls, and my eyebrows shoot up. "We're only twenty-two, for fuck's sake. We should be carefree and-"

I cut him off by putting up my hand. "Let me stop you right there, Emmett. First of all, I don't *feel* twenty-two." Very goddamn true. After a year and a half in prison, I'm definitely fit, if not fucking *bulky*, but my body is still tired. I'm fucking *exhausted*. This is the first time in my life I can just sit back and relax without worrying about *anything*. I'm my own person. I'm dealing with my demons. I'm doing shit right, and I can finally *breathe* properly. There's a lot in my life that I hate; I'm full of regrets, shame, and guilt, but I'm trying now. And I want to do that far away from shit I don't give a flying fuck about. Namely, city life and people from my past. I'm not hiding; I'm just done. I'm sick of all that.

There are bad days and good days, and finding myself in a big city on a bad day is asking for trouble. I wouldn't say there are more temptations, but there are definitely more paths of destruction to take.

"Second of all," I release a breath, "I'm not carefree."

I'm a nervous fucking mess. I'm still struggling with my past, which I will *always* do, and then there's everything with Nathan and Bella. I know that I won't be able to forgive myself for everything I've done before I have Bella's forgiveness. And it's a vicious cycle, 'cause I don't believe I deserve her forgiveness.

And, to back up a little, I don't get why Emmett's pressing this matter. He's always been a small-town guy, and the reason he didn't go to off college was because it was always his plan to take over the diner in Forks when his folks retired. He hates big cities almost as much as I've come to hate them. The past seven months—as well as the time before my incarceration—I lived in a condo in Seattle, and I fucking loathed it. Anyway, had it not been for what Rosalie did, Emmett would've never even considered leaving Forks.

"I know," Emmett sighs quietly. "But..." He hesitates and I level him with a warning glare as I light up another smoke. "Just listen to me, dude. There's something in Anchorage—"

"For Christ's sake!" I exclaim. This has *got to stop!* Charlotte first came up to Forks because Rosalie thought her friend was gonna side with her—she wanted Charlotte there for support. When it turned out that Charlotte sure as fuck didn't stand on Rosalie's side, but on Emmett's side instead, Charlotte took it upon herself to suddenly be my friend, too. So, every weekend for a month, a whole fucking month, I had Charlotte and Emmett crashing at my place in Seattle. I don't fucking need her as a friend; I don't hate her, I just don't care about her. But she was all buddy-buddy with Emmett, and when I asked for advice about where I was gonna start over, the two became an unstoppable force. Anchorage this, Anchorage this. Fuck Anchorage!

Honestly, it was almost better when Charlotte hated my guts.

"*You've changed, Cullen. Glad to see it,*" was the only thing Charlotte said after spending her first weekend with Em at my place. And after that, she started acting like she's my friend.

Whatever.

"Bella's in Anchorage!" Emmett blurts out.

My head whips in his direction so fast that I'm afraid it's gonna fall off.

*What* did he say?

"She's here—in-in Alaska, I mean," he stammers. "I found out when Charlotte—when she came to Forks."

I look at him, incredulous, and feel how the blood drains from my face.

"Charlotte told me not to tell," he goes on, running a hand through his short hair. "But she's a chick, ya know? She had this fucking vision in her head that you and Bella were gonna run into each other in Anchorage and live happily ever after. And when you said that you were moving to Sterling, she was still banking on you finding a therapist in the city."

I can't...I can't *fucking* believe this.

Bella is here? In Alaska? With *Nathan*?

Wait.

"How..." I swallow hard then take a deep drag from my smoke. "How does Charlotte know all this?"

He lets out a breath and slumps back in his chair. "Charlotte's known all along, dude. She and her uncle were the ones who helped Bella get out of Forks. And apparently this uncle is pretty close with Bella today. Jasper, I

think his name was." He nods. "And this Jasper guy's wife, too. They all live in Anchorage."

In shock, I look away from Emmett and out at the nothingness in front of me.

"They lived in Memphis first, Cullen. Then they moved up here six months ago. Charlotte told me everything after that first weekend at your place in Seattle."

I nod slowly, dazed, stunned, and confused.

I'm in the same state as my son. Approximately two hours away.

*Two hours.*

Then I remember the email I sent Bella yesterday, and I'm suddenly panicking. I also grow angry. I have no idea if she's even read it, but if she has...then maybe she'll think I'm lying to her. Maybe she thinks I know that she's here and that I mentioned Tennessee in an attempt to come off as innocent.

"You should've fucking told me from the beginning," I grit out, facing Emmett again. "I emailed her. Yesterday, I sent her a long email about wanting to know Nathan. I said my guess was that she was in Tennessee."

His mouth forms the "Oh" before it actually slips out.

"Yeah. *Oh*," I say, sarcasm lacing my voice. "Fucking hell, Emmett!"

"I'm sorry," he says, looking contrite. "For what it's worth, Charlotte and I will obviously tell Bella the truth."

I huff and roll my eyes. "Damn right you will," I mutter. I shudder when a harsh wind blows by, and while I'm still pissed, I'm too tired to fuck around with this crap right now. It's been a long goddamn day, and I need

some sleep. Maybe I'll email Bella tomorrow and explain what's going on. 'Cause the last thing I need is more shit on my plate. "I'm freezing my balls off out here; I'm gonna hit the sack. You know where your room is." I let out a quick whistle to alert my dog. "Come on, Taz."

~CYE~

When I wake up the next morning, I find that the cabin is empty. Not only is the cabin empty but, as I look out the living room window, I notice that my car is gone from the driveway, too. Dressed in nothing but a pair of flannel pajama bottoms, I trudge into the kitchen, and...

The note on the kitchen table doesn't really tell me *why* the Rover is gone. Only who took it. Which was pretty damn obvious from the get-go.

*I'm borrowing the car for a few hours. Took Taz with me.*

*-Emmett.*

"No shit, motherfucker," I yawn, walking over to the fridge to take out a few eggs. While checking the contents of the fridge, I rub my bare chest and decide that I should probably buy a fucking cookbook or something. 'Cause as it is right now, I can buy groceries like a champ, but I can only make pasta and omelets. Not counting sandwiches.

With the eggs sizzling in a pan and the coffee brewing, I walk over to the kitchen window, open it, and light up my morning smoke. The fresh air coming in feels really fucking good; it's crisp and works better than an alarm clock.

I spot my laptop on the counter, and with last night's conversation filtering through my mind, I slide it closer and power it up. It took me three days to gather the courage to finally send Bella an email, so I doubt I can just do it right now, without several internal pep talks, but-



"Ah, fuck." I forgot. I don't have internet out here. Hell, I barely have any signal on my phone.

*Later, then.*

I take a final pull from the cigarette then toss it out the window.

I'm just about to pour myself some coffee when I hear a knock on the door, and since I haven't had my first cup of coffee yet this morning, I'm more than a little irritated. "You don't have to fucking knock, Emmett!" I shout as I reach for a big mug. It's definitely one that Emmett picked out at IKEA, 'cause I don't do polka dots. But this light green mug is covered in 'em.

*Knock, knock!*

"Argh!" Deserting my precious coffee, I stomp out of the kitchen, down the tiny hallway, and rip the door open.

I don't freeze in place because of the icy weather.

No, I freeze because it's Bella.

*Fuck me.*

My eyes widen; I even hold my fucking breath.

*She grew up.*

Wearing skintight jeans, a snug hoodie, a beanie, and winter boots, she's...she's, she's fucking gorgeous. Even more than she was before.

I release the breath I've been holding and look at her face, her eyes as wide as mine, her cheeks flushed from the cold, her full lips slightly parted... Christ, was she this beautiful before? No way. I mean...Bella's always been fucking *hot*. But she's...older now. More woman...ly. Not

seventeen anymore. Her hair is longer, I notice. Really long. And sorta wavy. And those curves...*damn*.

"*Tinks*."

It comes out as a quiet breath. In relief. Only, as soon as my name for her is out, I'm slammed back into reality—the reality where she hates my guts and has every right to do so. How the fuck could I destroy her? God, I was a fucking *monster*.

Going to look her in the eye again, I see that hers are trained on my ribcage, and I'm suddenly even more nervous. I have no idea how she's interpreting the ink I have there.

But I find out when her gaze snaps to mine and I see the fury.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

She takes a quick step forward and slaps me across the face, causing my head to jerk to the side, and before shock has even settled in me, she pulls up her knee and kicks me in the groin. The searing pain shoots through me, rendering me breathless and stunned, and I end up on the floor, both hands covering my balls.

"Christ," I wheeze out. I curl up in the fetal position and whimper from the goddamn pain. "You pack a mean fucking punch, Tinks."

"Don't—*fucking*—call me that," she spits out and steps over me to enter the cabin. "Hi, by the way. Asshole."

Come on in, *Tinks*. Make yourself at home.

*Oh, sweet Jesus*, I groan internally. Or perhaps it wasn't so internally at all. Rolling onto my back, I scrunch my face together, waiting not-so-patiently for the pain in my nuts to subside.

## **BPOV**

Since Riley's a pilot—and it's not like I'm close enough to him to know his schedule—I avoid the airport. Instead I drive. I drive the two hours and twenty minutes it takes to get from Anchorage to Sterling. All the while, I have Charlotte's words going on a loop in my head. God, that fucking phone call yesterday...

*"He's changed, Bella."*

We'll see.

*"Remember a few months ago and you said you were worried about Nate not having a dad? Well, he actually does have one, and I don't think Cullen's gonna fuck it up."*

There's a difference between a father and a dad.

*"I studied him like a damn science project; trust me. He's not the bully we used to know."*

Not your place to judge, Charlotte. You had no right.

*"Those two pictures of Nate? He has them everywhere. On his fridge, in his wallet, in picture frames in his living room and in the hallway."*

That just makes me angry. If he loves Nathan so much...

*"He's been in anger management—Emmett told me. Therapy, too. He's still going."*

So what? I need to see the proof for myself.

*"Give him a chance, honey."*

Uh-huh...

I shake my head and grip the steering wheel tighter.

I step on the gas.

I follow the GPS.

The past four years, I've worked with women who are victims of abuse, and it has given me a whole other perspective. While I always knew that Edward was in pain, physical and otherwise, I was too young and inexperienced to really comprehend what he was going through. But now... I *know* now. I know that he's a product of his parents' abuse and neglect. I know that he was desperate to keep his pain to himself, to keep his entire life a secret. And I was the one who wanted to help him by taking it to the authorities. Big mistake. But still, what was I supposed to do? As an outsider, that was all I *could* do. However, I've learned that victims of this kind don't get help until they're ready for it.

Years of therapy and work have helped me deal with all this. I've come to terms with Edward's reasoning and actions, but that doesn't mean everything is okay. It's sure as hell not. I still hate that man for how callous he was. I'm human; I can't control how I feel all the time. Regardless of what's right or wrong, he hurt me when I was so fucking vulnerable, and he did it so publicly and harshly.

I can deal, I can move on, I can push forward, but I can't forget and forgive just like that.

What pisses me off right now is that—selfishly—Cullen is fucking with my contentment, and...that he's a threat to Nathan. For all I know, Edward is still the fuck-up I used to know. And it doesn't matter what past he has. He can't hide behind that; his past gives him reason and, admittedly, some leniency, but fuck me if it gives him an *excuse* to do what he wants.

And I swear to *God*...if he immediately starts acting like Nathan is his whole fucking world, I will kick his ass. Because he doesn't know *shit*, and he didn't care enough to contact me before. Maybe he hasn't been ready until now, but I don't give a fuck. He could've fired off a simple email telling me that he wasn't in a good place in his life yet, that he wasn't ready, or...something. But no, instead he ignored it altogether. He made me believe that he didn't want Nate—that he didn't care.

That's mainly why I hate Edward.

I hate to hate, but Edward Anthony Cullen makes it easy for me. At the same time, I'm still struggling with the dichotomy. One part often tells me that Edward was nothing but a broken boy—which is all very true—and one part tells me that I gave up too quickly, that I left too quickly. But then...a girl has her limits. I was dealing with so much at the same time: the deaths of my parents, Alec's betrayal, Irina's public humiliation, leaving Phoenix, the confusing feelings I had for Edward, his fucked-up parents, and then finding out that I was pregnant.

What Edward did to me in school was the last thing I could handle. Correction: I couldn't handle it. The proverbial cup spilled over and I fled.

I'm brought out of my internal conflict when the GPS lady tells me to take a right, and soon I end up on a narrow road leading deeper into the woods.

I take deep breaths.

My black SUV takes me closer and closer.

*I will act civil, I will be polite, this is for Nate, it's not about me, I will push away my personal feelings.*

And then I'm parked in front of a two-story log cabin in the middle of nowhere.

"Before I lose my nerve," I mutter to myself and reach for my beanie in the passenger seat. I run a hand through my hair then put on the beanie, a little irritated that I actually left my apartment without a jacket. I woke up at around seven this morning, took Nate to Jada—who drops Olivia and Nathan off at preschool when I work early—but instead of driving toward work, where I sure as hell don't need a jacket, I took the first exit out of Anchorage. Then when I passed Girdwood, I called Mary and said I wouldn't make it. Last, I sent off a text to Charlotte, telling her that I was taking her advice and contacting Cullen.

*And now I'm here.*

I exhale and leave the car, my boots making crunching sounds against the snow as I walk toward the cabin.

After knocking once on the door, I hear, "*You don't have to fucking knock, Emmett!*" coming from inside, and I chuckle darkly.

Emmett, that *fucking* meddler. He and Charlotte will get an earful sooner or later. Yesterday, I was too shocked to lash out at Charlotte.

I knock twice more, harder this time.

My stomach does a somersault when I hear the stomping on the other side of the door.

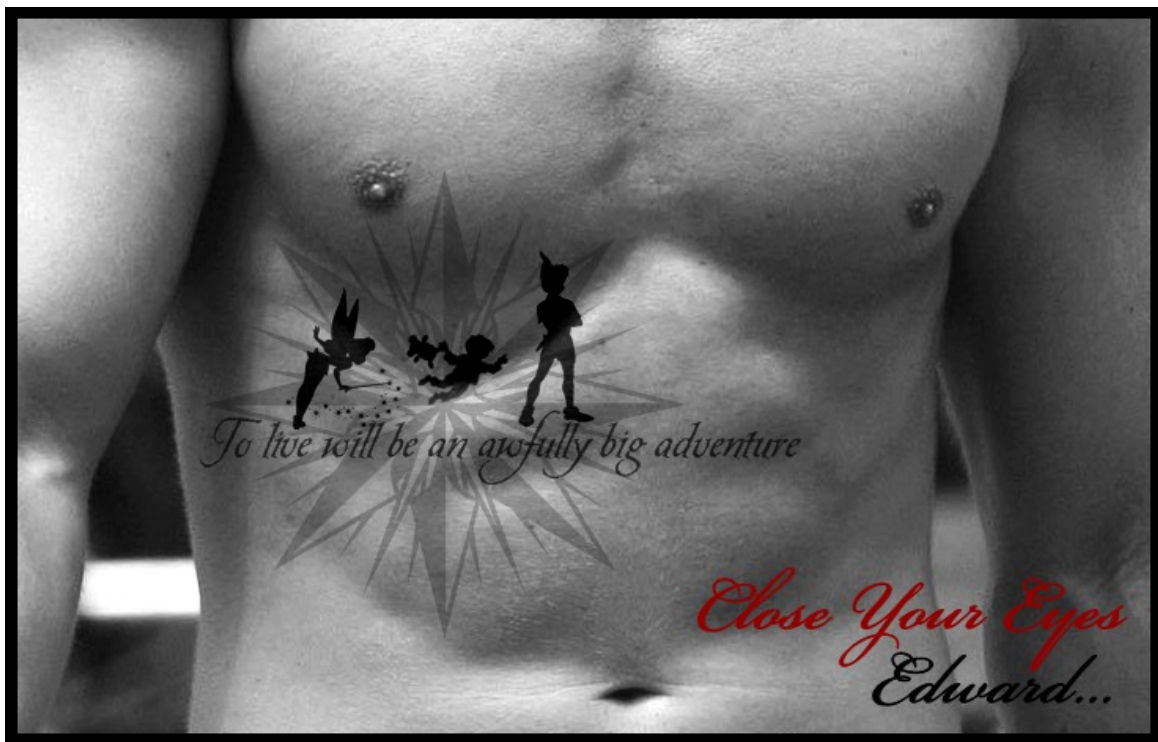
*Here we go. Jesus Christ.*

The door is ripped open and I'm suddenly face-to-face with my nightmare. A nightmare who has grown into a seriously built man over the past four years—holy shit—but the question is if he's grown into a real man on the inside, too. 'Cause that's what matters. But really, though...

*Doesn't he own a shirt?*

Without my permission, my eyes wander freely, starting at his face. He looks older, a *lot* older, and the clean-shaven jaw I'm used to has been replaced with a jaw with a day's worth of scruff. His hair is still a mess, but a little shorter now. His eyes...his eyes show the weight he carries on his shoulders, but there's also something else. A brightness I've never seen before.

His bulky arms are next. Then his torso. Goddamn. He works out. But what I narrow my eyes at is the tattoo on his ribcage. *I can't fucking believe him*. Three silhouetted characters are inked there. Peter Pan, Tinkerbell, and one of the Darling siblings—the youngest boy. It obviously represents Nathan. Last but not least, a quote from Peter Pan: "To live will be an awfully big adventure."



Fury surges through me.

How *dare* he?

We're not some happy fucking *family*, and this is *not* a goddamn fairytale.

If Nate means so much to him that he dedicates a tattoo in his honor... why the *fuck* couldn't Edward let me know that he at least *cared*? Even from a distance. Even if it was to say that he wasn't ready to physically be close. Even if...ah, whatever. No need to go over this again.

I'm a decent human being; I wouldn't have discarded a message from Edward. I've never made him believe I would, either. I'm here because of Nate. My decisions are based on what's best for him, and if Edward really thinks I wouldn't've allowed him to have a relationship with my son...

"Tinks."

My head snaps up; suddenly, there's no way I can "act civil".

Taking a quick step forward, I give him the mother of bitch-slaps, and then I kick him in the balls.

He ends up on the floor, pain etched across his features.

My heart is stuck in my throat. My chest heaves. My eyes close then open.

"Christ," he wheezes out, curling up in the fetal position. "You pack a mean fucking punch, Tinks."

No. He *can't*. I'm not Tinks anymore.

"Don't—*fucking*—call me that," I spit out. I glare at him as I step over his body and enter the cabin. "Hi, by the way. Asshole."

Jesus.

I fucking *hit* him. That wasn't the plan. How *stupid* am I?

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," I whisper shakily. One look to the right tells me where the kitchen is, so I go there, open the freezer, and find a bag of frozen peas. That'll do. Then I walk back to the little hallway and drop the



bag on the hands that are covering his crotch. "I'm sorry," I say curtly, kicking off my boots. "I know better than to use violence, but you're *such* a fucking idiot."

~CYE~

A few minutes later, Edward has uncomfortably directed me to the living room where we sit down on the couch—him in one corner and me in the other. On the way, he also pulled on a hoodie.

"Um...can I get you anything?" he asks uncertainly. "There's, uh, coffee, and...shit! Just a minute; I gotta turn off the stove." With that said, he walks out of the living room, one hand still pressing the frozen peas on his balls. He cringes when he walks too fast, so he slows down.

I sigh, nervous and anxious and angry and conflicted and...I could go on and on.

But I'm here. That's something, right? It's a start.



## Chapter 16

### Torn

*Chapter song – We Did It When We Were Young by The Gaslight Anthem*

#### **BPOV**

By the time Edward returns to the living room, my shock from seeing him again after all this time has finally started to wear off. But on the other

hand, countless other emotions wake up after laying dormant—emotions I thought I had worked through with my therapists.

There's a constant battle raging inside of me, and it's almost impossible to pick a side and go with it.

"I, uh—I made coffee," he says quietly, setting down a mug on the table in front of me. Sitting down on the couch, he cradles his own mug in his hands. I notice that he left behind the bag of frozen peas. It makes me cringe internally now, and I feel horrible. I actually hit him. Not once, but twice. "Do...do you still take it black with one sugar?"

I frown, confused. "What?"

"Um...your coffee."

He looks so uncertain and apprehensive.

It's not what I'm used to.

I'm used to the cocky boy who thought he was the coolest of them all. I'm used to bullying, rudeness, sneers, vicious smirks...

Not this.

It throws me off.

"Bella?"

In a slight daze, I turn to him. "Yeah?"

I hit him. There's no mark on his cheek, but...I slapped him. Then kicked him.

"Your coffee," he says slowly. "Black with one sugar?"

"Oh." I release a breath and try to focus. Coffee. Right. "Um, yes. Thank you." *Black with one sugar*. "You remember." I pull off my beanie and place it next to me.

In my periphery, I see him shrugging a little.

My mind—Christ—it doesn't stop spinning. It's almost too much. But first things first. "I'm sorry," I say quickly, not satisfied with that. "I'm sorry." A little better. Edward just looks confused, though. "I shouldn't have slapped you..." I wince. "I'm sorry."

He shakes his head. "I had it coming—I deserved it."

That's where he's wrong. "No one—*no one* deserves that," I respond quietly, imploringly. I'm not just talking about what I did. I'm talking about everything. Violence is never okay, and I can't believe I stooped that low.

He looks me in the eye for a second that seems longer than it is. Then he nods with a dip of his chin and peers down into his mug.

It's weird; the silence that follows is both comfortable and unbearable.

The inner war continues.

My worst of my anger has faded. It's been replaced with an ache that makes my chest constrict.

Taking a sip of my coffee, I glance at him subtly; change is evident. Many of them, really. I can see it in his eyes, in his stance... He sits more relaxed now than when he was seventeen. He's not rigid in his own home, which he was before. And his eyes...I thought about it before...that there's a brightness in them I never saw in the past. He has grown up physically, obviously, and I hope—for the first time—that this can work out. Just half

an hour ago, I selfishly wished he would've just stayed away, but...if he can prove that he's different now, I want Nathan to have a father. A *dad*.

Last time I saw Edward, I couldn't see a dad in him. Hell, I could barely see a mom in myself, but I made it happen. Of course, I wasn't as damaged as Edward was. Still, I can't let go of the hurt I felt when he refused to look in my direction back then. His actions made me believe that he probably just threw away the letter and the photos I sent him in Baltimore. Though, I know better now. *Four years later*. I can see one photo—the one of Nate and me—on a bookshelf. On the coffee table there's the photo of just Nathan. And since this was a surprise visit...in a matter of speaking...it's not like Edward could've prepared himself. The photos are evidently important to him.

My eyes sting and I have to look away for a moment.

Seeing him now, grown up and matured, living on his own, not looking angry or defensive...

And then comparing it to who Edward was in the past...

*I'm sworn in before I sit down, ready to answer the lawyers' questions. My eyes find Cullen, and he sits frozen in his seat, eyes blank and averted. His hands clutch the armrest to the point where I can almost see how white his knuckles are. They're a stark contrast to the dark shadows under his eyes, the yellowing bruises on his cheeks, and purplish red cuts on his forehead and eyebrows. His knuckles nearly match the whiteness of his left arm, which is in a cast.*

*"Ms. Swan, can you tell me the relation between you and my client, Edward Cullen?"*

Due to what Carlisle confessed in the hospital, it was a speedy trial, and I know that Edward wasn't up against any charges. Carlisle was still

recovering when the trial began, so he hadn't been taken into custody or anything. I remember Jasper telling me that after they transferred Carlisle to Seattle and he was taken off sedation, there were two police officers guarding him. And then it wasn't necessary to take things further since Liam shot and killed Carlisle. That happened after I had gone back to Memphis, though, so I still don't know much about that. Only that it happened. I kind of wonder myself how Liam got around the officers at the hospital. And why, obviously.

There wasn't too much that went public, so I only know the basics—what Jasper and Edward's lawyer told me. I know that Carlisle was conscious when he was brought to the hospital in Forks; he was crazed and frantic according to issued statements, yelling and screaming about how Edward had "ruined everything". Through Charlotte, I also found out that Emmett had heard plenty of things while he was in the house that were damning enough to put Carlisle away for a long time.

Character witnesses provided the rest and filled in the blanks about how Edward behaved in school, how often he showed up with bruises...

Yet another nail in Carlisle's coffin was the lack of Edward's medical records.

If your son comes home with a broken rib, you take him to the hospital, no?

I didn't exactly stick around to hear every detail. I had a newborn son waiting for me at home, and I was still lost and broken, so I only did what I was told. I answered the lawyers' questions, I gave them my truth about Edward's parents abusing and neglecting him, and then I left.

With a shake of my head, I bring myself back to the present...where I'm sitting in a big cabin, in the middle of nowhere, with one Edward Cullen, drinking coffee.

*Black with one sugar.*

It's a bit surreal.

"I—" Edward clears his throat. "I didn't know you were in Alaska."

I nod slowly and look down at the steaming beverage in my hand. "I know. Charlotte called yesterday and told me." I have already figured out that Edward was unaware, and then Charlotte confirmed it when I asked her. "She said that she and Emmett planned this?"

He cracks a small smile, still not looking at me. I only look at him when he's not looking at me, and I wonder if it's the same the other way around. When I speak and avert my eyes, does he study me, too?

"Fucking meddlers, huh?" he chuckles quietly, though the sound dies fast.

It's awkward.

And the questions I have bottled up are beginning to beg to be answered.

"Edward..." I don't know why that came out as a whisper. "Why—" I swallow hard, and I definitely have his attention. Once again, he looks apprehensive. Nervous, too. I blow out a breath. "Why were you in prison?"

He exhales shakily; he doesn't look surprised by the question. More... resigned, maybe...like he knew it was coming.

"Uh, s-second degree assault and drug possession," he croaks. "H-heroin."

I suck in a breath and look away.

*Jesus fucking Christ.*

I honestly don't know what I expected, and maybe I've even entertained the thought of it being drugs and assault, but...but to hear it is another matter.

"It's not who I am, Tink- *Bella*. Fuck—sorry. I just..." His words come out quickly and jumbled, and the pain in his voice tugs at my heartstrings. "I know I've messed up, but I don't want you to think I'm into that shit—I never was, really..." Skeptical, I face him slowly and stare at him. He releases a breath, struggling with his words, it seems. "I swear, *Bella*," he whispers. "I was—I was arrested before..."

"Before you became addicted?" I finish flatly.

I don't want to judge Edward; I have no right to do so, anyway. But it's hard not to. There's so much resentment lingering, and letting go of that isn't easy. Even when I remind myself that he's been through *hell*...he still hurt me deeply. And it sucks that I can't blame him for everything he's done. Like he said, he knew what he did was wrong, but at that time he had no idea just how his actions affected people. He was thinking of his own survival, and when he was weak, he felt the need to push down others. He became Carlisle, but how could he *not* become that person? All that hatred and wrongly placed hits and blows... That's all he's ever known.

Then there's another part that tells me that he knew how fucked-up Carlisle was. Edward should've left, escaped, reported him... Growing up, he must've seen how his friends' parents didn't act like Carlisle and Esme did. He must've learned in school that violence is wrong, and...blah, blah, blah.

I don't fucking know.

I'm so conflicted.

He was a seventeen-year-old boy.

We're human. We make mistakes.

*But there are still consequences.*

True.

"You don't have to believe me," he mumbles and sets his mug down on the table. "I was in a bad place; I'd gone through months of therapy where I'd learned what a cruel monster I was." He smiles bitterly, and I see that the brightness in his eyes is temporarily gone. There's so much agony in him that it's almost physically painful for *me*. "The truth hurt, and I did what I knew best: I turned to drugs—an instant escape."

I know what he's referring to, of course. When we were seventeen, we smoked weed. It gave us a calm that erased real life for a moment.

Heroin is different, though. After working with abused women for years now, I know that drugs are commonly used to escape reality. And heroin is one of the strongest drugs out there. It's a downer; instead of ecstasy and energy, you feel blissed out and calm. All the bad things fade away.

It's also so addictive that you become hooked after only a few times.

*Hence being skeptical of what Edward just said about being arrested before he became addicted to it.*

"So, tell me," I request in a hushed voice. He looks up, seeming surprised that I want him to explain. "You were arrested before?"

His Adam's apple moves as he swallows. "I never went back to college and Baltimore after the trial," he admits. "My plan was to see a shrink, get better, and then...contact you." I nod once to show that I'm listening.

"Nathan was my trigger."



I frown. "For what?"

"Getting better. When I got your letter—the photos..." He trails off, and his eyes become a little moist. "Uh, listen. I need a smoke; can we go outside for a moment? Or I could go out—I just need—"

"It's okay," I say quickly and stand up. I didn't know that he smoked, but I can't say that I'm surprised. "Let's go."

Soon, we're standing on the porch together. It's cold, but there's no wind, which makes it bearable...if not nice. The air is crisp and fresh.

Edward has also pulled on a beanie, but other than that, he's still in his pajama bottoms and hoodie. Oh, and sneakers.

I hope he owns a pair of boots, too. This is Alaska, after all.

"He's the one who made wanna confront Mom and Dad," he says quietly, suddenly, eyes focused on the woods. "Nathan, I mean." Oh. I'm not sure that's a good thing, seeing how hurt Edward got. But in the end, I guess it is. It was how it all finally came to a stop. "Anyway..." He takes a pull from the cigarette and exhales slowly. "After the trial and all that was over, I stayed in Seattle. My lawyer settled everything with money and whatever my folks owned—houses, apartments... I bought a condo in the city and started seeing a shrink." He rolls his eyes at that, and while he's already told me how it went—judging by what came next in his life—it's clear that there's a lot more to the story. "Talk about epic fail on my part," he mutters. I sigh silently. "And then I—I ran away from it. I drove to Port Angeles, contacted Royce, and bought what he recommended."

*How mature.*

"You bought heroin from Royce King," I state, folding my arms over my chest.

"Heh. Yeah... Smart move, huh?" He gives me a sideways smile, a wry one.

"Very," I deadpan.

He grimaces and looks down at the floorboards.

I keep studying him, still thrown off by this *man*. His demeanor is so different.

"I checked into a motel in Port A," he says hoarsely. "It was a weekend, and I didn't leave until I needed more from Royce."

The edges of everything become blurry as my eyes well up with tears, though I swallow that shit down again.

My mind tries to come up with things I could've done differently—back then. If I hadn't pushed him, if I hadn't tried to help Edward... Would things have been better now or worse? I know that Carlisle's abuse only got worse as time passed, so I'd like to think that I made the right decision. I don't know. Maybe.

Would Edward still have gone to prison on drug and assault charges?

Would he even be alive?

Perhaps he would've stayed in college to become a doctor.

But he didn't want that, did he?

No.

"The cops arrested me the second time I bought from Royce," Edward continues quietly. Watching him from the side, I see him scratching his arm—the inside of it—and I spot a couple of tiny scars. The sight makes my stomach churn because I wonder if it's left from when he did drugs

Not that I know how he took it, but... "I knew I was facing time in prison, and..." He chuckles tiredly, bitterly, almost silently. "I made it worse by assaulting the police officer."

I puff out my cheeks before exhaling heavily.

I don't want to be selfish, but there's a lot—a lot of feelings—I feel toward Edward...that I find justified. He took the long road to recovery while I went with the short one and never gave up. But I had Nate; I fought for his sake before I could fight for my own. Edward had no one. He was only eighteen at that point, and his world had just crashed down. I had Jasper and Jada, too. The first stranger Edward opened up to—his therapist—served him with the truth, which hurt Edward. And so he ran away, turned to drugs, was unable to deal with it.

We were so fucking young.

I want us to find a way to move past it all, because...we deserve that, don't we?

I just need to work through the resentment I feel. I hate feeling that way, but I can't help it. Regardless of how I see things, there's a voice in my head telling me that he could've done things differently, better. But I haven't been abused. Not physically, anyway. I went through hell, too; I had a year that was torture to endure. I lost my parents, never really got to grieve, got pushed down in the worst way—twice—and ended up pregnant.

But Edward suffered through thirteen of those years, and that was only before Carlisle and Esme died. The years that followed haven't exactly been easy for him, either.

"I feel old," I blurt out, sorta suddenly.

Edward huffs a chuckle. "I know what you mean."

And I believe him.

We're only twenty-two years old, but you can't really tell.

"Do you think—do you think I can see him sometime?" he asks hesitantly.

"Of course," I say, furrowing my brow.

"Oh." He nods, looking relieved, but mostly surprised. "Thank you."

Then it's my turn to be hesitant. "But can we wait a while?" Truth be told, it's not really a question, even though I posed it as one. I'm not ready for him to meet Nathan. First, I want to talk more with Edward. I want to learn about him; I want to know what kind of recovery he's gone through.

Mainly for Nathan's sake, but also for mine.

"Yeah, of course—anything you say. I'm just glad you're gonna let me see him at all." He smiles awkwardly.

He doesn't have to thank me. It's...it's his son, too. Or, it will be. I hope. If things go well. I just need to take it slowly. I don't want Edward to be a father who pops in when he feels like it. It has to be something permanent. Nate deserves that.

But until then... "I have a few photos in my wallet. Do you want to, um, see them?"

He takes a breath, a shaky one, and nods quickly. "Please?"

"It's in my car—just a sec." I leave him on the porch, the image of his glassy eyes burning into my memory as I go. My heart is pounding furiously. Opening the passenger door, I reach into the glove compartment and take out my wallet. If I'd planned to come out here, I would've brought Nate's baby book or something.

*Next time.*

I nod to myself at that thought. Next time. I'll bring it next time.

When I return to the porch, Edward's eyes are redder than before.

I don't comment on it, but I can see how hard it is for him to keep his emotions inside. Maybe it's cruel of me, but I see it as a good sign; I'm glad to witness his struggle. Had he not been affected, I would've doubted him more, I think.



*Chapter song – Start of Something Good by Daughtry*

## **EPOV**

Once we're inside the cabin again, Bella and I return to the living room and sit down on the couch. I sit down first and she settles closer to me this time than she did before, though I know it's because she's going to show me photos of Nathan. Sitting at opposite ends of the couch would make it more difficult. Whatever. I'm trying not to overanalyze, but it's not working. I'm nervous. Scared shitless and apprehensive. Because I want this. Nathan and Bella in my life. I want to be his dad. It's one of the reasons I've fought so hard in my recovery. While my therapist made me realize that I needed to fight for myself, she told me that Nathan was an excellent reason to remain motivated.

"I only have three photos here," she says, holding them in her hand. I would know since my eyes are trained on them.

"That's fine," I respond quickly. Fuck. My hands are shaking. They're sweaty, too, so I wipe them off on my thighs.

"Um, this is from his second birthday." She gives me the first picture, and I take it with trembling fingers. I'm a little embarrassed, but there's nothing I can do about it.

Peering down at the small photo in my hand, I bite the inside of my cheek in a feeble attempt to keep myself from crying like a bitch. The little boy in the photo is so fucking cute, it's insane. He has this lopsided, toothy little grin...a party hat which is tilted, and what I assume is ice cream or cake around his mouth, on his nose... I chuckle thickly. It's even on his forehead and shirt.

He has green eyes and my wild hair.

My vision gets blurry, so I blink a few times to see clearer.

"This is from Christmas—same year; he was two."

I nod and accept the photo; more tears well up in my eyes. But this time there's no blinking them away. My therapist has told me to be open and honest, but breaking down right now, right here, after seeing Bella for the first time in four years...yeah, I'd rather not. I'm sure there will be plenty of other times she's going to see me in tears.

"He's..." I'm not sure about what word to use. Beautiful? Cute? Handsome? All those are correct.

"I know," she says softly. Keeping my eyes on the photo, I smile a little at the sight of Nathan tearing into his gifts. He's completely surrounded by gift wrappings and boxes. "Um, this is from a few months ago."

The third photo floors me.

He resembles me so much that it's scary.

"Christ," I breathe out and wipe at my cheeks.

"I've seen you every day, Edward," she whispers, causing me to look up at her. "In Nathan. He's you."

Exhaling shakily, I focus on the picture again. I don't know if it's from a special occasion; it's a simple photo of Nathan sitting on a couch. He's grinning into the camera, and he's dressed in a Superman pajama set.

There's a big difference, going from a two-year-old to a four-year-old. He has grown up a lot. He's a little person. No chubby cheeks or thighs. His face is more defined...more like my own features.

What I notice most are his bright eyes.

I don't ever want that spark to fade. Like it did with me.

"I hope he's not too much like me," I choke out, terrified. My eyes are watery and wide as they meet Bella's.

But she only smiles. "He's the boy I was friends with in Arizona. You remember him?"

Barely. It's been a long time since I was that boy—the boy who chased Bella around Charlie and Renee's backyard for kisses.

I wish I could remember more from when we lived in Phoenix, because it's obvious that Bella does. She seems to have countless memories of us, whereas I only have one. It's a precious one, though—the memory of us running around, me stealing her first kiss. Giving her my own first.

I got chocolate on her dress and tickled her until she smiled again.

Five was a good age. Hopefully, I will be here to see my son at that age, too.

"Edward, are you okay?"

I realize that I'm shaking more.

*Deep breaths, Cullen.*

"Yeah—sorry," I croak. I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose, willing myself to calm down.

Why couldn't I have gotten my shit together sooner? Why did I have to miss four whole years?

I remember how fucking nervous I was when I stepped into my first therapist's office. Hell, I was ready to piss my pants. Or bolt. Which I did in the end. I couldn't take it. It was too much. Not that the man was harsh or anything, but the truth hurt nonetheless. It was like starting over. He told me about right and wrong, about making choices and taking consequences. He encouraged me to get it all out, and then he delved deep into my messed-up brain and dissected me like a fucking frog. Okay, not really, but he basically tore me apart. Only, I ran away before he could put me together again. Metaphorically speaking.

I know that I'm the only one who can fix me.

Sitting in his office, I spoke about *everything*; I opened up. I was still—at that time—so eager to get well so that I could move on and have my son in my life. But then, with each session, I became more and more introverted. I loathed myself to the point where I was ready to kill myself, and my thoughts were morbid and dark.



I closed myself in completely. The outside world didn't exist. At first, it didn't exist because I only had one goal, and that was to get better. And then it didn't exist because I was too busy pushing myself down.

Having fun never crossed my mind. I never went out. I never met new people. I didn't even meet people I already knew. Isolating myself, I only had the sessions with my therapist and the loneliness of my condo. I watched movies, played video games, wrote to Bella and Nathan, played music...

I still have all the letters to Bella and Nathan that went unsent—both from when I lived in my condo and from when I was in prison.

After one particular session, I bought a bottle of vodka.

It went downhill after that.

The shrink had asked me how I dealt with any guilt I harbored after accidentally killing my mom.

Problem was, I didn't feel guilty. There was no remorse, and it led to my thinking how monstrous I was. Because someone who kills should feel bad, right? But I didn't. So, I drank and drank. It numbed the pain, and I felt infinitely better for a moment. I even—as I sat there in my dark condo—thought about going out. I thought...*I haven't gotten laid since I was with Tinks; it's time to finally get some pussy.*

*With the almost-empty vodka bottle in my hand, I leave the condo and head outside. The air is cold, which would've been good if I wanted to sober up. Fresh air brings clarity, so fuck that noise.*

*I drink more and smirk when I spot the bar across the street.*

*See? Problem solved. There won't be fresh air in there.*

*On the way over, I give myself a pep talk, because I have evidently forgotten the almighty king I used to be. Edward fucking Cullen. That's me. So what if my parents are dead and I have no one? I can take care of my own. I don't need anyone. And fuck that fucking mindfucker who thinks I should feel remorse for what I did to Mom. The bitch had it coming. She let Dad beat me up. She let him use me as his punching bag. Well, it's not my goddamn fault my father ended up being a fucking fag who couldn't own up to it. It's not my fault he felt the need to rough me up just because he was embarrassed about liking cock.*

*Fuck it all.*

*Fuck that shrink. Fuck my parents. Fuck Bel...Bella. Fuck Nath-*

*My stomach lurches just as I reach the other side of the street.*

*"Jesus Christ," I whimper, leaning against a brick wall.*

*What the hell am I doing?*

*Dropping the bottle on the ground, I bring out my wallet where I have the photo of Nathan.*

*I sink down on the sidewalk, my back against the wall.*

*I stare at the picture.*

*Yeah, you're not so strong, are you, Cullen?*

*Before I know it, I start sobbing like a little pussy.*

*And then I make my way back to the condo again, feeling more pathetic than ever.*

The weeks that followed were worse. I didn't attempt to go out again, but I drank a lot, and my shrink wanted to put me on more pills. I already had

antidepressants that I took, but apparently that wasn't enough? Anyway, I fled a few weeks later and drove up to Port Angeles.

Another week after that, I was arrested.

I realize that I've been silent for quite a while, just staring at my four-year-old son.

*So much I've missed.*

But prison...anger management and counseling... I may have missed a fuckload, but the past two years saved my life. Being arrested ensured that I got away from all things destructive. It helped me. And that's where Emmett entered my life again. I managed to shut him out after the trial but not so much when I was behind bars. The man didn't relent; he visited me. We built a new friendship, one that's based on...well, we're actually friends now. Or rather, I'm a friend to him. He's always been there, but I never gave a shit in the past.

He let me walk all over him back then. Everyone did. Except Dad, of course.

And Bella. She didn't take my crap. She got out, just like she deserved to. After what I did to her, I'm glad she's even breathing. That she made a life for herself is amazing.

My wish is that this is the start of something good—something that will give me more than an existence. While I feel better nowadays, I've only just started living. There's still a long way to go, but I'm on the right path.

I sniffle and scrub a hand over my face.

"Thank you for showing me these," I whisper and return the photos.

She purses her lips, staring at me.

I sorta wanna squirm under her gaze, 'cause it looks like she can see into me.

"You've really changed, haven't you?" she asks softly, tilting her head.

I open my mouth to say something, but I don't know what. Yeah, I've changed. What I thought was a man before was nothing but a fucked-up kid. But telling Bella this won't be enough. I have to prove it, and I have to do it thoroughly. For her sake and Nathan's.

"I'm not perfect," I say quietly. "I never will be."

The last thing I want is for her to have too high expectations. I'll just fuck that up. I mean...what I want is to live in peace. I want a good relationship with my son; I want to be happy. I also want to show that I'm not a selfish prick. I want to give back, I guess? I don't have it all figured out, but I have goals. Goals that are my own. Goals that don't only involve my own happiness but others', too.

To be the cause of your kid's smile has got to be rewarding, right? At least that's what my cellmate told me in prison.

Being locked up didn't turn me into a religious nut-job or anything; I don't believe in a savior, and I don't feel reformed. I believe we make our own luck. We just need to work for it, which I'm more than willing to do now.

And if I can earn Bella's forgiveness, too...

*One step at a time, buddy.*

Chancing a glance at Bella, I see that she has a wry smile playing on her lips.

"Who is?" she chuckles. "Nobody's perfect, Cullen."

I guess. Maybe.

"And keep the photos," she adds, her smile widening for a second. "I'll bring more next time."

*Next time.*

Too overwhelmed to speak, I can only nod at that.

She will be back. And in the future, I'm going to meet Nathan.

*Jesus Christ.*

Honestly, I didn't expect her to be so...agreeable. Hospitable. *Friendly.*

"I'm s-sorry," I suddenly splutter out. My throat closes up, but I keep going because it feels as if I'm going to explode if I don't say something. "I'm really fucking sorry for what I did to you, Bella." Sorrier than she'll ever know. She has no idea that I grieved for her more than I grieved for my parents. With Bella, it feels like I actually lost something. "I'm sorry," I croak out again.

"Don't." She shakes her head and puts up a hand. I swallow hard. "I'm not ready to talk about...our...differences, conflicts, past...whatever. I'm not ready. We're doing this for my—" She releases a breath while I hold mine, my heart stuck in my fucking throat. "Our son," she whispers.

I nod quickly, understanding, all while chastising my sorry ass for getting ahead of myself.

*She hates me.*

*This is just for Nathan.*

"I don't hate you," she admits in a rush, at which I look up in shock. Is she a freaking mind reader now? "There's—" Her brows knit together and she averts her eyes. But only for a second. Then she looks me in the eye again. "There's acceptance and understanding," she says slowly, as if

she's thinking out loud. "But..." Yeah, there's always a but. "Edward, I have so much to work through. I can barely hold onto one feeling before it's replaced with another one. I feel..." She licks her lips and sighs. "There's resentment. Hurt—you hurt me so fucking—" She stops herself and takes a breath. "We'll work on it, okay? But right now...this is for Nate."

I nod again, willing to take whatever she offers. *Anything.* "Okay."

She nods, too. "All right...okay. I think...I think I better go." She's quick to stand up and pull on her beanie. Meanwhile, I try to ignore the uncomfortable way my chest constricts. "I have a two-hour drive, and Nate is going to be home from school soon."

Just hearing her talk about him pulls my heart in two different directions. There's pain for not knowing anything about him... Joy for knowing that this is the closest than I've ever been to him. And I will only get closer from now on. No more running away.

"Thank you for the photos," I murmur, standing up, too. "It means..." I look down at them, still in my hand. "It means a lot."

She gives me a small smile. "You're welcome."

Following her to the door, I try to come up with something to say. Much like the email I sent her, I'm stalling and trying to make it—this—last. I guess that's pathetic, but I'm beyond caring. I will obviously go at Bella's pace, though I'd be a liar if I said it was the pace I want.

*Patience.*

Right.

"Can I have your number?" I ask awkwardly as she puts on her boots. "I just figured since, uh...I mean, if I need to call you of whatever."

She stands up and brings out her phone from her back pocket. "Sure. I've already programmed yours." She fiddles with her phone for a bit. "I don't know my own number," she chuckles, scrolling away.

I crack a grin at that. "Well, you never call yourself, right?"

She lets out another chuckle. "Exactly—oh, here it is." She shows me the phone, and I quickly memorize it so that I can write it down as soon as she's gone. "You wanna get a pen or something?"

"No, I got it," I say and then repeat the number.

"Great." She smiles carefully. "Okay, um...we'll be in touch?"

*Not good enough, not good enough!*

My lungs feel too small all of a sudden.

"When?" I ask, anxious. I need a date. Or limits. Can I call tomorrow or do I have to wait a week? Will we see each other in a few days or will she need a month? Or more? "No pressure," I lie.

At that, she actually smirks. "You know...I never bought your bullshit, Cullen. At least not for long." Well, fuck. "I'm glad to see I've gotten better."

"Or maybe I've gotten worse at lying," I chuckle, sticking my hands in the pockets of my pajama bottoms. I look down, both amused and nervous. I'm also relieved that the tension seems a little lighter now.

"Could be that, too," she concedes, and I face her again. She offers me another smile. I sigh quietly, unable to not think about how great she looks. "So..." She rocks back and forth on her feet. "How about I give you a call tomorrow after work? We could set another date for me to come out here."

*After work. I wonder what she does for a living.*

"Tomorrow sounds better than the day after that," I say honestly, smiling back at her. "Oh, and if you want, I could always come to Anchorage. It doesn't seem fair if you do all that driving."

She shakes her head, dismissive. "It's okay. I think your place is good for...for this."

Oh. Maybe she doesn't want me in Anchorage.

"Uh, will you at least let me help you?" I ask, rubbing the back of my neck. "I don't know—gas, plane tickets?" I obviously noticed her SUV in the driveway, but I thought everyone flew in Alaska.

"No worries, Edward. You're not the only millionaire around here," she teases, and I grin, knowing that Charlie owned a successful gaming company. If I remember correctly, Bella told me that Charlie taught her to play poker when she was like five. Anyway, when Charlie and Renee died, everything they owned was liquidated, and Bella gained access to a shitload of money when she turned eighteen. "Not that I have much left," she chuckles, backtracking. "But I do all right. Thank you for the offer, though. Very considerate of you."

I furrow my brow, confused. "Not much left?" I tilt my head.

How is that possible? Bella doesn't exactly come across as a big spender.

"I gave most of it away to charity." She shrugs and rests her hand on the door handle. "I set up funds for Nate—a trust and a college fund—I bought us a condo, I have a great car, and there's a savings account in case I'd ever need something. It's all good."

Huh.



*Mental note: check up on charities.*

"So, I'll call you tomorrow?" She opens the door a little.

I nod dumbly. "Tomorrow."

Watching her drive away is painful.

~CYE~

My ass is a block of ice from sitting on the bench on the porch, but I'm not moving just yet. Plus, Taz loves to run around in the snow in front of the house. And I'm too freaking excited to give a shit about the cold.

"Check out this one," I say, grinning like an idiot. Taking a drag from my smoke, I watch as Emmett's mouth curves into an even wider smile. And I know what he's thinking: that Nathan looks exactly like me. "He's four in that picture, so it's pretty recent."

"Holy shit," he chuckles. "This is great, man."

I nod. "Bella said she's gonna bring more next time."

"I'm happy for you." He slaps me on the back and returns the photos to me. "Does this mean you're not pissed at Charlotte and me for interfering?"

"Annoyed as *hell*." I grin wryly and tuck away the pictures into my wallet. They'll stay there until I can find a good place for them. Gotta make copies, too. "But not pissed. I'm curious how you knew she'd be here today, though."

"Charlotte called me this morning." He pauses to take a swig from his beer. "See, Bella texted her this morning and said she was gonna take Charlotte's advice to contact you. So, she told me to get out just in case. I actually passed Bella's car on the way, but I don't think she saw me."

"Huh. All right. Well, you can expect to get outta Dodge next time she comes, too." I flick off some ash from my smoke. "And take Taz with you."

"Of course. Let me know if I'm in the way, Cullen."

"Dude." I shake my head. "You can move up here permanently for all I care." I give him a sideways glance. "I'm serious. It's just when Bella's here. In the beginning, at least. But while we're on the subject..." I cock a brow at him, and he knows where I'm going. "Have you talked to Rosalie?"

"Don't speak that bitch's name," he spits out.

I hold up my hands. "Sorry."

It's quiet for a while, but then he breaks it and sighs heavily.

"I'm so fucking angry," he whispers.

I nod, understanding that. Rosalie dropped out of college during her second year because she missed Emmett. She returned to Forks, and the two moved in together. She was talking about taking classes at the community college in Port A, but she was definitely not leaving the area again. She said Emmett was more important than anything. So, they lived together and were happy. Emmett popped the question to her last year when his dad promoted him at the diner. Mr. McCarty retired, so it's Emmett's place now. Anyway, she said yes and it was their little fairytale or what-the-fuck-ever.

Until she left him at the altar a couple of weeks ago.

"Well, stick around 'til you feel better," I suggest, patting Taz's head as he sits down in front of me on the porch. "But she's still calling you, right?" Apparently, Rosalie is full of remorse and regret. I swear she calls every

night. Even when Emmett crashed at my place after the failed wedding, I heard his phone go off every fucking minute.

"Yeah," he mutters. "She blames cold feet. Whatever. I'm not ready."

Subject closed.

Changing the topic, we talk a little more about Bella's visit, and Emmett halts me when I start over-thinking again. He's a good buddy. God knows I need him.

"It'll be good, Cullen," he sighs and stands up. "Just give it time. I'm gonna go to bed."

I nod. "Night, man."

I stay up for another hour or two and just think about today.

And it feels...it feels good. Considering.

The start of something good. I hope.



*Chapter 18*  
A New Routine

*Chapter song – Who You Are by Jessie J*

## **BPOV**

I plop down on the couch in Jasper and my office, exhausted, having just told Lisa everything that happened yesterday with Edward. I tend to pace

a lot when I have too much on my mind, and Lisa always lets me get it all out before we go through everything again, but in more detail.

"I'm a mess," I finish with a sigh.

Lisa grins wryly. "You're not a mess, Bella. And you know that. A lot happened yesterday; it's no wonder you're conflicted." My only response is to sink farther into the couch. "Now, let's go back to the beginning. You told me that you were furious when you first arrived."

I nod tiredly. "I think I was in shock—I don't know. It was just too much to take in. Four years of hurt just exploded? Maybe." I really have no idea. Because while I've been angry and have expressed my hatred toward Edward, I haven't walked around for the past four years being pissed at the world. Regardless, the shit I thought I had moved past, I clearly haven't. "The resentment has been there for years, but the way I lashed out..." I frown and look down on my hands in my lap. "It was like I saw red. It was more hatred than I've ever felt."

"Because of the tattoo?"

"That, too." I nod. "It felt like a slap in the face. We're displayed as some Disney fairy tale family on his ribcage, but all this time...I thought he didn't give a shit. And to mark his own body with...*me*...after the crap he did to me? Yeah, that hurt. I'm not the person I once was, and to see that—Tinkerbell inked on him... Ugh, am I totally weird for being angry?" I palm my face and glance at Lisa between my fingers.

"Definitely not." She shakes her head no and scribbles something on her notepad. "You contacted Edward after Nate's birth, and he ignored you when you came to Seattle for the trial. We've talked about this: it's completely understandable for you to be hurt and angry. It doesn't matter how hurt he was himself. Just because he was going through something horrible doesn't mean what he did to you was okay. One hurt doesn't

remove another. Humans are creatures of habit, and breaking a pattern is very difficult. One email from him won't help you see that he has changed." I nod along, agreeing. "So, when you saw him yesterday, you obviously still saw the Edward you've been used to. You didn't see change or redemption—also understandable. You will see change in time; you're not a mind reader. You can't see it right away. But what happened next..." She gives me a pointed look.

"I know," I mumble, still pissed at myself. Disappointed. "I slapped him and kicked him."

"Yes, and that wasn't smart. I'm glad you apologized, though, but that's probably something you and Edward need to talk about more in the future. Because he said he deserved it, didn't he?"

"Yeah..." I sigh. "I told him he was wrong—that no one deserves that."

Especially him, I add internally.

"That's good. Okay...next you said that you felt calmer—once you were inside the cabin."

With a slow nod, I recall how the worst of my anger faded pretty damn quickly, which I don't really understand.

"You said..." I shift in my seat, hesitating. "You said I won't be able to see change right away, but..." I look down again. "I think I *did* see that—*something*—right away." It was like Edward was stripped bare; there was no armor around him. No wall to get through. "He was so...*honest*." In the past, it was close to impossible to read him. He hid so well. But yesterday...so raw with emotions... "He was nervous and, and...exposed? I don't know, but it felt that way."

"And that made you relax?"

My brows knit together. *Relax*. I suppose that's one word to go with. "A little, maybe. But I also became so conflicted—more so than before. I didn't expect him to be so mature."

"He took you by surprise," she says, and I nod. "Did you become doubtful or was it a relief to see those changes in him?"

I chew on my lip, thinking back. I can't really remember feeling any doubt. Wait. I do remember being skeptical when he talked about not being addicted to heroin, though we straightened that out.

"Should I have doubted him?" I ask, worry seeping into me.

Maybe I'm giving him too much credit?

Or not enough?

"Either would've been okay," Lisa tells me. "It's only sensible for you to be careful and cautious, but if you don't doubt him—if you accept the change you've seen—you will be more open to giving him a chance."

That sounds...logical. "I think—I think I doubt him in general, but I trust what I saw. If that makes sense."

"Of course it does." She smiles. "You can't know what you haven't seen yet, and judging by the past, he has a lot to prove. But that you're willing to give him a chance is very good. And this is where your understanding comes in. You've said that you understand his reasons behind his actions."

"Survival instincts," I say, nodding. "He saw me as a threat he felt the need to get rid of." Which he did—harshly. But yeah, I understand and accept. Still, there's no forgiveness. I hope it will come in time, though it's too far away at this point. "Edward's not..." I blow out a breath. "He's not bad—as a person—but what he did..."

"Was bad," she finishes. "And it's great you can see the difference. Not everyone can."

I shrug. Even back then, when we were seventeen, I saw vulnerability and good in him. On rare occasions, but...I did manage to crack his shell a time or two. I remember how deprived he was of affection, how touchy-feely he was when we...when we were *together*. In school, he was also territorial and possessive. He wanted me to himself.

"How was it to show him pictures of Nathan?"

My cheeks heat up, and there's only one word coming to mind.

"Rewarding."

She tilts her head. "How so?"

"Because he got it," I whisper. "I could feel that I had finally met someone who understood how much I love Nate. I could see it in Edward, too."

Jasper and Jada adore Nate. My son is our jokester. He makes people laugh and feel better. But when I studied Edward—as he studied the photos—I felt light in another way. It was like...*here's a guy who sees it. Here's a guy who sees how precious Nate is.*

"You mean the way usually only a parent can see?" Lisa inquires.

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out.

*Parent.*

That's Edward. He's Nate's parent. I don't think I've grasped that yet, though thinking back on how it felt when he couldn't find a word to describe Nathan, that's exactly how I saw him—as my son's parent.

Shit, is that too soon?

Am I getting ahead of myself?

"I can see you backtracking, Bella," she observes. "Don't do that."

I look at her, needing advice.

She goes on, smiling gently. "From what I can tell, you seem to have separated Edward from Nathan's father." I frown, confused. "You're not ready to talk about Edward—I mean your personal opinion of him?"

I shake my head quickly. "No way. When he started apologizing, I panicked. I also got angry." So fucking angry.

"And that's understandable," she tells me. "I can say this a thousand times: he hurt you, Bella. No matter how difficult his life was, he hurt you. *But...* you see what I mean? When you talk about Edward as Nate's dad, you're calm and open. It's when we bring up Edward—as the guy you tried to help—that you close in on yourself."

And I do get it.

We spend another hour talking about all this, and by the end of it, I feel better. My thoughts have cleared, and Lisa tells me that I just need time to let everything settle. Time will help me. Wounds heal with time. Same goes for the resentment and hurt I feel. I need to give Edward a chance to explain himself—at a pace we both feel comfortable. If he really has changed—which I'm *willing* to believe—I hope to move past this one day. In every way possible.

Before Lisa leaves and I return to work, she asks me what my plan is about introducing Edward to Nathan. She wonders how long I intend to wait, what I want to know before I do let them meet, and what it would take for me to trust Edward as Nate's dad.



Honestly, there's no time frame. I'd like to know more about Edward's recovery, and I need to know this is something he wants permanently. So far, he hasn't done anything to make me believe this is only temporary, but I want to make sure. I've only met him this once, after all.

My hope is that a few conversations on the phone and driving out to see him some more will be enough. And when I tell Lisa this, she suggests that Edward and I try to create a routine together for talking to each other. It doesn't have to be for very long, though it should be often. That way, we will get used to the fact that our lives will be forever tied together. We have a son together, and for his sake, I want this to work.

~CYE~

"Nathan!" I holler from the kitchen. "Time for bed!"

*"But, Mommy!"* he complains. I'm willing to bet his eyes are glued to the flat screen in the living room. The boy can't get enough of his superheroes. Batman, Superman, Captain America, Spiderman, you name it. *"I'm not sleepy!"*

I snicker to myself and wipe down the counter. After dinner and Nate's bath, I made a pie for Nathan's teacher. It's her birthday tomorrow, and Nate insisted he'd bring something. His crush on Miss Chelsea is going strong.

It takes a while, but eventually I manage to chase down Nathan after a few fits of giggles around the living room. Throwing him over my shoulder, I carry his squealing self into the bathroom and get his teeth brushed. Then, when we're done in there, I usher him into his room and playfully toss him on the bed.

"You, Captain Nate, are a handful," I tease and pinch his little butt.

He giggles as I tuck his covers under his chin. "I'm not Captain Nate anymo', Mommy! I got a new name today."

"Why am I not surprised?" I grin and kneel by his bed. "Okay, so what's the new name? Bat Nate? Spider Nathan?"

"Miss Chelsea help-ed me," he says proudly. "It's—Mommy, you gotta drum."

I smack myself on the forehead. "How could I forget?! Silly me." Tapping my fingers against his bed frame, I give him the drum roll he needs whenever he declares his new name.

His face lights up. "It's Super Kid!"

I laugh and clap my hands. "That's so cool, honey."

"I know," he says solemnly. "Did you make the pie for Miss Chelsea?"

"I did. One big strawberry pie."

I've never been a fan of frozen strawberries, but they work just fine when you use them in pies.

He gives me his toothy grin. "Okay. Good. Thank you."

"You're welcome," I chuckle. "All right. Time to sleep, Nate." I stand up, leaning over his body and drop a kiss on his forehead. "I love you. Sweet dreams."

"Love you, Mommy. Don't forget this much." He holds his hands apart, and I estimate that the space between them is about six inches.

I nod dutifully and leave the door open about six inches before I make my way back to the kitchen.

"Okay," I sigh to myself. Everything is done for tomorrow, Nate is in bed, the laundry is finished, the patient files Jasper wanted me to go over are complete, and I'll pack Nate's lunch tomorrow morning. "A glass of wine—oh, yeah." I pour a glass of white and then grab my phone. With another contented sigh, I sit down on a stool and scroll down 'til I see Edward's number.

I guzzle down some wine before I press dial.

Deep breath-

*"Bella?"*

Holy crap. The first signal barely came through before he answered.

"Um yeah, it's me. Hi," I say sorta nervously, dumbly.

I hear his exhale before he responds. *"Hi."*

Silence.

Oh God, this is awkward.

*Say something, Swan!*

"How are you?" I blurt out just as he blurts out, *"Everything good with you?"*

We both chuckle nervously.

*"Wow. We are so smooth."*

I let out a breathy laugh. "Of epic proportions."

*"Yeah..."*

I take another sip of my wine in order to calm down. "So, what have you done today?"

That seems like a safe topic, right?

"*Uh, I went into town,*" he says, clearing his throat. "*Kenai—not Sterling. I need to have a land line installed, so... Got a bunch of shit done. I was there anyway, meeting up with my new therapist.*"

I nod even though he can't see me. Internally, I'm pleased that he's still seeing a therapist.

"I talked about you with my own therapist today," I admit, tracing the rim of the glass with my finger. "I needed to clear my head."

"*Oh—so, you still...you still go to therapy?*" he asks uncertainly.

I chuckle wryly. "I doubt I'll ever stop."

"*I'm sorry,*" he whispers.

My eyes widen. "No!" Fuck, fuck, fuck. "That's not what I meant, Edward. Sorry—I just..." I take a breath. "It's not because of...everything in the past. Right now it's more because it helps keep my stuff together. Lisa is my security blanket," I laugh awkwardly, half lying. While it's true that I don't necessarily need counseling anymore, I still like it. However, with the recent developments...yeah, I need Lisa.

I don't want Edward to feel bad because of *that*, though.

In an attempt to lighten the tension, I talk about Nathan instead. "Did you know that Nate asked me to buy thirty-two birthday candles today?" I cringe at my less-than-subtle change of topic.

"*Wh-what?*" he chuckles.

I relax and smile. "Nathan has a crush on his teacher, and it's her thirty-second birthday tomorrow. So, he told me that he wanted to give her a big cake with thirty-two candles."

Edward laughs quietly. *"Older women, huh? I see. So...did you get the candles?"*

"No." I shake my head, amused. "I did bake her a pie, though."

"Cool." In the background, I think I hear him lighting up a cigarette. Or, uh, maybe he's lighting a candle? I nearly snort at that, a grin on my face. *"Um...can you tell me something else?"*

"About Nate?"

He blows out a breath. *"Yeah—if you don't mind."*

"I don't mind." I grin. "But you're gonna have to narrow it down, Cullen. Anything in particular?"

He hums. *"There's nothing I don't want to know, so how about the beginning?"* His words flow easier now, but I can still detect that he's nervous. *"Uh, his birth?"*

"It hurt like a motherfucker," I deadpan, and I get another chuckle from him. That's good. "Okay, his birth..."

*I curse the fucking epidural, stating loudly that it doesn't do shit for me. In the meantime, Jasper tries to hide his amusement. Jada glares at him, though, and he's quick to look apologetic.*

*"Oh, my God!" I cry out as another contraction hits me.*

*"Not yet, Bella," the doctor tells me. "Don't push yet."*

*"I need," I pant, "I need to puuush!"*

"God, it was painful," I say to Edward, letting out a sigh. "I can laugh about it now, but back then? Jesus. I even threatened to sue the hospital, because I was sure the epidural was—like...I don't know, a placebo? I wondered why they wanted me to die." I snicker and shake my head. "The doctor told me it was a quick labor. Six hours is nothing, he said. I wanted to stomp on his balls."

"*Ouch,*" Edward chuckles. I imagine him wincing. Then his humor is gone, and it's replaced with apprehension. "*Were—were you alone?*"

*The doctor tells me to push; I push. There's little else I can or want to do.*

*I scream when I can finally breathe again.*

"*You're doin' so well, honey,*" Jasper murmurs, and I squeeze his hand as hard as I can. "*Oh, good God—that hurts, Bella.*"

*Jada and I throw him looks that could quite possibly kill.*

"*Not. Another. Word,*" I seethe.

"*Ignore him, Bella,*" Jada says and wipes my forehead. "*Come on. You can do this.*"

"*Push!*" the doctor encourages, though it was unnecessary. *I'm already pushing!*

"No," I say softly. "Jada and Jasper were there. Um, Charlotte's uncle?"

He clears his throat. "*Yeah, I've heard of him. You live with him, right?*"

"We work together, but he lives with his wife—that's Jada—and their two daughters," I answer. "I live with Nate a couple blocks away."

"*Oh. Oh, okay.*" He pauses. "*So...the birth?*"

"Right." I nod. "That last push...I...there's no describing it. I remember the sound, the feeling, the burn...and then all that faded away when I heard Nathan's wail."

*I'm a sweaty, aching, panting, sobbing mess, but I don't care. As the nurse gently places the little bundle on my chest, he's the only one who matters. For months, I've known that I was having a boy, and now he's here.*

*Jada smiles through her tears and runs a chilled cloth over my forehead and cheeks. "He's so cute." She sniffles. "Jasper, come here; take a picture."*

*Jasper, who is still beaming with pride after having cut the umbilical cord, walks around the bed, camera in hand.*

*My eyes are still locked on my little baby.*

*"I love you," I whimper hoarsely. "I love you so much."*

I remember spending the following days crying. I never stopped. Whether it was in happiness or sadness, I cried for so long that Jada was afraid I was suffering from postpartum depression. I wasn't, but I was too overwhelmed to keep my emotions at bay. I cried for Nathan, my parents, Edward, myself... I cried for everything. I cried when they brought me red Jell-O instead of green.

*"Bella?"*

Oh, shit. "Sorry, I'm here." I reach for my wine. "Got lost in a memory."

*"Good or bad?" he asks softly.*

Where I sit in the kitchen, I can see the wall in the hallway where I have photos from Nathan's birthdays. I've made a tradition that each birthday,

I take four photos that I put up on the wall. One where he has just woken up in the morning, one where he opens presents, one where he eats cake, and one where I'm in the shot, too.

Memories of Nathan are always the good kind.

"Good," I respond quietly.

"*Good,*" he echoes just as quietly.

For a while, Edward and I keep talking about memories I have of Nate. Aside from his birth, I also tell him about Nate's first word—which was "ball", "Mama" being a close second—his first step, and how he wouldn't stop screaming when he was teething, unless he had a teething ring to chew on. When I tell Edward this, I make him laugh when I embarrassingly admit that I first called a teething ring a chew toy. Not only did I call it a chew toy, but I did it when I was at the store and asked for them.

The sales lady probably thought I was a nut-job.

Then I take Lisa's advice and ask Edward if we can call each other around nine PM every night. It will be a perfect way for Edward to find out more about Nathan, and it will be my way to let Edward into our lives.

Edward agrees right away and then asks me when he can see me again.

"How about Friday?" I suggest. It's my day off, and if I leave Anchorage early, I can make it back before Nate comes home from preschool. "Oh, wait. Do you work?" I hadn't thought of that, but I assumed—for some reason—that he hadn't gotten around to that yet. I mean, he just moved here. But what do I know?

"*No, no—Friday's good,*" he says quickly. "*What time?*"



"I could always bring lunch...?" I chew on my lip, waiting for his response.

I also make a mental list of other things I need to bring. Nathan's baby book, of course. Maybe some home videos. I also have a few scrapbooks that I've made from special occasions—such as Nate's first visit to a zoo. Stuff like that.

*"Don't feel like you have to,"* Edward responds. *"Uh, I can't cook for shit, but I can always pick something up."*

I chuckle. "I'll bring lunch. Around noon?"

*"Sure."* He lets out a breath. *"Thank you, Bella. For all of this."*

"Don't say it; show it instead. This can be good for both of us."

*"I know—I'm trying,"* he whispers.

I smile. "I can tell, Edward."

This was just our first conversation on the phone. Over the next few days, we call each other once I've put Nate to bed. It's strictly about Nathan, which makes it easier for me. Maybe for us both, because I think other topics would be too heavy to discuss on the phone. Either way, Edward seems to relax a little with each phone call, and I can tell that he's soaking up the stories I share about Nate. In turn, that makes me relax, too.

Before I know it, it's the day before I'm driving out to see Edward again, and we've been on the phone for the past half hour.

*"Poor hamster."* He snickers.

"Poor hamster?! Poor *me!*" I cry out between laughs. "The little fucker bit me all the time!" Yeah, no, I can't say that I miss Nate's hamster. "It used to bite Jada, too. But never Jasper or Nate." Then I lower my voice to a

whisper, "I think it was gay." And Edward barks out a laugh. "What? I'm serious! It hated girls, but boys were cuddlers or something."

*"That's what you get for buying a little rat, Bella," he chuckles. "Even a cat would've been better. 'Cause I'm thinking the smaller animal, the smaller the brain is."*

I giggle. "Hey, Nate loved that little fur ball."

*"More than he would've loved a real pet?" he teases.*

"You gotta take care of the pet, too, Cullen." I grin wryly to myself. "At that point, I didn't have time to walk a dog or take care of a cat. And I can't exactly expect Nate to do it."

*"I actually have a dog now."*

That kinda surprises me. "Really? What kind?"

*"A black Labrador. Taz. I adopted him a little while ago—he's six years old. And he's great to have in the fucking wilderness."*

Wow. "So, if you run into a black bear out there, you believe Taz will save you?"

*"Exactly!" he laughs. "Nah, truth be told, Taz probably couldn't hurt a fly. He's a lazy 'ole fuck. Oh, but he does love to hunt birds."*

I can't help but laugh, too. "I see. So, no flies, but birds are cool?"

He chuckles, about to say something, but then he shouts out—away from the phone. *"What the fuck, Taz?!"* He groans. *"Aw, man."*

"What's wrong?" I ask, amused. I already knew he was outside, 'cause I can hear the winds every now and then, not to mention whenever Edward

takes a drag on his cigarette. So, if he has a dog, I guess I can assume he's out there, too.

*"Speak of dead birds and they shall appear,"* he mutters. I snicker. *"Yeah, you laugh it up, Swan."* Oh, I am. *"Listen, can I call you back in ten minutes? I gotta get rid of the feathers from Taz's mouth."*

I stifle my laugh. "Okay. Have fun!"

*"Have fun,"* he mimics in a girly voice. I laugh harder, and he hangs up, chuckling.

For the next few minutes, I occupy my time with emptying the dishwasher. I also prepare Nate's snacks and bring out the sausages from the freezer that I plan to use tomorrow for Edward and my lunch. I don't think he would protest if I wanted to use his kitchen, but I figured I could bring something light for tomorrow. So, before I take off, I'm making a pasta salad with chorizo, olives, feta, tomatoes, and fresh baby spinach. To go with it all, I'm stopping by the bakery down the street tomorrow morning to pick up a loaf of their zucchini bread, which is to die for.

When the phone rings again, I take a quick peek at the clock on the wall and see that it's only been nine minutes.

It's with a grin I pick up the phone.

"A minute early, Edward," I tease. "So, did you get rid of all the feathers?"

*"Um, Bella? It's Riley."*



## Chapter 19

### Lunch & Lyrics

*Chapter song – How to Save a Life by The Fray*

#### **EPOV**

When I see Bella pulling into the driveway, I leave the cabin to meet her. I'm nervous and jittery, but the phone calls we've had over the past few days have really helped.

At the same time, they've made me physically ache. There's nothing I want more now than to see Nathan.

"Hi!" she greets with a big smile as I walk down the porch steps. "No pajamas today, huh?"

Fuck me. I think I'm blushing. What am I, a school girl?

But no. I'm not wearing pajamas this time. I figured jeans and a grey hoodie were more appropriate. "Funny you," I quip, the corners of my mouth tugging upward. Seeing the containers she's carrying, I close the distance between us. "Here, let me help you with that."

"Thank you." She gives me another smile and we head back to the cabin. I make a mental note to clear the driveway of snow later. "By the way, was that Emmett I saw leaving? I could've sworn it was."

"Yeah, it was him." He's helping me set up shop in the shed I have behind the cabin. I've ordered tools, materials, and heavier equipment. Honestly,

I don't have everything mapped out yet, but I'm more than ready to begin. My fingers itch at the mere thought of woodworking. Anyway, since I want privacy with Bella right now, Emmett offered to pick up the circular saw and the shipment of softwoods I've ordered. Holding the door open for Bella, I add, "He's living with me 'til he's figured out what to do about Rosalie."

"Rose?" She frowns up at me. "Wow, how is she? I haven't talked to her since..." Her brows knit together before she looks down, and she doesn't finish the sentence. She doesn't need to. 'Cause I already know that she hasn't talked to Rosalie since the day she left Forks.

I saw Rosalie a few times after I was released from prison, and I can't say much had changed between us. Charlotte, Rosalie, and Bella were tight back in the day, but the three are completely different nowadays. While Charlotte saw change in me immediately, Rosalie didn't. She barely spoke to me, and the looks she gave me held nothing but contempt and disdain.

"She's..." I chuckle darkly and head toward the kitchen. Bella follows. "I'm willing to bet everything sucks for her right now."

And Bella...she's in the middle of the three, which is understandable. She has Nathan to look after, so she's cautious about moving too fast. Plus, she's the one I actually hurt. Not Rosalie or Charlotte. But Bella's giving me a shot; she's willing to give me an honest chance to prove myself. For which I'm eternally grateful.

"Why would things suck for her right now?" she asks as I set down the containers on the kitchen island. She's still frowning. "Did something happen?"

"Yeah, you could say that." I nod and lean back against the counter behind me. "She left Em at the altar."

"No!" Her eyes widen. "What—why...? I don't get it."

So, I tell her. I tell her about Rosalie dropping out of college to be with Emmett. I tell her that they lived together—happily—and planned their future together in Forks. I tell her that Emmett proposed and that Rosalie said yes—a thousand times yes—and then how it all fell apart on their wedding day. No warning, no note, no nothing. Em showed up at the church, dressed to the nines, and both families were gathered, as well as a few friends. And the bride was a no-show.

"Oh, my God," she mutters, shaking her head. "I can't believe it. Were you there?"

I grimace. "I was invited, and Em wanted me to be his best man, but going back to Forks..." No, thank you. I just couldn't—still can't. I tried a few times, but I never got very far. After the shit I pulled in Port Angeles, I can barely stomach the thought of going there either. So, Forks is definitely out of the question.

"I get it," she says quietly, looking down for a moment. "So—crap, I'm still processing." She chuckles a little, seemingly dazed. "She just left him there?" Pretty much. In my opinion, Rosalie is a cold-hearted bitch. "Man, I hope they can work it out. I remember how badly she wanted Los Angeles and UCLA, but it also killed her to be away from Emmett."

I frown. "I know she was your friend, but I can't really see it the way you see it. I think Emmett deserves something better."

At that, Bella faces me with fire in her eyes. It's not anger, but it's something intense. Passion? For what, I don't know.

"But what if she made a mistake, Cullen?" she asks curiously, still with that smoldering thing going on in her eyes. "What if she got cold feet and took the easy way out?" I stare at her, a sinking feeling in the pit of my

gut telling me that she is about to make one helluva point. "Doesn't she deserve a second chance?" She tilts her head. I swallow hard, unable to break away from her gaze. "Was what she did so *awful* that it can never be forgiven? If she *proves* herself..." She grits her teeth together. "If she takes the consequences and proves how *sorry* she is..."

Fuck.

Yeah, Bella's not really talking about Rosalie here.

I've made mistakes—horrifying ones—and Bella's currently giving me a second chance.

And I know all too well about taking the easy way out.

Despite those mistakes I made, Bella's here. With lunch. With a bag full of albums of Nathan.

"You see it, don't you?" she whispers.

I release a breath and nod with a dip of my chin, averting my eyes to the floor. I do see it. While I personally don't like Rosalie, I have no right to say that Emmett deserves better. If...yeah, *if*...she shows how sorry she is...

Like my therapist in Seattle told me a gazillion times: humans make mistakes. We're fallible and imperfect.

"Hey, I'm sorry," she says, moving in my periphery. I look up at her in question, wondering what the hell she has to be sorry for. "I didn't mean to lecture you or anything. Just saying my opinion. You know more of their story than I do—"

I cut her off with a shake of my head. "You're right. Seriously. I just didn't see it that way." I smile carefully. "I, for one, am thankful for second chances."

Maybe I can talk to Emmett about this later—let him see it from Bella's perspective.

"So am I," she responds softly and grabs one of the containers. "I hope you're hungry; I made way too much of this."

I'm still stuck on her first sentence. "What do you mean, so are you?" I ask, genuinely curious. As far as I know, there's no reason for Bella to even ask for a second chance. Okay, she slapped me and kicked me in the nuts, but she showed me afterward that she regretted it, and she apologized. Is there more?

Bella just shrugs and lifts off the lid of the rather large Tupperware bowl. The smell instantly hits me, causing my stomach to rumble. Fuck, that looks delicious. It's some pasta salad with a bunch of stuff mixed in. "We've all made our share of mistakes, haven't we? Big or small. In general." Another little shrug. "We fuck up at times."

And I decide that Bella Swan has to be the most understanding person on this planet.

"Did you study psychology in college?" I blurt out.

My question seems to surprise her, and a laugh slips through her lips—lips I'm trying not to look at.

What? Don't fucking judge me. I've been asexual for the past...*since Bella left Forks*. Booze, self-hatred, trials, drugs, parents dying, prison, more shit...yeah, that stuff doesn't exactly leave a man horny. I think the first time I touched my own dick after Bella and I last fu—*oh, you don't wanna go down that road, Cullen*. True. Anyway...my body started waking up



when I started making a real recovery, which means just months ago. Not years, but months.

But back to Bella, who's still chuckling. "No. I didn't study psychology in college." She snorts. "Hell, I didn't *go* to college."

Oh.

I don't really know how to respond to that, and I'm not sure she wants to talk about more personal stuff. So far, we've mostly talked about Nathan. So...I backtrack a little and continue with my first observation. "It's just that you seem so understanding," I explain.

"Counseling helps," she teases and playfully elbows me in the side. "My therapist back in Memphis helped me with all that. Lisa, too—the woman I see now." I don't think she gives herself enough credit. "But enough about that. You wanna eat?"

Unfortunately, I don't have time to reply to that, 'cause a song begins and it's obviously her phone.

*All I wanna do is find a way back into love*

*I can't make it through without a way back into love*

I raise a brow at the lyrics but say nothing as Bella curses under her breath and fumbles with her phone.

"I'm sorry." Her cheeks flush scarlet. "Cheesy shit—I didn't pick it. It's from a movie, and..." She waves it off, looking uncomfortable. "Fucking chick flick." As she taps a finger on the phone, I catch a name on the screen.

*Riley.*

I can feel how my face falls, how my hope deflates, and I don't even know why.

*Sure you do, Cullen. This is Tinks we're talking about.*

I shake my head internally. This is about Nathan. I refuse to get ahead of myself or even dream about the unattainable.

*Yeah, 'cause the heart always listens to the mind.*

Fuck. I need a smoke.

Before Bella looks up, I manage to compose my expression. I force a smile. "Boyfriend?"

I just had to fucking ask, didn't I?

"What?" She frowns, and then her eyes widen. "Oh! No. Oh, no. Nope." She chuckles, though it sounds as forced as my smile feels. "Uh...no. No. God, no."

How many "no"s were there, really? One too many? Definitely.

Of course Bella's not single. I mean...look at her.

*Jesus Christ.*

Does this mean there's a man playing Daddy to my son?

That thought makes my insides churn.

"I'm really sorry," she apologizes again. "I'm turning this off now."

Desperate to lighten the tension and get rid of the depressing shit surging through me, I say the first thing that comes to mind. "I'm surprised you have reception out here. I sure as hell don't." God, I'm so fucking lame.

Bella probably thinks I'm lame, too, but she doesn't call me out on it. Instead she says, "But we've talked over the phone."

I laugh a little through my nose. "When I'm on the porch, there's one bar on my phone. It's the best I've managed out here."

"Oh..." She looks pensive. "But...wait, so you've been standing out there," she points a finger in the direction of the door, "while we've talked?"

I nod slowly, wondering what's wrong with that.

"It's freezing!" she exclaims.

My only response is a shrug. My land line will be installed in a few days, and there was no way I was gonna hold off talking to Bella 'til then. I mean, come on. Besides, I wear a fucking jacket.

"Do I have a personal ring tone on that thing?" I ask, nodding at her shut-off phone.

She finally grins, and I think we're past the moment of major awkwardness. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Actually, I do. Unless there's a song called, "Pathetic Loser" and she picked it. If she chose a song like that, I'm definitely relieved that I call her on her home phone at night. 'Cause you can only personalize ring tones on cell phones, right?

The last thing I want is for Nathan to wake up to those lyrics. I'm pretty sure I already have an epic struggle ahead of me to win over my own son. No need to add more fuel to that fire.

I know I'm being stupid now. She wouldn't go with a song like that.

Goddamn, I'm really messed up.

"Now you gotta spill, Swan," I tell her, plastering a smirk on my face.

She stares at me for a second or two, maybe contemplating, and then she turns on her phone again and says, "Gimme a call and find out."

Yeah, and I do that quickly. Pulling out my phone, I scroll down until I reach "Tinks".

As soon as I hear the unmistakable sound of Jimi Hendrix's guitar, I'm flooded with memories of the old cabin I often took Bella to in Forks.

*...There must be some kind of way out of here*

*Said the joker to the thief*

*There's too much confusion*

*I can't get no relief...*

I remember telling her that this was my kind of music. Jimi Hendrix, B.B King, The Doors, Van Morrison, Muddy Waters...

Bob Dylan may have written this particular song, but Hendrix has this shit down.

*...There are so many here among us*

*Who feel that life is but a joke*

*But you and I, we've been through that*

*And this is not our fate...*

"Remember?" she asks quietly.

"Yeah." I clear my throat and stick my hands into my pockets. "Feels like a lifetime ago."

She smiles ruefully. "It sorta was."

Or another life entirely.

"Okay," she sighs, pocketing her phone. "Enough of the heavy for a while?" I nod, thankful. "I'm starving."

So am I. My kitchen feels pretty spacious, but with the kitchen island in the middle of the room, there's no space left for a kitchen table. So, I have that in the living room. And once I've set the table in there, we sit down across from each other to eat.

Expecting us to talk about Nathan, I'm a little shocked when she asks about my experience with therapy. My shock is written all over my face for a moment; Bella notices, so she explains that she just wants to know how I've been recovering. She's being a protective mother, I realize, and it fills me with hope that she'll allow me to see Nathan soon.

Since I don't have anything to hide, I go through it all. I tell her about my first therapist, who definitely wasn't a bad guy; it's just that we weren't on the same page. Or rather, I switched from one page to another at a crazy speed. One day I was so ready to just heal, another day I was too consumed by my cynical thoughts, and the very next day I was talking about taking things slower. Really, I was a living rollercoaster. In the very beginning, for instance, I wanted to take things so slowly—to ensure that my recovery was permanent—that I only wanted to see this guy once a month. In turn, he told me that a slow—or steady; the word he used—recovery didn't mean fewer sessions each month. And this pissed me off. At that point, I was still unstable and volatile. My fuse my too short and the explosions were massive. Everything could set me off.

When I opened up to my therapist about my past, everything just spilled out of me. There was no stopping. However, the guy told me my limit had

been reached after two hours, and that of course angered me. I mean, who was this douche to tell me about my own limits?

What I realized pretty quickly was that his office wall wasn't littered with diplomas, degrees, and certificates for no reason. Because I distinctly remember how I broke down when I got back to the condo that day. I was a fucking mess, sure that I was having a heart attack or something. In reality, it was a panic attack and my therapist wrote out a prescription for Xanax.

Popping pills was something I saw as a weakness; yes, I see the irony since I was later arrested for possession of heroin. But whatever. I took it as an insult when he wanted me to take pills in order to get better. So, I didn't. I lied, stating that I had taken them, and kept pouring my heart out. I just needed to tell the whole fucking story.

My attacks started piling up, which just fueled my anger and frustration.

Though, I continued going.

My therapist started telling me all about wrong and right, actions and consequences, blaming and taking blame, owning one's mistakes...I just shattered. Firstly, because these were things I already knew, although I never really grasped anything. Secondly, because I felt like a little kid. Here was this guy, telling me things I was sure a toddler knew. Okay, maybe not, but still. And thirdly, because it made me realize how fucking badly I had hurt the people around me.

I got a conscience.

And that's when I said "Fuck it all" and escaped.

"Then you got arrested shortly after," she concludes quietly.

I nod and look down at my empty plate. "Right now..." I lick my lips and think about my words. "Now I can see that prison was a blessing in disguise." Chancing a glance at Bella, I assumed I'd see surprise, shock, or even a what-the-fuck look.

Instead I see silent understanding.

"Prison grounded you," she says casually. "I get it." She shrugs. "I assume you had counseling while locked up?" I nod. "Right, well, you couldn't exactly escape those sessions. You didn't have a choice but to go, and you had to do it at their pace. They laid down the rules."

That about sums it up, yeah.

"I went through anger management, too," I say quietly, reaching for a slice of the zucchini bread. "And group therapy—which..." I grimace. Sitting there in a group, talking about "venting healthily"...not really my thing.

"Group therapy isn't for everybody," she chuckles. "But it helps many—to hear that you're not the only one going through hell."

I open my mouth and then close it. But in the end I can't help but ask. "Did you go to a group?"

She shakes her head. "No, but it's a popular alternative at work. It helps the women bond. They're usually very reclusive and people-shy when they come to us, so gathering in groups helps them to open up."

There's no way I can't ask about her job now. "What is it you do?"

"Oh! Haven't told you that, have I?" She smiles sheepishly. "Um, I work with women who've escaped abusive relationships."

*Of course she does.*

"Well, at least you have experience," I mumble. Dad may not have abused Bella, but she was still there—in that environment. Besides, there are two kinds of abuse, and I'm definitely guilty of abusing her emotionally.

"It was more of a coincidence that I ended up working in that field," she says. "I don't know if you've heard of Whitlock House and the Whitlock Foundation..." I think about it for a second, and then shake my head. But I presume it has to do with Charlotte's uncle, seeing as they're Whitlocks.

"Well, Jasper owns it. He takes in women from all over the country—women who are on the run, mostly."

I nod slowly, thinking. "How old is he?"

Since he took Bella in, he has to be older than us, right?

"He's thirty-four now," she responds. "Christ, I'm stuffed." She leans back in her chair and pats her stomach. "Do you want more?"

Tempting, but no. "I'm good. Thanks for lunch—it was delicious."

"No worries. I can leave it here, though, right? Maybe Emmett can take the rest? I can just take the containers home with me the next time I'm here."

*Next time.* It never fails to relax me whenever she says, "Next time."

"Um, sure—thank you," I say, a little humbled. And no, Emmett probably won't see much of the food. It was *that* good. "Are you in a rush, or do you want some coffee?"

Or maybe she has a date with Riley—fucking asshole—before Nathan comes home from school.

What kind of name is Riley, anyway?

*Because Edward is such a cool name.*



Fuck off.

Bella checks her watch and chews on her lip for a second or two. Then she looks up and smiles. "Coffee sounds good."

My shoulders sag with relief.

About ten minutes and a smoke later, I bring two mugs of coffee to the living room where Bella's waiting.

I wonder if *Riley* knows she takes her coffee black with one sugar.

*Yeah, a pissing contest is probably the last thing you wanna enter now.*

True. Aside from her coffee, what the *fuck* do I know?

"Is it okay if I ask you more about your recovery?" Bella asks, wringing her hands in her lap.

"Go ahead." She can ask anything.

"Great. Um...what happened when you got out of prison?"

Much like we spent lunch, I tell her about my therapy sessions and anger management. We talk for approximately an hour and a half, and I let her know about the last therapist I had in Seattle. Tia, a woman in her late forties, took over from my counselor in prison, and she helped me ease my way into society again. Not that much had changed, but it was still a little overwhelming to be out. Inside, I never had choices. Someone else made all the decisions, and now I suddenly had to do it on my own. I had to set up limits; I had to *want* things now. While I wanted to get better in prison, too, the outside was different because I had to take the initiative, as well.

I tell Bella about things that had changed in me while I was locked up—such as feeling older, wanting things I'd never wanted before, prioritizing

differently, and somewhat making peace with the past me. The regrets, the remorse, and some of the pain will always be there, but in order to move on...yeah.

"There were a few setbacks, of course," I admit, taking a sip of my now-lukewarm coffee. "But I handled it a lot better. When I got pissed, I managed to talk myself down instead of using my fists or getting high." I shrug a little. "Emmett's been a huge help, too. He used to come down to Seattle most weekends, and we'd work out together or whatever."

In the end, it feels like I've told Bella everything there is to know, which says a lot about how little I've done. Aside from getting better in my fucking head, that is.

I worked out a lot—still do—I ate better, I started reading a lot, I caught up some of the movies I'd missed, I went to my sessions, and I simply focused on getting better. Going out doesn't appeal to me at all anymore—not that I'm sure it ever did—and my mantra has become, "peace and quiet".

When I tell Bella this, she chuckles and mentions that there's no such thing as peace and quiet around Nathan.

Luckily, she says it with a teasing glint in her eye, because that's hardly the "noisy" shit I'm shying away from.

Catching a glance at the clock above the fireplace in the corner, I see that it's past two, and I know that Nathan's out of preschool around three. So, I point this out to Bella, but she says that she texted Jada—Jasper's wife—earlier when I was outside smoking, and she's picking him up.

With that, I relax further into the couch and we talk for a while longer. Since I'm not sure she's willing to divulge much about her own life, I stutter like a fucking idiot when I ask about her own recovery. But to my

surprise, she seems willing to share now. So, we end up comparing stories, emotions we've gone through, and mistakes we've made along the way.

It's almost four o'clock the next time I check, and Bella admits that it's time for her to go home. She has a two hour drive ahead of her, which I feel a little bad about. And that's why I, once again—as I walk her to the door—offer to come to Anchorage the next time we meet.

Bella declines this time, too.

"Shit!" I suddenly remember the photos. "I—I haven't seen the albums yet."

"Oh. Well, I sorta figured it would be more comfortable for you to look through them in private." She explains this all casually, even adding a shrug after she's pulled on her boots. But I don't think she realizes how opposite of casual this is for me. The fact that she's leaving those albums here for me to go through at my own pace means a lot. Plus, I won't have to struggle to maintain a straight face.

Like I said, I'm not hiding anything from her, but crying like a bitch is something I still prefer to do when no one is around.

After thanking her profusely, I can't help but ask when I'll see her again.

I don't expect it to be very soon; it's Friday today and Bella works during the week, so...maybe next weekend? Or even the one after that? 'Cause I'm sure she has plans for this weekend.

For a moment, she just stares up at me with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Next Saturday?" she asks, a nervous smile on her lips.

Don't ask me why she's nervous, though. She has to know by now that I'll take whatever I can get.

"And..." She blows out a breath. "How about I bring Nate?"



*Chapter song – Let It Go by Blue October*

## **BPOV**

After reassuring Edward a few times that I'm not kidding about bringing Nathan next week, I leave Sterling behind, the memory of Edward's teary eyes in the forefront of my mind as I go.

I've barely reached the main road when my phone rings, and I groan, remembering that I never shut it off that second time—after I had told Edward to give me a call to find out what his ringtone was.

"Mental note: change Riley's fucking ringtone," I mutter to myself and bring out my phone. I *told* him I was gonna call him tonight. But that wasn't good enough, was it? *Jesus*. Placing the phone to my ear, I answer. "Hey."

"Hi!" he replies cheerily. *"Is this a better time?"*

I grit my teeth together. "Not really," I say honestly. I don't like to be on the phone while I'm driving. "I'm on my way back to Anchorage."

Last night when Riley called and I thought it was Edward, it felt like a cold shower. Our conversation was short, and I was truthful. I told him that Nathan's father had contacted me, and that I needed to do this for Nate's sake. Riley was shocked to say the least; I could also detect some anger and jealousy. Then I just told him I was going to call him after I got home today. Clearly, he didn't listen.

*"Oh... So—how was it? Was he nice? Nathan's dad, I mean."*

I blow out a breath. Was Edward nice? Yeah, that'd be an understatement.

He has changed. There's no denying that.

"He's not the boy I once knew," I admit. "I saw him last week, too, and we've spoken over the phone a lot this week."

*"What?!"* he shouts. *"I thought today—you've been hiding this, Bella?!"*

I shake my head and push down the anger I feel. From the get-go, Riley has been one or two steps ahead of me. I've been clear; I've told him plain and simple: I'm not ready for a real relationship. Yet, Riley acts like we're committed to each other. I'm sorry, but four dates doesn't give him the right to dictate. We don't make decisions together, especially not when they concern my son.

"I wasn't ready to tell you," I say simply. "Riley..." I sigh. "I asked you not to push."

He doesn't miss a beat. *"I just think you can do better than Nate's deadbeat father."*

"This isn't about a fucking romance," I chuckle humorlessly, slowing down the car when the truck in front of me also slows down. "And you don't even know Edward," I add, annoyed. My business is my business. The only thing I've told Riley about Edward is that he's not in Nathan's life.

Well, he wasn't. And I admitted that Edward didn't want Nate, because that was the only truth I knew up until a week ago. "I want Nathan to have his dad—"

Riley cuts me off. *"That could be me, Bella! Can't you fucking see that?"*

Deep breaths, deep breaths, deep breaths.

"Edward is his father," I whisper. "He also has a legal right to see him."

*"He shouldn't have that right,"* he says flatly, fueling my anger. *"He didn't want Nathan, and all of a sudden he does?"*

"You don't know what you're talking about," I snap. God, he makes it sound like Edward just threw us away. Okay—he did. He did. But...*fuck*, there's so much more to the story. "Look, I can't talk right now; I'm on the road. I will call you later, all right?"

He chuckles dryly. *"You see? He's already turning you against me."*

"What?!" I shriek. Oh, my God! "This isn't about you and me, Riley! This is about Nate meeting his dad! Edward is different now—a completely new person. His life..." I exhale harshly. "You don't know how Edward grew up." *I* barely know. Imagine living in fear since the age of *five*—Christ, he was just a baby. Nathan is only a year younger than Edward was when Carlisle first hit him. "I have to give Edward a chance," I tell Riley. "Not only do I have to, but I need to—I *want* to. What he did..." I swallow hard. "Edward hurt me like hell. He—yeah, he crushed me. But he..." All right, I'm not ready to make excuses for what Edward did back then, but I do see all the circumstances. It's not black and white.

*"But he...?"* Riley prompts. *"Sounds to me like you're defending a douche. Isn't that like what many women do before they end up at Whitlock House—defend their asshole men?"*

I gape at the phone, completely stunned he would say something like that.

In the end, I have nothing to say, and I disconnect the call. He's so *wrong*, and...I can't believe him. Because to me, every case is different. It's all so individual. And I'm not making excuses for Edward; I'm the last one who'd do that. But I'm not blind. I know change when I see it. Plus, if I ever thought Edward would lay a hand on my son...

I chuckle darkly at the mere thought of it.

Carlisle was a monster. He abused his son, but that's *nothing* compared to what I'd do to Edward if he beat Nathan. In other words, if I'd been Esme, Carlisle would've been six feet under after that first blow.

Parents fuck up all the time. When I was ten, my mom forgot me at the grocery store. Granted, she came back after five minutes and she was crying her eyes out, but she still made a mistake. When Nathan was one, he wouldn't stop screaming—it was the mother of tantrums, going on for hours—so I left him in his playpen and went into my bedroom to scream into a pillow for twenty minutes. I was ready to throw in the towel. Right on that brink. So, yeah...we make mistakes. We fuck up.

My point is: I'm not expecting Edward to be perfect. I won't judge him. I won't think he'll know everything going into this. The only things I won't tolerate are abuse and neglect.

~CYE~

When I pick up Nate at Jasper and Jada's house, I end up staying for dinner. We talk—no, I talk. They let me vent, basically, and I tell them all about today. Not just what's going on with Edward, but also the shit I went through in the car with Riley. Then, when I'm finally done, Jasper goes into therapist mode and points out all the perspectives I need to see

stuff from. He's not really a therapist, but he has studied psychology, and he's very pedagogical and thoughtful as a person. He's also a master at reading facial expressions and whatever tone of voice you use.

And Jada, who I consider to be my best friend, is blunt yet sweet. She doesn't sugarcoat things—she's brutally honest—but she still states her opinions in a way where you can't be offended. When you first meet her, you feel comfortable. Her long, honey-blond hair and bluish green eyes see to that. However, you'll soon discover that she's sharp, quick, and unafraid.

Jada keeps me alert. She's also not a big fan of Edward, though she's considerate enough to keep quiet about *that*. In truth, I think Jasper has told her to pipe down when Edward is the topic. Jada agrees that a second chance is something Edward deserves, but she can't grasp the fact that I'm so understanding. Jasper, on the other hand, thinks as a parent. Nate comes first, and Jasper believes this is best for my little boy. I agree with him.

If Nate has a father out there who wants to be in his life, then he should be—Edward should be. And, to be selfish, I wouldn't want my son to hate me. I don't want to be the person who keeps Nate from his dad.

"Have you and Edward discussed next Saturday?" Jasper asks me, nodding in thanks as Jada serves coffee. "Is he gonna be Nate's dad right away, or are you introducing him as a friend?"

I frown. "A friend? Why would I—uh, I mean... *What?*"

Why would I introduce Edward as a friend when he's Nate's dad?

Can you really do that?

"It's common," Jasper says with a shrug. "They do it with the child in mind. The parent who has always been there—it's his or her way of easing



the new parent into the child's life. It's also a way of making sure the parent who recently showed up can prove that he or she is sticking around—that's it not temporary."

Huh. I sit back and think about what he's said, and I totally get it. I just can't see past the lying. If I told Nate that Edward was just a friend, the truth would still come out and my son would be hurt—maybe? That's how I see it, anyway. And even if Edward decided this wasn't for him, and he'd leave, I would still live with the fact that I've lied to Nathan. But then again, it's a lie I could live with if it meant Nate didn't get hurt. A friend can leave—that happens—but a father can't. Not without leaving open wounds behind.

"I can't see Edward leaving," I whisper.

Jada grimaces. "How can you be so sure, hun? You barely know this guy."

But I *do*. No, I don't. Yes, in a way I do. Fuck. I'm losing my mind again.

I know the five-year-old boy who was my best friend in Phoenix—the boy who gave me my first kiss, the boy who got chocolate on my dress and tickled me until I smiled again.

I also know the cocky idiot who bullied everyone in high school—the idiot who smashed heads in if they said something that was out of line, the idiot who thought he was a god.

And I got glimpses of the guy underneath that shitty mask. He was vulnerable, hurt, neglected, bruised, and in need of affection.

The man he has become...well, I'm starting to get to know him, too. Two long visits and hours on the phone—I've learned a lot about Edward. He's still vulnerable, but he's also strong? I don't know, but it feels that way. He kinda has to be to have come so far. He has matured; he's gone from

an abused guy who turned to drugs to keep the pain away, to...to what he is now. I'm still learning.

"I can't be sure," I admit. "But my gut instinct..."

"You do what feels right for you, Bella," Jasper says, nodding. "I suggest you call Edward and talk to him about it, though."

I agree with that. "That's gonna take a while," I sigh. "To automatically include Edward, I mean. Making decisions—I'm so used to doing it by myself."

"I bet," he responds. "You've been on your own for four years. Of course it'll take a while. But with time—and Edward's increasing involvement—I have no doubt it will come naturally."

"I hope so," I chuckle and then sigh again. "God, I want this to work."

A little while later, I walk into the living room to take my sleeping boy home. Jada carries their daughters to bed, too, and then I say goodnight to Jasper and Jada.

~CYE~

Saturday

**What's Nathan's favorite color? –Edward**

I grin to myself and reply.

**It changes from day to day, but it's usually red, blue, or yellow.**

**Superman is da man :P ~Bella**

"Nathan, breakfast is ready!" I holler as my phone beeps again.

**Oh, I agree ;) I read Superman comics when I was a kid. –Edward**

I didn't know that. But I can see it. I can picture a little Edward on his bed reading comics with a toothy grin on his face.

*Until Carlisle came home.*

I shake that thought away. Fuck.

**Nathan has every cartoon there is about superheroes, it feels like. Superman, Batman, Captain America, Spiderman...the list goes on. He threw a fit when I didn't allow him to see that movie with Ryan Reynolds. The Green Light? Way too violent, and it's not a cartoon.**  
~Bella

**You mean Green Lantern, and you're probably right. Comics and cartoons are harmless. Today's movie adaptations, not so much. Emmett and I saw Ghost Rider a while ago. It's nothing like the comic! Definitely not suited for children, haha. –Edward**

I chuckle at the text, seeing Nathan in my periphery as he enters the kitchen.

"Oh, my God, baby!" I laugh, looking at him. "Where are your clothes?"

He's buck naked and holding his penis.

"I gotta pee," he whines, doing the pee-pee dance.

"So, you took off all your clothes?" I ask incredulously and then lead him to the bathroom. "Come here—sit down on the toilet." Maybe it's because he's been raised by a woman, but he always sits down when he goes to the bathroom. "You're such a goof." I smile and ruffle his hair before I walk out.

"I don't like clothes, Mommy!" he shouts after me.

I shake my head, amused, and return to the kitchen. I have just enough time to fire off another text to Edward before Nate comes back.

**Nathan just did the pee-pee dance in his birthday suit in our kitchen. What a lovely Saturday so far! :D ~Bella**

"Did you wash your hands, honey?" I ask him as he stands in the doorway. He's still naked. He nods and shows me his hands. "Good. Okay, let's put some clothes on, and then you can eat."

"Can I have chocolate for breakfast?" he asks sweetly as I pull out a pair of thermals for him. Today, we're just gonna go outside to play for a bit in the snow, and thermals are more comfortable when he's wearing his snowsuit.

"Yeah, no." I shake my head at him, smiling wryly. He always tries; I always shoot him down. "But it's Saturday today, so how about some special cocoa when we get back from the playground? And some chocolate tonight when we watch a movie?"

"Yes!" he giggles and shakes his butt. "Special cocoa is the best!"

I know he thinks so. 'Cause it couldn't be more sugary. It's hot cocoa with marshmallows, whipped cream, chocolate flakes, *and* chocolate syrup.

What kid wouldn't love that?

After getting him dressed in his thermals and a t-shirt, I usher him back to the kitchen where he sits down to eat his toast and drink his milk.

Meanwhile, I sit down with my cereal and check my phone.

I can't help but laugh at Edward's response to my last text.

**This will sound weird, but I'd pay a million bucks to see that. – Edward**

~CYE~

## Sunday

While Jada takes Nate and the girls to see a movie, I call Riley and ask if he can come over. He has texted and called several times since I hung up on him on Friday, and now I'm ready to see him face-to-face without letting my anger boil over.

"Hey, sweetie," he says, kissing my cheek before I close the door behind him.

"Uh—hi." I don't understand how he can act as if nothing's wrong.

"Coffee?"

He nods. "Sure. I gotta stay awake."

"Long shift coming up?" I ask as we walk to the kitchen.

"Yeah. I have the Anchorage-New York route next week, and before then, I have a cargo shipments—Anchorage-Nome. All day tomorrow, back and forth." He chuckles a little. "And all day yesterday, I flew between Chignik and Juneau."

"Cool," I mutter, not knowing what else to say. After pouring us two mugs of coffee, I sit down by the kitchen island and take a small sip of my own. Conveniently, I slide his mug to the other side of the island. "So...I figured we should talk."

He gives me the look to be expected when someone says, "We should talk."

Infamous words. For a reason.

"You're ending this," he states, waving a finger between us. "I fucking knew it."

And that's the thing: "Ending this."

How can I end something that has barely even started?

"I asked you—from the beginning—not to *push* me," I whisper, as if Nate's around the corner. But he's not.

He grins, but it makes him look evil. Sinister. "I'm not pushing, Bella. I'm just pissed that you won't even give me a goddamn chance."

I hold up my hands. "Don't start. I *told* you—"

"I know what you said," he says impatiently. "You said that you weren't ready—whatever. Now, you won't *ever* be ready." He gives me a bitter look. "It will be all about Nathan's father now," he chuckles dryly. "What do you expect here, Bella—to go off into the sunset with this fucker?" My eyebrows shoot up. "That you'll be a perfect family? He left you!"

*Is he for real?*

"This isn't about me, Riley!" I point to myself. "This is about Nate. That's it. Riding off into the—" I can't even finish the sentence before I scoff at him. He's ridiculous.

"So, you're saying that this is only about Nathan seeing his father?"

"Yes!" I cry out. How many times do I have to tell him? "God!"

He purses his lips and narrows his eyes at me. "Well then, what's stopping you and me from having a relationship?"

"Jesus Christ," I groan, rubbing my temples. "Let me ask you this: how often are you home?"

He looks confused for a moment, perhaps thrown off by my question, but answers nonetheless. "Two days a week. Sometimes three."

I nod. "And I work eight to five, Monday to Friday. So, since I expect to be busy in Sterling many weekends, when do you suggest we see each other?" He's about to say something, but I hold up a finger, letting him know I'm not finished. "More than that, I don't think it's wise to introduce you to Nathan—"

"Why the hell not?" he asks, frustrated. "I'm a decent guy, Bella. I honestly want to get to know your son."

"I don't want him to get confused," I say truthfully. "On Saturday, Nate is meeting his dad for the first time. Having another man in his life so soon..." I shake my head, feeling that I'm getting off track. Regardless of what's best for my son, I'm not ready for what Riley wants. "I don't want to string you along, either," I admit, which seems to earn me a glare. "Four dates—it's been four dates. I can't..." I release a breath. "I have too much right now—too much going on."

He stares at me, saying nothing. Not a word.

Starting to feel uncomfortable, I fidget with my coffee mug. The man is still there, the man who gives me those girly butterflies in my stomach, but... Fuck. I can't push myself. I can't fool myself, either. And maybe I'm a loner, I don't know. Ever since I lost my parents, family has mattered the most to me, which might sound odd. Family has always been important to me; I'm glad to say that I always appreciated my parents while they were alive, too. But I digress. Family is my priority—what I stick to. Not Riley. And my family is Nathan, Jasper and Jada, their kids... Edward? No. He's not. But he is *familiar*. There's a past, and not just what we shared in Forks. He's the only one in the world I know who at least vaguely remembers my parents. There's like...a link? Yeah.

"You've clearly made up your mind," Riley mutters, making me look up. There's anger and resignation written all over his face. "I'm just gonna go." He stands up and turns to leave.

I stare, unable to stop him.

"Take care, Bella."

And he's out.

I palm my face.

~CYE~

### Wednesday

After being on the phone with Edward for about an hour, we fall silent, and it's not very comfortable. We've talked about Nate's baby book and all the photos I brought him. I think I heard Edward in tears once, too, but now we've exhausted the topic—at least for a little while. And now...now he knows I'm stalling. He knows I want to talk to him about something, though he doesn't ask, doesn't pressure.

"So..." He trails off.

I run a hand through my hair, pacing my kitchen, and almost wishing Nate would wake up and interrupt. But no. I need to talk to Edward about Saturday.

"Yeah, um." I clear my throat and then sigh. I kinda wish I had wine at home. "Listen, I—" *Christ! Just spit it out!* "Can we talk about Saturday?" I blurt out, slapping a hand to my forehead.

Why can't we be relaxed at the same time? If I'm smooth, Edward's a nervous wreck...and if Edward's calm and collected, I'm a stuttering fool.

"Are...are you cancelling?" he asks in a small voice that does something to me. My chest constricts; I'm still not used to an Edward who shows his emotions so clearly. *"I totally get it—you're busy—um, but—"*



I cut him off before he gives himself an ulcer. "I'm not cancelling, Edward!" I exhale audibly, and I hear Edward do the same. "I'm not cancelling," I repeat softly. "I just wanted to talk to you about—about...all of it? Um, how we'll go about things, I guess."

"*Oh.*" His breathing is still labored. "*Uh, what do you mean...exactly?*"

I release yet another breath and muster up the courage to just ask him. "Are you in this, Cullen?" I whisper. "Is this for life? I just...need it confirmed."

"*Tink—fuck, sorry. Bella.*" He lets out a strangled chuckle, and I find myself smiling to myself. "*Bella, there's nothing I want more.*" My shoulders sag in relief, making me realize how much I needed to hear this, no matter how much I've seen change in him. The confirmation, yeah, I needed it. "*You won't get rid of me—unless th-that's what you want. Maybe not even then. No, not even then.*"

I chuckle. "Sounds good to me." And then I sober. "Um, I'll tell Nathan tomorrow then—if that's okay."

Admittedly, I want to tell Nate about Edward on my own. I'm his mom and, so far, I've been his only parent. Having Edward there...maybe it would distract Nathan?

"*Oh shit, really?*" He actually squeaks. "*Fuck, this is actually happening. Can you call me afterward? I mean, I assume I have some major work to do—you know, to get him to like me. Christ, I hope he will. Four years,*" he rambles. "*I've bought some shit; you've told me what he likes. I- Yeah, I, uh, shopped-*"

"Cullen?"

He breathes out. "*Yeah?*"

I grin. "Relax."

Another breath. *"Right."*

"And you have no work to do," I add quietly, looking down at my lap. "I've made it pretty easy on you; I told him you were sick." There's a slight bitterness to my voice, and I find it both justified and...not. I don't know, but that bitter part of me still feels so betrayed, and after what I've told Nathan, I know Edward won't have to work to get Nate to approve of him. My son is pretty easygoing. All he demands is loyalty, love, and fun times. "I admit," I let out a shaky laugh, "I've made it easy on myself, too. I just couldn't bring myself to tell him that his dad didn't want him."

*"I'm sorry,"* he whispers thickly, sounding anguished. *"I'm so fucking sorry, Bella."*

I shake my head, trying to get rid of the knot in my stomach. I don't want to be angry, hurt, or resentful, but I need to give myself time. However, I don't want to show this—not now. This is about Nate. Not me. Not yet.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I ignore the stinging in them. "Stop. Don't—just... Never mind. I'll talk to him tomorrow. We'll work this out."

*"Wait, um, what did you mean before? You said you've told him I was sick."*

I nod even though he can't see me. "I tried to explain to him that you were too sick to be with him, that you needed to sort out your life. That you needed to heal. He...he asked how you were sick, and I said that you can be sick in different ways." I puff out my cheeks, remembering the several occasions Nate has asked about Edward. "I briefly told him that your childhood wasn't easy, and that you needed time to get better."

Edward is silent for a long moment, his breathing the only sign of his still being there.

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"*You didn't have to do that for me,*" he whispers, clearing his throat.

"I know." I swallow. "But I did it for him, too. And myself. And then, if he got older and you still weren't around—which is what I've believed for four years—I'd tell him the truth. About your parents and everything."

I figured honesty is the way to go. I fully plan on throwing Edward's parents under the bus one day, because I know they're the reason for Edward's fucked-up past. And Nathan deserves to know that, but he's too young to understand now, not to mention he's too young to hate people he's never known.

I'd like to keep my son innocent and carefree.

"*Still...I don't really deserve this,*" he sighs quietly.

I don't reply, still torn. There are too many circumstances. Edward is just a victim, but at the same time he's not.

Instead I repeat my words to Edward about this working out, and then I promise to call him tomorrow once I've talked to Nathan.

Shortly after that, we say goodnight, and I look forward to a restless night of tossing and turning.

How the hell will I break this to Nate?

~CYE~

Friday

Procrastinating—easy. Stalling, buying time, finding excuses...

I chickened out yesterday and didn't tell Nathan anything. I also texted Edward and told him I'd do it today instead. He texted back and said he understood.

But I can't stall anymore. Which is why I'm now sitting with Nathan in the living room—on the couch—with the TV shut off.

"Baby, do you remember what I told you about your dad?" I ask, nervous and fidgety as hell.

He tilts his head, scrunching his face together a little. "He's sick."

I nod, releasing a breath. There's really only one thing to say, and I hope it'll work.

"He's not sick anymore," I croak. This seems to confuse him, so before I lose my mind, I continue. "I met him—talked to him," I say, forcing out the words. "He's better—he's not angry and sad now. Um, he lives in a town a couple of hours away from here." Kinda stupid to say, seeing as he can't tell time. Christ, Swan. "He wants to see you." I manage to smile.

"He live here in Alaskuh?" He chews on his lip; I nod, smiling carefully.

"Not sick," he whispers and frowns, looking down. "My daddy is okay now?"

*Hold it together, Bella.*

"He is." I nod.

"I thought he gonna be sick always."

*So did I.*

At a loss for something to say, I just keep quiet. For a little while longer.

"Did he get medicine?" he asks, peering up at me.

I purse my lips, trying to find an example to go after. They're always the easiest way to make him understand.

"You know I told you how he wasn't sick like—a cold or a flu?" I murmur, and he nods slowly. "I said he was sick in his—um, inside." I place a hand to my chest. Nate nods again. "Well, do you remember when you took candy from Olivia on Madison's birthday?" At that, his cheeks turn red and he tries to look away. I squeeze his hand and smile, silently letting him know that it's all okay now. Water under the bridge. "You also remember that you felt so bad that you had to tell me about it?" One more nod, a small one. "So, you talked to me about it, you apologized, and then you felt better, right?"

"Yes," he mumbles.

I nod. "That was like medicine. You felt bad, but when you talked to me and we fixed it, it was all better. You didn't feel bad anymore." I pause. "It was like that for your daddy. Talking about the things that made him sick eventually made him feel better." I hardly feel it's necessary to explain about anti-depressants or prison counseling. "Do you understand, baby?"

Again, he nods slowly. "Talking is medicine?"

"Sometimes," I say softly. I grin a little, thinking of Lisa. "You know how I talk to Lisa, yeah? Sometimes I have so much to think about that I just talk to her."

"You talk lots to her," he giggles.

"I do," I agree, chuckling. "She helps me. I feel better once I've talked to her. It can be big things on my mind, or very small. But sometimes it just feels good to have someone to talk to."

"You can talk to me, Mommy."

"I know, sweetie," I laugh quietly and kiss his forehead. "Nothing works better than you, that's for sure." He offers me a silly grin. "So, you understand how talking can be like medicine?"

"Yeah—did he also steal candy? Did he feel bad?"

Another laugh slips through my lips at the thought of Edward stealing candy. If only things were that easy, huh?

"It was a bit more than that," I admit. "And it wasn't just things he had done. It was about so much—how he grew up, how his family was, and... other grown-up things. He was really sick from that." I take a breath and squeeze his hand again. "He also felt so bad about not being able to see you. But he was afraid that he'd do something bad, um..." Christ, I don't know how to explain this. "He was just too sick to be able to be there for you." I settle for that.

"But he's okay now?"

"Exactly, and he wants to meet you. How do you feel about that?"

Biting down on his lip, he averts his eyes again. I can see that he's thinking.

"Um..." He looks up to me. "Will he think I'm awesome?"

"Of course," I giggle. "How could he not?" I poke his tummy. "He will definitely think you're awesome."

*If he doesn't, this Mommy will be pissed.*

But I have faith in Edward when it comes to Nathan. I really do.

"Is he coming here?" He smiles.

I shake my head no. "We're driving out to him tomorrow, if that's okay. He lives in the middle of the woods, and you know what? He has a dog." My eyes widen, knowing the dog will be one way to seal the deal. "Isn't that cool?"

"Yeah." He nods furiously. "Can we buy candy for the dog? That's what Mikey does with his dog. He told me."

"I'll ask Edward." I grin and ruffle his hair.

He tilts his head. "Who's Edward?"

Oh, right. "That's your daddy's name."

"Huh. Okay."

~CYE~

Saturday

Once Nate has used the restroom at a truck stop, I send off a quick text to Edward before we're back on the road.

**We'll be there in ten. ~Bella**

I'm nervous, Edward's nervous, Nathan's...well, he's singing along to Disney tunes right now.

I spoke to Edward last night and told him Nathan had taken everything well, and so on. I also asked if Edward's dog was nice and if he could be there, too. Edward assured me Taz—that's his name—was just an old cuddler and that he could certainly be there. 'Cause I'm thinking the dog could be an icebreaker or something. I don't know. I'm just hoping for the best.

In order not to have too much of nothing going on, I also took it upon myself to bring the ingredients for Saturday Soup. It's Nate and my tradition: we eat soup after a day of playing in the snow and then finish it off with popcorn and other snacks for a movie night. So, Edward knows I'll be using his kitchen later.

"Mommy, are we there yet?"

I respond, watching him in the rearview mirror. "Almost, baby. You excited?"

He shrugs a little and looks out the window. "I hope he likes to play superheroes."

I have to grin at that. "Have you decided what movie we're gonna see?"

"Yeah." He nods and giggles. "*Kick-Ass*." Another giggle. "Ha, ass. Ass. Assss."

"That's enough, Nate," I chuckle, at last seeing the cabin ahead.

"Do you think he will like *Kick-Ass*?"

"Yes," I say and slow down the car. And if he doesn't like it, he will pretend just like I do. There are a few parts of *Kick-Ass* that are way too mature, so I always skip those. Or press mute.

Blowing out a deep breath, I park the SUV in front of the carport.

*Here we are.*

My fingers are still gripping the wheel as I tilt my head in the right direction to see the cabin, and I'm pretty sure I just saw something moving in the kitchen window.

Someone. Not something. He knows we're here.



"My daddy live here?" Nate asks. "Like Santa—middle of the forest like in *Fred Claus*."

I laugh nervously and unbuckle my seatbelt. "Yeah, like Santa. Can you undo your belt, honey? I'll go around to let you out."

*Deep breaths.*

Once I've exited the car, I inhale the crisp air, letting it calm me down. Not that it works. Fuck, I don't think I've ever been this nervous.

I open Nate's door and manage to smile for him. "Are you ready to meet him?"

He nods. "You promise he gonna think I'm awesome?"

"I promise." I help him out and then tell him to wait while I get the bag of groceries I brought.

Since we're in the middle of nowhere and it's a calm day—not even a breeze—I hear when the door to the cabin opens. Still, I don't turn around. But after a second or two, I see him in my periphery. Him. Edward. And Nate is out, too.

*Deep breaths.*

With a small smile, I finally turn to Edward and see that his eyes are glued to Nathan.

Standing in jeans, unlaced construction boots, and a black hoodie, he looks pretty bulky and intimidating, but all that disappears when I get a closer look at his expression.

I watch as he swallows hard, as his eyes well up, as he blinks back tears, as he sticks his hands into his pockets, as his chest heaves a few times with shaky breaths.

Meanwhile, Nate inches closer to me until he's hugging my thigh. He's definitely not scared; he's just shy around strangers. He's curious, though, 'cause he usually hides his face, too.

"Hi," I say quietly, a bit hoarsely.

Edward's eyes find mine, and he exhales. "Hey. Um..." He glances down to Nate and then back to me. "Need any help with that?" He points to the bag.

I shrug, not really needing help, but he takes a few steps forward and grabs the bag anyway.

"Thank you for coming," he whispers thickly.

I nod and avert my eyes to Nathan. He's still staring at Edward with a curious look on his face.

"Let's go inside?" I suggest.

Edward walks ahead of us with the groceries, and I pick up Nathan and position him on my hip. Partly because he's not dressed for being outside right now—his overalls and boots are in a bag in the car, in case we're going out later. And partly because he's still clinging to me.

In the hallway, I remove Nate's jacket and sneakers, not a word uttered by anyone, and follow with my own jacket and shoes. We're both dressed casually, Nathan in blue sweatpants and a black long-sleeved t-shirt, and me in jeans and a snug grey hoodie.

Still quiet, we all walk into the kitchen, and this is where I feel the need to break the silence.

I pick up Nate again and sit him down on the kitchen island, just as Edward places the bag of groceries on the counter next to the stove.

Introducing them would feel...awkward, formal, and weird. Instead, with Edward's back turned to us, I pretend to whisper to Nathan, knowing that Edward will still hear us.

"Did you know that Daddy likes superheroes, too?" My words are for Nate, but my eyes are on Edward's back. He stiffens but says nothing, while Nathan's expression turns into one of even more curiosity. I nod. "He used to read comics when he was little."

*Come on, Cullen. Turn around. You can do this.*

"What kind?" Nate whispers back, and he doesn't *know* how to whisper quietly.

I wink at him. "I don't know. Maybe we should ask him."

Staring at Edward's back, I will him to make a move. I don't want to pressure him, but I do think this is the easiest way to start up a conversation. My—*our*...son...is very easygoing. It doesn't take much to make him happy.

"What kind?" Nate asks again, only this time he looks to Edward.

"Edward?" I prompt softly.

The man in question clears his throat and turns around slowly, and I catch him quickly wiping his cheeks.

It creates a small crack in my heart.

"I liked many—um, *Hellboy*; I read that a lot," he says quietly.

"He's cool," Nate giggles with a lopsided grin. "He's all red. But Mommy says I'm too little to see the movies. There are two *Hellboy* movies." And he holds up three fingers.

Edward's shoulders sag and his eyes flick to mine. I see relief.

The corners of my lips tug upward. My expression tells him...*relax; he's not difficult to impress, Cullen.*

"Mommy's favorite is *Batman*," Nathan says matter-of-factly.

I chuckle and roll my eyes. Then I scoot him across the surface on the kitchen island before I walk around it. I need something to occupy my hands; cooking will take care of that. Hopefully, it will also lighten the tension.

"*Batman*, huh?" Edward smiles at me—carefully, hesitantly.

"It's the only one I bothered to read," I whisper to him behind my hand.

He grins.

"The movies are good," I admit. Otherwise, superheroes aren't really my thing. "George Clooney?" I nudge his side with my elbow. "The best Batman ever." And the hottest. Christian Bale can take a hike.

"Not Val Kilmer?" he teases.

I shake my head no and start to unload the ingredients for the soup.

While I rummage through the cabinets, Edward and Nate talk about superheroes. It's easy to see that Edward isn't as obsessed as Nate is with Superman and all the gazillion others, but I think it's impossible anyway. It's all Nate talks about, it seems. Regardless, Edward is far from clueless, and the ice is currently breaking, melting away.

The only negative thing that comes with cooking is that my mind tends to wander.

With both Nate and Edward busy, I start thinking about my own feelings, my own reactions, and my own thoughts on all this. And truth be told, I don't know what I feel yet. I'm mostly relieved my son seems to be doing okay. Edward, too. As for my own emotions...I just don't know yet. Perhaps it will hit me later.

A hand on my shoulder startles me and brings me back to the present.

"Sorry," Edward says, quickly pulling his hand away. "I said your name, but you seemed out of it." Oh. I release a breath and nod for him to go on. "Uh, Nathan asked if he could meet Taz? He's upstairs in my room. Is it okay if I bring him down here?"

"Um, of course," I say slowly, glancing over to Nate. He's still sitting on the island, a hopeful smile on his face. It makes me smile in return.

"All right, I'll be right back," Edward promises before leaving the kitchen.

I raise a brow at my boy. "It's going well, isn't it?" I whisper.

"Uh-huh. He's cool." He nods, seemingly having just another regular day. "Can I have some, please?" He points to the carrots I'm slicing. "Is there any ranch dip?"

"No, sorry." I snicker and cut him a few carrot sticks; they're easier for him to hold on to. "I'm making the curry soup—that okay?"

He gives me his approval as we hear the sound of a huge bear coming down the stairs. Well, at least that's what it sounds like. In reality, it's a black Labrador that runs down and into the kitchen. Edward follows.

"Ooh, can I pet him?" Nathan asks, grinning down from the island at the dog. Taz pretty much just stands there, tail wagging and tongue hanging out. He takes a whiff of my leg before...nothing. "Hi, Taz!" Nate waves at him.

"Sure," Edward answers and walks toward Nate. He's about to help Nathan down when he suddenly stops and quickly looks to me, eyes showing slight panic.

I stare at him, a challenging grin on my face. I cock a brow for good measure. It's so that he realizes he has nothing to freakin' panic about. 'Cause I doubt Nate will even care that his dad is about to pick him up. For the first time. Ever.

That thought makes my gaze soften, and I offer Edward an encouraging nod.

"It's okay," I mouth.

He nods, too, maybe to himself, and then closes the distance and lifts up Nate.

The sight of the two of them so close, looking so alike, causes a wave of emotions to rush through me—emotions I didn't expect. My stomach does a somersault, and I sorta hold my breath there for a moment.

Edward seems almost reluctant to let go of Nate but does so anyway.

"He's like a big teddy bear," Edward chuckles, squatting down next to the four-year-old who is staring wide-eyed at Taz. Oh, fuck. I just know the kid is gonna ask for a dog the minute we go home. Well, I'll have none of that. I love dogs, but I hardly have the time. He will just have to settle for Taz whenever we're out here.

Nate is sold, and while I continue preparing lunch, he and Edward sit on the kitchen floor and pet Taz and talk more about superheroes. Every now and then, Edward will try to change the subject and ask trivial questions about Nate's likes and dislikes, but it always comes back to superheroes. In the end, Edward and I share a laugh at Nate's obsession.

It feels good.

~CYE~

Lunch is...I wouldn't say uncomfortable because that would be a lie, but it's definitely different. Like the last time I was here, we sit by the table in the living room, and I catch Edward staring at me several times. With my eyes, I ask him what's up, but he just shakes his head and returns to eating.

"There's no rush, kiddo," I chuckle and wipe Nate's chin of soup. "Take it easy, okay?"

He nods and eats slower. For a little while.

"What are your plans?" Edward asks me quietly. "You're not—I mean, are you leaving soon?"

I smile and grab another roll. "There's no rush," I repeat in a whisper. "I'm pretty sure Nate wants to watch a movie after this—if that's okay."

The relief is written all over Edward's features. "More than okay."

I wink. "You might think differently once you know what movie it is."

He laughs through his nose, looking so genuinely happy that it's contagious.

"So...where's Emmett today?" I wonder.

"He's in Kenai," he responds. "I think he's getting ready to call Rosalie, and he wanted privacy for that."

I nod in understanding. "I hope they'll work it out."

~CYE~

After lunch, Edward helps Nathan put on the movie while I stall a little in the kitchen with the snacks. I guess I just want them to have a minute or two by themselves. But after a while, I take the two bowls with popcorn and candy and walk back to the living room. Three glasses and a bottle of Sprite are already set on the table, and the light has been dimmed low.

"What kinda movie *is* this?" Edward asks, holding up the cover. "It looks..."

"It sucks," I mouth, referring to *Kick-Ass*. "Oh, it's just terrific," I add for Nate's benefit.

"It's awesome." Nate nods, grinning widely. "Mommy likes it lots."

I give Edward a look, to which he snickers and plops down on the couch.

With him occupying one end of the couch, I sit down on the other, and Nathan ends up in the middle.

"Use both hands, baby," I remind him when he reaches for his Sprite.

He gives me the stink-eye. "I was gonna, I promise."

"Right." I stifle a giggle and give the remote to Edward. "Maestro?"

Edward pushes play, and maybe I should've warned him about how Nate gets when a "good" movie is on. 'Cause here's the thing: he likes to give his own commentary, and he can't—under any circumstances—sit still.

A few minutes later, Nate begins. "That's Dave, Daddy!" He points to the screen. "He's Kick-Ass."

My eyes find Edward right away, knowing very well it is the first time Nate has called him Daddy.

Judging by Edward's expression, he knows it, too, and he's not the only one who gets choked up. I feel the same.



"You okay?" I ask quietly.

He swallows hard and offers a small nod.

But about twenty minutes later, I can see that it's becoming too much for him. Nathan is basically bouncing on Edward's lap, pointing out the different "heroes" in the movie and what they can do.

"Mommy, here comes Hit-Girl again!" And Nate jumps over to me, practically vibrating with excitement.

"I know," I chuckle and ruffle his hair.

"Bella," Edward whispers, and I look to him. "I just..." He jerks his thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of the front door. "I need a minute."

"Of course," I whisper back, concerned.

"I'll be right back, buddy," he tells Nathan, plastering a grin on his face. But I can see that he has reached his limit and is overwhelmed.

"Hurry—you don't wanna miss the fight," Nate mumbles, eyes on the screen as he attacks the popcorn bowl. "Yeah, Kick-Ass!"

I watch as Edward leaves.

Five minutes, that's all I can take. Then I have to go outside and make sure he's okay.

"Mommy will be right back, Nate," I say as I stand up. "If you need something, we're just outside."

"Uh-huh." He's too engrossed in the movie.

With quick steps, I make it to the hallway and put on my boots. Forgoing my jacket, I open the door and spot Edward sitting on the porch swing. Elbows on his knees, and hands cradling his face.

"Edward?" I say softly.

He goes rigid for a second but relaxes quickly. "Sorry," he croaks, wiping his cheeks. "It's just..."

"Hey, it's okay; I get it," I murmur and walk toward him. Standing in front of him, I act on instinct and place a hand on his shoulder.

"Fuck," he whimpers, squeezing his eyes shut. I notice that his hands are now balled into tight fists, too.

I take a step forward, wanting to...comfort, I think.

Seeing him so shaken is a new experience for me.

It stirs up a shitload of feelings.

"He's amazing, Tinks," he chokes out, looking up at me. I hold my breath, taken aback by the raw emotion in his eyes. "And I'm so fucking sorry." His face crumbles again, and he averts his eyes once more. "I'm sorry."

I don't reply, but I close the distance and hug him.

Instead of calming down, Edward breaks. He lets out a small cry and places his hands on the backside of my thighs. Then he drops his forehead to my stomach and squeezes me to him.

There's nothing I can do but be there. Here.

"I'm sorry," he sobs, the sound muffled by my hoodie. "I'm so sorry."

I believe him.

"I know," I whisper, stroking his hair. It's still so soft. The way I remember it.

"I've missed so much," he whimpers.

Blinking back my own tears, I realize that missing out on Nathan's first four years will always be his biggest regret.

A pinch of resentment melts away.

As horrible as it may sound, it gives me comfort to know, see, and feel how much he actually loves Nate. I mean...seeing this, seeing how upset and broken he is...yeah, it matters to me. Had he not been this way, then maybe I wouldn't have believed him? I don't know, but it makes sense in my head.

Suddenly, Edward stands up, only to wrap his arms around my shoulders. Once again, he repeats how sorry he is, but I tune it out and focus on the fact that we're hugging. Not only that, but we're pretty much squeezing the breath outta each other.

Silent tears trickle down my cheeks as I tighten my hold on his midsection.



## *Chapter 21* In Sickness and Health

*Chapter song – Wide Awake by The Dirty Guv'nahs*

**EPOV**

*I let out a shaky breath and blink back tears, my heart threatening to pound its way out of my chest.*

*Have you ever looked into your own eyes? Only, they don't belong to you?*

*Not a million photo albums could've prepared me for seeing Nathan for the first time.*

*It's not the same, and now, now all I can see are his eyes. The innocence and curiosity in them. With his little arms wrapped around Bella's thigh, I watch him peering up at me, not saying a word. Maybe he's shy? I don't know, but I had the idea that shy people averted their eyes. But he doesn't.*

*He just watches, and I'm afraid of a little kid—of the child standing mere feet in front of me. I'm scared to death that he's gonna be disappointed. 'Cause these past couple of weeks, I've heard all about Nathan's obsession with superheroes.*

*I'm not a hero.*

*I hope he doesn't expect me to be one.*

*If anything, he's mine. He and Bella...they're who I had in mind when I finally started fighting for recovery.*

*"Hi," I hear Bella say quietly.*

*Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump. My heart keeps pounding furiously.*

*Forcing my eyes to leave Nathan, I find Bella's eyes instead. "Hey," I respond dumbly. It's sort of an out-of-body experience. "Um." I think I'm in shock—I don't know. "Need any help with that?" I point to the bag in her hands.*

*She shrugs, but my feet carry me closer, and I realize that's what I want, need, and have to have—closeness.*

*He's here, they're here, I chant internally.*

*And it hits me on a new level. They're really here. Bella's really giving me this chance to own up to my fuck-ups.*

*"Thank you for coming," I whisper, a bit more tearfully than I wished.*

*She nods and then suggests we go inside.*

*It gives me a moment to try to pull myself together.*

*I'm already falling apart, barely able to breathe.*

*He's here, behind me, in the kitchen—they both are. My fucking son. This is huge. Incomprehensible. Overwhelming.*

*I give myself an internal pep talk, determined to get through this day without breaking down. Not that it would've been weak to start crying like a bitch—I think, I hope—but I want to enjoy this. I want to enjoy the first day I have with my own son.*

*At this point, I don't know that I'm going to fail at keeping my emotions in check.*

*In retrospect, it was an impossible feat.*

*The story of my life—hindsight is 20/20.*

I remember this happening to me before—breaking down and being unable to fucking stop. I'm out of control, much like last time. Only this time, I'm clinging to Tinks as if she's what holds me together.

Last time, I was alone in my condo, surrounded by empty vodka bottles.

The tears wouldn't stop then, and they won't stop now.

*I'm sorry.*

I wanted her to have an abortion back then. I didn't want Bella to complicate my life more, I didn't want a kid to bring me down further, and I didn't need more angst. I also didn't want my dad to find out and take his anger out on her. Or me...more than he was already doing, that is. So, I threw that money on Bella—the money for the abortion. And before that, I'd called her a worthless whore...in front of the entire school.

*I'm sorry.*

Those two words are pathetic, so inadequate.

The pile of regrets is like—like a fucking mountain.

I will always live with those regrets.

There will always be that little *twist, stab, churn* going on inside of me.

To be honest, Tinks forgiving me is the last thing on my mind, because I know I won't ever forgive myself. Moving on, sure, I'll do that. I will live. But will I ever look into her eyes and not be reminded of what I've done?

From the beginning, when I started planning all that...*shit* I put her through...I knew how harsh, how monstrous, and how vile it'd be. I was so aware, and that's what killing me right now. Had I not *known* that I was about to fucking *crush* her, maybe it would've been different. No, I didn't have a grasp of exactly how *much* I'd destroy her, but I still knew I would—to some extent.

*I'm so sorry.*

"Shhh." She soothes me, strokes my hair, as if I'm some good guy who deserves it. "Deep breaths, Edward," she whispers.

I'm glad she doesn't utter the words, "It's okay."

Because this is so far from okay.

But I'm still selfish. I don't break away—I don't end the hug, 'cause... 'cause this is the first hug I've received in years. Sorry, but Emmett's bro-hugs don't count.

In fact, I'm pretty sure the last person I hugged prior to this was also Tinks.

How fucked up is that?

What's even more fucked up is that I paid to have my son killed.

"Fuck," I choke out, and...*twist, stab, churn*. My stomach is a knotted mess, nausea creeping up. And the guilt...Jesus Christ, it's eating me alive.

Feeling my knees buckle, I end up on the porch swing again, but I bring Bella with me, not giving a fuck about personal space and what's appropriate. I'm just starved for some closeness. Vicious goddamn cycle: I need to prove myself, yet I *use* her—to comfort my sorry ass?

*I'm sorry, Tinks.*

"Edward," she breathes out, hugging my neck. My face is buried in the crook of hers, with my arms now snaked around her waist. And I realize that I've forced her onto my lap, her legs straddling me. "Stop apologizing."

I shake my head minutely, gasping for air. "Never." I squeeze her so hard, wanting to go back in time and run away with her.

If I'd done that, maybe I would've been the one who took that photo of Nathan on Tinks' chest—right after his birth.

*Fucking hindsight.*

Maybe I would've been there to see his first step, to hear his first word, to take all those pictures. And it would've been more than that. I don't just want the milestones, the happy moments. I wish I'd been there the first time he was sick or hurt himself—to comfort him, to have him rely on me, to hug him and brush away his tears.

I would've held him.

I only know what it feels like to have him in my arms as a four year old.

*I run up the stairs, my heart finally drumming at a slower pace. I'm still in shock, I think, to have them here—both of them. But I can breathe now, as opposed to fifteen minutes ago.*

*Opening the door to my room, I see Taz on my bed, looking nothing like a guard dog. The lazy fuck is on his back, mouth popped open and tongue hanging out.*

*"Taz," I say, snapping my fingers; he startles awake. After jumping down from the bed, he moseys over to me and rubs his face against my leg, which means he wants to be scratched. "Is chasing birds really the only way to keep you alert?" I squat down in front of him and scratch him behind his ear. I blow out a breath. "Be good down there, yeah?" I swallow hard. "If you can do a few tricks, I'd appreciate it." Yeah, okay, this is stupid, 'cause Taz only knows how to sit and heel on command. I guess I just... "I guess I just want my son to like you," I whisper and then let out a shaky laugh. My son—I just wanted to say the words, and I did it to my fucking dog. "Come on, you lazy bum."*

*Taz barrels down the stairs, and I follow him through the living room and into the kitchen. The cabin is already smelling delicious thanks to*



*whatever Bella's got cooking on the stove. I think she's frying curry with butter and a bunch of vegetables. It makes my mouth water.*

*"Ooh, can I pet him?" Nathan asks, bouncing a little as he sits on the kitchen island. His grin, lopsided as my own, is wide and dedicated to Taz on the floor. "Hi, Taz!" I smile when he waves down at the dog.*

*He's me at that age—Nathan, he's me. My own baby book told me as much when I compared mine and Nate's this past week. I never thought I'd go through the photos from my past, but when I opened one of the several albums Bella let me borrow, I grew curious; I wanted to see if there were similarities—more of them.*

*Remembering Nate's question about petting Taz, I respond with a "Sure," and walk toward him to help him down to the floor. My arms are reaching for him when I realize what I'm doing, and I panic for a second, eyes seeking out Bella. She just grins and cocks a brow, seemingly not seeing the big deal. But it is a big deal, because if Nathan allows me to pick him up, I'm afraid I won't be able to let the kid go.*

*A moment later though, her gaze softens and she gives me a small nod, an equally small smile playing on her lips.*

*"It's okay," she mouths.*

*It's okay. It's okay. It's okay.*

*Releasing a breath, I nod to myself and close the distance. My hands go under his arms, and I pick him up, immediately pulling him close. Shit, what if I dropped him, huh? Bella would run for her life.*

*I just wanna hug him to me—feel his arms around my neck or something.*

*Nathan is all giggles as I slowly lower him to the floor, completely unaware of the significance of all this.*

*I don't know if I'm thankful or disappointed.*

Tinks' fingers playing with the fine hairs on the back of my neck brings me back to now.

I let out a shuddering breath and give her waist a squeeze.

"I'm sorry," I breathe out, sniffing. Backing away a little, I use the sleeves of my hoodie to wipe my cheeks. I also see how I've soaked the fabric of Bella's shirt. "Fuck—sorry," I mumble, brushing a thumb over the wet spots.

She just shrugs and smiles as she taps my shoulder with a finger.

I tilt my head and look down, only to see that there's a damp spot on my shirt, too. And when I meet her gaze again, I notice that her eyes are a little red.

It's weird how I once caused her tears and didn't give a fuck, but now...it breaks my fucking heart to see her sad.

"Feeling better?" she asks softly.

I nod. "A little. Thank you." I swallow. "It's been..." *a big day? Too much? Overwhelming?*

"I know." She smiles knowingly and touches my cheek. Which causes me to close my eyes and savor. She has no idea how I feel about her, how sorry I am, how I look up to her, how proud I am of her, how much I adore her. "I will forgive you, Edward," she whispers. At that, my eyes flash open again. "Just...patience, all right?" My brows furrow, wondering if she's really being honest. Because I can't see how she could ever forgive me. "I'm not just talking about this—this with Nate. I mean all of it—what happened in the past." She blows out a breath. "I know I will forgive you for all of it. I just need time."

I shake my head, blinking back a new round of tears. "You shouldn't," I croak.

She smiles ruefully. "You're wrong." No. I'm not. "I can see that you've changed, Cullen. And..." She grimaces and averts her eyes. "I won't punish you for something Carlisle and Esme did."

"They didn't write on those lockers," I grit out. "They didn't knock you up, and they didn't throw money at you for an abortion."

"I'd like to think we're both responsible for getting me pregnant," she responds dryly, folding her hands between us. My own are hanging limply at my sides. "As for the rest..." She chuckles humorlessly. "You're right; that was all you. But it's not as simple as that. Had your parents just been good..."

I tilt my head, annoyed and frustrated. "I still knew what I was doing," I whisper. "I planned the whole thing, remember? I *knew*, Bella. And I didn't care enough. I just thought about myself—about getting out of Forks. There was one small part of me that thought it was about your own safety; I wanted to protect you from my father. But..." I chuckle darkly. "I was fucked in the head." I tap my temple. "Because if I had really wanted to protect you, I would've put my foot down and told you to get out safely. And I sure as shit wouldn't have asked you to get an abortion."

*Twist, stab, churn.*

I was one selfish, cruel, vicious motherfucker.

"Who says I would've backed down, Edward?" she asks, raising a brow. "I was stubborn; I had seen what abuse did to Alice. You remember her?" I swallow hard and nod hesitantly. "Exactly, and I was afraid you'd do the same. I was also afraid Carlisle was gonna kill you." She shakes her head sadly. "I wouldn't have obeyed if you'd told me to skip town."

"*Why?*" I choke out, unable to understand.

"Because I cared about you, of course!" she whisper-yells.

Her admission pretty much floors me.

As my breath leaves me in a whoosh, she continues.

"My entire family—*everyone...was dead*," she grits out. "Can't you fucking see that, Edward? As destructive as our relationship was, you were all I had at that time. You were all I had left!"

Tears fill my eyes, and it feels like I've been punched in the gut. At the same time, I revel in the knowledge of having someone who cared about me. At least back then.

The difference between us—four years ago—was that I didn't show that I cared. Instead I crushed her to pieces.

I was such a fucking coward.

"You're beating yourself up for the both of us," she says quietly, flatly. "I see it in your eyes, you know? The regret, the remorse, the *guilt*." She gives me a look. "I don't need to punish you more, 'cause I know what will always kill you."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"Missing out on Nathan's first four years," she replies with a shrug. Yeah... *twist, stab, churn*. "That is a time I will have forever. You won't. Your decisions back then ensured that. You pushed me away. And now you regret it."

*Understatement.*

I look down, slowly placing my hands between us. They almost touch hers. Just a few inches separate them.

"Nothing will make you feel worse than that," she whispers.

"You're right," I breathe out, swallowing the lump in my throat.

In my periphery, I see her nodding. "That's also how I know you love him. If I didn't see it in your eyes..."

"I get it," I murmur hoarsely. "And I do," I whimper, tears spilling over, "I do love him."

To my surprise, she closes the distance between our hands and places hers in mine.

"I know," she whispers.

Holding my breath, I lace our fingers together, hoping she won't pull away.

She doesn't.

"Just give me time, okay?" she asks softly.

I look up and stare into her eyes. What I want to say is...*I can give you forever.*

But I'm pretty sure she'd misinterpret that. No, actually, she would see it for what it is. She would know I want it all. With her.

That won't happen—ever. Maybe she will forgive me for what I've done, but the only thing we will share is Nathan. She won't see me the way I see her. Hell, she's moved on, anyway. She's with *Riley*.

I will take what I can get and be grateful for it, 'cause I don't deserve any of it. I refuse to be greedy.

The only thing I say to Bella, in response to her plea, is, "Anything."

She smiles and is about to say something, but the door opens, revealing Nathan's head.

A goofy grin is in place. It's a sight I can only smile at. He's too fucking cute. "Mommy, you forgot to skip a part," he tells her. Confused, I glance between them.

"What do you mean, baby?" she asks, seemingly confused, too.

"In the movie," he explains. "Kick-Ass said..." He lowers his voice to a whisper, "He said fffuuu...you know the word?"

*Holy shit.* A tearful chuckle slips through my lips.

"I'm sorry," Bella whimpers, holding in her amusement. "You're so good for not saying the word back."

He gives Bella a silly little grin as his ears tint red.

"Are you coming in soon?" he asks, bending down to pick up some snow from the ground. He giggles, closing his fist around the snow. "Or can we go out and play? The movie is over."

Bella looks to me, arching a brow in question.

I shrug and decide to be honest. "I'm not ready for you to leave yet," I admit softly.

She squeezes my hands. "It's still pretty early. There's no rush." Then she turns to Nathan. "Go inside; Daddy and I will be back in in a minute, and I will get your snowsuit from the car."

*That...what she calls me...Daddy...it won't ever get old.*

*If Nathan calls me Daddy again, that won't ever get old, either.*

*Because the first time...I thought I was gonna burst.*

*I don't really have a clue what the movie's about, but I couldn't care less about it. What I do care about is watching Nathan and seeing how enthusiastic he is. He's a happy little kid, which only makes me want to worship the ground Bella walks on. Because she's the one who has given him everything. She's given him the foundation for a happy childhood and, unlike my own parents, I know Bella won't stop. Nathan is her world.*

*"Shhh! It's starting," Nathan says, even though Bella and I haven't uttered a word. I smile down at him, not giving a fuck about the screen. He can't even sit still. "That's Dave, Daddy!" He points to the TV.*

*Meanwhile, my eyes widen and I feel my face drain of color.*

*Sucking in a quick breath, I try not to lose it.*

*I heard him right, didn't I?*

*In need of confirmation, I tilt my head in Bella's direction, and I'm met with her concerned expression.*

*Yep, I heard him correctly. He just called me—he called me...*

*Oh, fuck.*

*"You okay?" she asks almost silently.*

*No, I'm not okay. My son just called me Daddy for the first time, and I'm afraid to fall apart.*

*Keep it together, Cullen!*

*To Bella, I offer a small nod.*

*As if I weren't already struggling, the next twenty minutes or so are pure torture. Repeatedly, I blink back tears and try to control my breathing. But when Nathan jumps onto my lap, I know it's only a matter of seconds before the floodgates open.*

*He's so soft, so small, and so fucking amazing. And he's right here, pointing things out to me. His little hand is fisting my shirt, his little butt is wriggling, and his eyes are darting between my own and the screen as he introduces the characters.*

*Too much, too much, too much.*

*My chest heaves with a shuddering breath, one that I have to push down before it turns into an ugly sob.*

*I don't wanna scare the poor kid to death with my uncontrollable emotions.*

*"Dave want to do kissy faces with that girl," he giggles, pointing at the girl in the movie. At the same time, he leans back with his head resting on my chest. A chest that feels like it's expanding in every way possible. Literally, figuratively, physically...like I'm about to explode.*

*I feel lightheaded, and I need to get out of here for a moment.*

*When Nathan bounces over to Bella and says something about a Hit-Girl, I get my opportunity.*

*"Bella," I choke out in a whisper. She looks to me. "I just..." My throat closes up, so I jerk my thumb over my shoulder. I draw a quick, shallow breath. "I need a minute."*

*"Of course," she whispers back.*



That brought me out here.

"So, shall we bundle up?" Bella suggests.

I nod quickly. "Let's go for it."

And she leaves my lap. It's sad how bereft I feel.

~CYE~

"How are we gonna team up, honey?" Bella asks Nathan.

The boy looks thoughtful for a minute, all while I can't wipe the grin off my face. In his snowsuit, he's a little ball of energy. And since the snow is pretty deep, moving isn't the easiest for him.

*I should clear the driveway again.*

Taz is out here, too, and Nathan has decided that Taz is his sidekick.

"Boys against girls?" Bella suggests and shoots me a wink.

I raise a brow at her.

"We're one, two, three boys, Mommy," Nathan says, scrunching his nose.

"I can take care of myself, buddy, I promise," Bella retorts, amused and... a little too confident, in my humble opinion.

"You sure about that?" I ask, scratching my eyebrow. "I gotta say, your cockiness makes me wanna..." I point down at the snow.

She laughs. "Makes you wanna what? Throw snowballs at me? Well, you gotta aim right to do that. Maybe your aim stinks."

"Oh," I chuckle. "You really shouldn't have said that, Swan."

"Does your aim stink, Daddy?"

*Jesus Christ, slay me already.*

Looking down at Nathan, who's standing right next to me, I push down my emotions. I'm getting used to it.

"It does *not* stink," I say, grinning. When my vision blurs at the edges, I blink that shit back. "Want me to show you?"

His smile widens. "Yes! Throw something at Mommy's car."

My mouth opens and then closes. Bella lets out a cute squeak in protest.

I can't blame her.

"How about a tree," I say slowly, amused, squatting down next to him. I pick up some snow and start forming a snowball. "We don't want to hurt Mommy's car."

"No, we don't." Bella scowls playfully.

"Yeah, okay, that one over there." Nathan points to the large tree right next to my carport.

With a nod, I stand up and press the snow a little harder before I'm done. Then I pull my arm back and throw the ball, slamming it into the tree, which causes the snowball to shatter.

I smirk at Bella; she gives me a glare.

"Yay! Boys 'gainst girls!" Nathan proclaims.

What I hadn't anticipated was Bella's own stellar aim.

'Cause when the epic war begins, it feels like she's ricocheting them at a speed I'd call inhuman. Meanwhile, Nathan is smart and hides behind me. Oh, and the snowballs I make, he takes.

"Oooh, three tough boys!" she mocks through laughs. "Nate, Edward, come on! Taz is the only one who has actually gotten close to me!"

Yeah, and why can't my dog throw a ball? That'd be cool.

Crouching down, I make two snowballs and then tell Nathan, "Buddy, hop onto my back." I figure I can shield him while I advance on Tinks.

Nathan doesn't hesitate, and all I hear are his giggles and belly laughs.

"We gonna get you, Mommy!"

"Crap," Bella mutters, running toward her SUV.

I laugh and follow, Nathan clinging to my neck. "Aw, Bella! Don't be a pansy!"

"Can I have a snowball?" Nathan asks in my ear.

I nod and hand one to him, keeping the second for myself. Then I give Tinks a good chase around her car. Eventually, though, we finally catch up, and I throw the snowball at the back of her head. Her hoodie is up and she's also wearing a beanie, but I still got her enough to make her yelp.

"We win!" Nathan yells. "Daddy, we win!"

I cringe at the volume but can't wipe away the victorious smile on my face.

"You win?!" Bella exclaims incredulously. "What about the twenty snowballs I hit *you* with?"

I shrug and pull Nathan to my front, where I settle him on my hip. "They don't count. Don't you know the rules, Tinks?" I tease.

Her face falls for a second, and I know I slipped. Grimacing, I mouth an apology to her, but to my relief she waves it off, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips again.

"Fine—you win," she grumbles, shooting us another playful scowl.

"Can we make snow angels now?" Nathan asks, squirming to get down to the ground. I let him go reluctantly, but my chest feels lighter when he grabs my hand. "Daddy, I can show you how to do 'em. Mommy say mine are best."

"I bet she's right," I murmur, catching Bella's beaming smile.

"You go ahead," she tells us. "I'm just gonna get something from the car."

With a nod, I follow Nathan to an untouched patch of snow to the left of my porch.

"You gotta lie down." He points to the snow.

Amused, I obey him and sit down on my ass. The hood goes up on my head, too, and I'm fucking thankful now that Emmett forced me to buy thermals and ski pants. However, I'm not wearing a jacket. Just an undershirt and a hoodie. But...whatever. It's not too cold so far, and it's a nice day.

"Don't you have to lie down, too?" I chuckle as I lie down. It's fucking comfortable, I gotta say.

"I will," he says simply. "Okay, out wit' your arms."

He looks so serious, studying my arms as I push them out. And shit, I got snow up my sleeves. Inside my gloves, too.

Behind Nathan, I can see Tinks approaching. She holds a finger over her lips, silently telling me not to give her away. So, I don't, curious to see what she's gonna do.

My answer comes when Bella picks Nathan up and tosses him in the deep snow right next to me.

"I win!" she laughs, fist pumping the air.

"Mommy!" Nathan screeches and sits up. "I wasn't ready!" He shakes off some snow like Taz would do. Speaking of Taz, I see that he's sitting next to Bella's legs. Just so fucking calmly. "Can we do it again?"

At that, both Bella and I crack up.

Nathan, with his nose a little red, tries to stand up, but he trips and lands right on top of me.

"Oomph!" The air leaves my lungs, which causes my laughter to turn into wheezing coughs.

In all my twenty-two years on this planet, I don't think I've ever felt this carefree.

"You okay, bud?" I giggle like a girl.

"I'm cool," he says flippantly, and I stifle laugh. "S'the snowsuit's fault I fell."

"Of course." I humor him, nodding.

Since I haven't heard a word outta Tinks in a while, I lift my head and see that she's still standing a few feet away. Only now, she's holding a camera.

Despite the cold seeping through my clothes, there's also a warmth rushing through me.

"Can you look at Mommy, kiddo?" Bella asks. And Nathan looks up, still half-sitting on my stomach. "You too, Cullen." She flashes me a quick grin before looking through the lens again.

A bit awkward, I smile as she clicks away.

*Mental note: buy a camera.*

"Thank you, boys." She smiles and tucks back the camera in a small camera bag. "Now, I think it's time to head inside. Edward, your nose is red. So is yours, Nate."

Instead of feeling like a chastised kid, I kinda dig that she's so motherly, even to me.

"Hurry," Nathan tells me, looking oddly upset. "C'mon." He gets off me and tugs on my hand. "Gotta get inside, Daddy!" Now he looks panicked, too.

*What the hell?*

Bella notices his expression and frowns in concern. "Honey, what's wrong?"

Standing up, I brush away snow from my legs and ass while I watch Nathan.

His lip quivers, and he's also starting to look angry. "We gotta hurry!" He stomps his foot. "Now—before he gets sick again!"

I freeze, and not for the first time today, I feel like I've been punched in the gut.

My heart fucking breaks for him. And for myself. He thinks I'm going to leave again—get sick and go away.

"Oh, baby," Bella sighs, picking up Nathan. He starts to cry, and I don't think I'm more than a few minutes after him. "He's not gonna get sick like that again."

I bite the inside of my cheek, eyes rapidly welling up.

"Let's go inside," she murmurs. "We'll explain it to you, okay?" Nathan nods in the crook of her neck.

I follow them up the porch steps and into the house.

Taz slinks through before I close the door behind me.

The heat from inside feels good and comes on so strongly that my skin prickles and stings, but it's not enough. It's been a while since I banked the fire in the living room.

"Bella," I say quietly, pushing off my ski pants. She's squatting down and helping Nathan with his overalls and boots; she looks up at me. "Can—can I talk to him?" To be honest, I don't really know what I'm gonna say, but I need him to know that I won't ever be able to walk away from him. That's not a mistake I'll make twice.

Tinks stares up at me pensively.

Then, with one slow nod, she whispers, "Okay." Turning to Nathan, she helps him with the rest of his clothes and says, "How about you and Daddy go to the living room. I can make us some special cocoa."

In response to what she said, I do mental scan of what I have in my cupboards. I *think* I have ingredients for hot chocolate, but I'm not sure. Maybe she brought it?

"Okay." Nathan snuffles and looks up at me.

I force myself to smile for him and hold out my hand.

"I'll join you soon," Bella says softly before heading to the kitchen.

"Come on, buddy," I whisper as he takes my hand. It feels good—different—because before, when we were outside, there were gloves in the way.

"We can make a fire."

He nods and looks down. His grip on my hand tightens.

Once we're in the living room, I guide him to the corner where the fire is, and then we sit down right in front of it.

"Can you show me how?" he mumbles softly.

He's still looking so sad.

I hate it. It makes my insides hurt.

"Of course." I grab a log from the pile and hold it up for him before I throw it in. The fire fizzles and crackles. "Here—take this one." I give him a smaller piece of wood. "Just toss it in."

Chewing on his lip, his eyes dart between the log in his hands and the fire. Then he pushes himself off his butt a little and leans forward to throw the wood into the fire.

A small giggle escapes him as he sits back, but then it's gone when I accidentally snuffle.

"Are you sick?" he asks, bottom lip trembling again.

I shake my head quickly. "I'm not leaving, Nathan," I whisper, swallowing my emotions. "Um—Mommy told you how I was sick, right?"



He nods. "Inside. In your heart?"

Eh. I guess—in a way.

"Right." I clear my throat. "I was..." I blow out a breath, racking my brain for a good explanation.

"Mommy say you were angry and sad."

I nod, 'cause that's certainly correct. "Mommy's right. It was like that for a very long time. But—um, can you see the difference? I mean..." Yeah, what do I mean? Christ. "Something bad has to happen to get sick like that—like I was. It's not like being outside in the cold." Okay, this could work. "So, I will probably have a cold sometimes, and the flu, too. But that's different. Even if I have a fever, I'm not going to leave." Throwing a few more logs onto the fire, I add, "Nothing could make me leave you and Mommy. The way I was sick before—that's not gonna happen again." *That* is a promise I can make. And keep. Because leaving Nathan—just the thought of it...that hurts like a motherfucker. "Leaving will never be my choice."

In sickness and in health, I'm here.

"Promise?"

I look down at him, into his green eyes. "I promise."

Like a flip of a switch, his shoulders look less tense and his smile is back.

And a couple of minutes later, Bella enters the living room with a tray holding three mugs—those green ones with polka dots that Emmett picked out at IKEA in Seattle.

I notice that her eyes are a little red, so I figure she's listened to the conversation.

I'd probably do that, too, if I were her.

I hope what I said didn't upset her, though.

"Everything okay?" she asks and sits down on the couch.

"Yes," Nathan replies for us as he stands up. I follow suit. "Did you put in lots of chocolate syrup for me?"

"Of course," she chuckles.

I cock a brow when I see the mugs, completely topped with whipped cream and chocolate. "You didn't find that here, did you?" I sit down next to her.

"Um, no." She smiles bashfully. "I brought it—in case. Here." She hands me a mug. "I don't take responsibility if you wind up in a sugar coma."

I snicker and raise the mug to my face. "Gotcha." Taking a sip, I'm immediately assaulted by sweetness and chocolate and chocolate and chocolate. "Wow." I chuckle. "I can see why Nathan loves these." I may or may not have to ask Bella for the instructions so I can make them myself.

"They're the best." Nathan licks some whipped cream off his lips.

The only issue with so much sugar is that it makes me crave a fucking smoke. I haven't smoked all day, wanting to keep that shit away from Nathan.

"So...I was thinking." Bella definitely has my attention when she says something like that. I'm still nervous that all this will fall through—that I will disappoint her, that she will take Nathan away from me. "It's getting pretty late."

Oh. Right. Yeah. Of course.

"I get it," I say, composing my face. It's not like I can keep them here forever.

"I wasn't finished," she says, slapping my knee. "Wipe off that puppy-dog look, please."

Shit. So much for composing my face.

"It's Sunday tomorrow," she goes on. "We don't have plans, but we do need to go home." She releases a breath. "So, either you bring your butt to Anchorage tomorrow..."

"Butt," Nathan giggles.

"Or," I prompt Bella, at the edge of my seat.

She smirks. "Or you come with us now—when we leave. You can go with us, or you can take your own car. If you leave with us—"

"I can take a flight home tomorrow," I assure her quickly. Holy shit, I can barely believe her hospitality.

"Great. We have a pullout couch in our living room, or," she snorts a little laugh, "Nathan can sleep with me, so you'll take his bed."

"My bed is awesome," Nathan says seriously.

I don't withhold my smile.

"Of course, if you prefer, there are hotels—"

Again, I cut Tinks off. "Your couch will be just fine."

More than fine.

All I need to do it pack a small bag and call Emmett. Taz is good to stay here alone for six hours or so, which will give Emmett plenty of time to return from Kenai. That's less than thirty minutes away, so...

"When are we leaving?" I ask, suddenly eager. But I can't wait to see Bella's place. And Nathan's room, and...all of it. Funny, Anchorage was nothing to me when I first got to Alaska. Now I can't wait to go.

This day just got even better.

"After this?" Bella suggests, holding up her mug. "We can pick up pizza or something—have a late dinner when we get home."

*Sounds perfect.*



*Chapter 22*  
Not Just Nathan

*Chapter song – Atlas Hands by Benjamin Francis Leftwich*

## **BPOV**

Over the next several weeks, Edward and I establish a routine we both feel comfortable with—for now. It starts with Nate and me driving out to Sterling on Saturday morning; we spend the entire day there, and then Edward follows us home. He spends the night and then either drives or flies home. It all depends on when there's a flight. A few times, he has stayed 'til Monday morning, too. So...yeah, we have every weekend together. He also comes to Anchorage every Wednesday and goes home on Thursday morning. It was three or four weeks ago when he asked if he

could visit us during the week, too, and I agreed right away. Nate was overjoyed.

It's Wednesday today, actually.

It's also the day I've planned to introduce Edward to Jasper, Jada, and their two girls. They're all coming over dinner any minute now.

"Mommy, I'm hungry," Nate announces, joining me in the kitchen. "What's for dinner?"

"Pork chops—you like those." I smile and pick him up before sitting him down on the counter next to the stove. "Here, baby." I hand him a few slices of cucumber. "You wanna help me?"

He nods furiously.

I hand him a whisk for the sauce. "Just stir in this one." I point at the pan with sauce. "Will you let me know when the bubbles appear?"

"Okay."

Keeping a close eye on him, I return to chopping vegetables.

As always, though, Nate gets bored quickly—way before the sauce is hot.

"There you go," I chuckle, helping down on the floor again.

"I can see when Daddy gets here," he says and runs out of the kitchen.

"Don't open the door, though!" I holler.

Nathan knows he's not allowed to open the door himself.

"I won't! I'll ask who it is first! I promise!"

I snicker to myself and go for the tomatoes.

Instead of worrying about how quickly Nathan has formed an attachment to Edward, I'm glad and relieved. Maybe I wouldn't have been if I doubted Edward, but I don't. He's in this.

My only worry now is myself.

I kept waiting for some kind of explosion—I don't know—it was just what I'd expected. But then I spoke to Lisa about—well, I called her in the middle of the night when I had a bad dream about...ugh, anyway...I called her, bribed her with pancakes to come over, and... She came here at four in the morning. We talked. I was nuts. She was understanding, amused, and full by the time she left. Good thing she lives five minutes away, I guess.

The nightmare was about Edward leaving, and my problem was the state of freaking horror I woke up in. I was devastated—not just for Nathan, but for myself. The dream left me confused because I was under the impression that this was all for Nate—that I wasn't personally invested.

Joke's on me.

Lisa told me that it wasn't unexpected for me to grow attached, either. Not necessarily to Edward as a person, but to the last link I have to my past. After all, Cullen has played a big part in my life. And she explained that this fact alone took away some of my anger toward him. When I didn't understand this, she gave me an example. For instance, you're more lenient with family members. People close to you can usually get away with a lot more and still be in your good graces. "Humans are hypocrites by nature," she told me with a glint in her eye. I guess that makes sense now, but it didn't before. A crime executed by a stranger would get a harsher punishment than if a family member had done the same thing. So...Edward's close to me? I don't fucking know. It's frustrating, 'cause I still resent him for hurting me so much back then.

And I told Lisa that, to which she deadpanned, "Well, you need to talk to Edward about this."

Basically, I can't hide behind Nathan anymore.

Because it's not just about him—as I'd previously convinced myself.

"Daddy!"

*Speak of the devil.*

"Hey, little man!"

Wiping my hands on a towel, I make my way out of the kitchen.

What I see when I get to the hallway is Edward squatting down with Nate's arms around his neck.

I smile and lean against the wall.

This—I like this. For myself, too. It's not just about Nathan.

Which I feel conflicted about, but I'll deal.

"I drew a picture in school—you gotta see," Nate tells him and, like always, he runs off like a speeding bullet.

Edward grins and stands up, eyes on Nathan's disappearing form. Once he's out of sight, Edward turns to me instead. "Hey, you. Everything good?"

"Yep. You?" I fold my arms over my chest, needing it. Our greetings are a little forced when Nate's not around, and it almost feels like we're holding something back. I don't know.

He sticks his hands in the pockets of his jeans and bobs his head slowly.

"It's—it's all good. Yeah."

*Cue awkward silence.*

Luckily, Nate rescues us when he runs back with a piece of paper in his hands. And I excuse myself to check on dinner. I've already seen the picture he drew today; a part of me doesn't want to see it again.

A few minutes later, I'm in the kitchen checking the potato wedges in the oven, and I hear a quiet curse coming from the direction of the doorway. I close the oven again and stand up; looking behind me, I see Edward entering the kitchen, too.

"What's up?" I ask.

"You don't wanna know," I think he mumbles, though the next sentence follows quickly. "Did you see this?" He holds up the picture Nate drew today.

"Um, yeah." I smile awkwardly, just a small one, and remove the saucepan from the stove. Edward comes to a stop a few feet next to me—close enough for me to smell his aftershave, a hint of cigarettes, and mint. "Is Nate in the living room?"

"Yeah, there was a movie on," he says quietly. "Some animated superhero family."

I nod and plate all the pork chops.

*Where are Jasper and Jada? They should be here by now.*

"I'm not a superhero, Bella," Edward whispers.

In my periphery, I see him setting down the picture on the counter—the picture of the three of us like a superhero family. Much like the movie Nate's watching in the living room.



"Neither am I," I whisper back. "But you don't need X-ray vision or the ability to fly to be a hero in a kid's eyes."

Edward needs to learn that. He's afraid our expectations are too big; meanwhile, he's the one having them. The only things I demand are devotion, love, and loyalty.

I'm not one of those *prissy* fucking parents who shield their children from everything. I find those people annoying as hell and way too uptight. In order for my son to know what's right and wrong, he needs to hear both sides. I can't tell him not to curse if he doesn't know what a curse word is. And I'm a firm believer that adults and children shouldn't live under the same rules. While I also believe that children do what adults do—and not what they say—it doesn't have to be one way or another. You can find a spot in between. For instance, Nate knows bad words and he knows that I sometimes accidentally say them—though I try hard never to swear in his presence—but I'm an adult. There are things I'm allowed to do—things he's not. He's aware that rules will change as he gets older.

I won't reprimand him for something he hasn't done yet. How will he learn about consequences otherwise? In my opinion, there are things you say up front and things you wait on. When it comes to cursing, eating too much, stating that you don't need to go to the bathroom even though Mommy tells you it's best... Let the child learn by experience. Nathan knows it's bad to swear, and I send him to his room if he does. He also knows that it's best to go to the bathroom before bed, because if he doesn't, he might end up wetting the bed. Oh, and he's very aware of the stomachache he can get if he eats too much and too quickly.

When I was little, my mom told me not to touch the stove; it was hot.

Did I touch it? Of course I did. I was a kid. But I never made that mistake again, that's for sure.

"You're doing just fine, Edward," I tell him with a quick grin.

He smiles crookedly in return, relief evident in his features.

The man needs to relax.

"Anything I can help with?" he asks.

I shake my head no. "Everything's done. But thanks." The salad's done, the meat's done, the sauce, too. I'm just waiting for the potato wedges, and the table is already set. The drinks are on the table...

Hmm, maybe I should change clothes, though. The skinny jeans I'm wearing have a small stain on the thigh from when I made Nate his after-school snack—peanut butter and Nutella toast. My white long-sleeved t-shirt is okay, however.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Shoot," I say, bending over to check the potatoes again.

"Jesus," he mutters. "Um, right. So, I, uh, talked to Emmett. He would like to see you again. You and Nathan."

I chuckle. "Well, that can be arranged. How about this weekend?"

"Really?"

I look up from the oven to see his wide smile. "Sure." I smile back. "I kinda wanna see him, too." I've heard a lot about Emmett since Edward came into my life again, and that's another man who has evidently matured. He's no longer the mountain of a boy who follows Cullen's every move.

"That's awesome," he says, and the silly grin on his face makes him look even more like Nathan. Or the other way around, I suppose. "I can cook

dinner," he goes on. "I actually bought a cookbook after a session with my therapist in Kenai." He lets out a little laugh. "Can you believe that shit? Me—cooking?"

"I'm sure you'll be great," I giggle. "And hey," I bump my hip with his, though it's more his upper thigh, "I can always pitch in."

He smiles down at me, a soft one, eyes happy. I like that, too. "It's not necessary. But you can always sit on the sideline and judge."

Before I can answer, the doorbell rings.

"Can I get it, Mommy?!" Nate shouts from the living room.

"Ask who it is before you open!" I tell him. He gives me a quick okay, and I face Edward again. "Did he ask through the door when you got here?"

"Yeah, he did." He nods. "You're doing an amazing job with him. You know that, right?"

I open my mouth...then close it again. While I've received compliments on this subject before, I realize that it's different when it's Edward saying it. I guess since he's Nate's father, it means more? Maybe.

"Thank you," I say and duck my head for a second.

I feel his fingers around my wrist, and I'm about to look up when Jasper and Jada enter the kitchen, both girls clinging to Jasper's legs.

"Hey!" I smile widely at Olivia and Madison. At the same time, I take a step away from Edward. "How are my favorite girls?"

I don't have Jada fooled, though. As I pick up little Madison, I meet Jada's pointed look.

She thinks my old feelings for Edward are clouding my judgment.

I think she's wrong.

With Madison still sitting on my hip, I make the introductions...just as Nathan runs into the kitchen, too. "Jasper, Jada, this is Edward."

"My daddy," Nate fills in matter-of-factly.

"And," I chuckle, "Edward, this is Jasper and Jada."

"Nice to meet you," Edward says as Nathan attaches himself to Edward's thigh. It's so fucking cute. "Bella's told me a lot about you."

"She's told us a *lot* about you, too," Jada says wryly.

As Jasper shakes Edward's hand, I shoot her a glare for that remark. So does Jasper, actually.

Edward takes it, though, and I think I'm the only one who sees how his face falls for a second.

And in that moment—that exact moment—I wish Jada wasn't here.

"Um, and these are your daughters?" Edward inquires quietly.

"Yeah." Jasper grins and picks up his three-year-old. "Olivia, this is Nate's daddy. His name is Edward."

"Hi." She waves and smiles shyly and then buries her face against Jasper's neck.

Edward shoots her a quick wink.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" Jada asks me.

"No." I turn my back on her and take out the potato wedges from the oven. "You can all take your seats."

For some reason, I'm not surprised when Edward lingers.

"You okay?" I whisper to him.

"I'm fine." His smile is fake. "Let me help you."

Grabbing the meat and the sauce, he's about to walk toward the kitchen table, but I halt him with a hand on his arm. He stares at me; I stare back. Then I motion for him to come closer, which he does.

"See those two people at the table?" I murmur in his ear. Once again, I'm assaulted by the subtle scent of his aftershave. He nods. "They're my friends, but, Edward? You don't have to answer to them." I look up at him, ignoring our close proximity. "You don't owe them anything."

His brows furrow. "That's where you're wrong, *Tinks*," he whispers. I swallow and then exhale shakily. "They took care of you when someone else should have stepped up."

"You had no obligation to take care of me-"

He cuts me off, softly but firmly. "That's debatable, but I did have an obligation to my own son."

Taking a step back, he holds my gaze for a second or two before he moves toward the table.

I breathe out.

Sometimes...or always...but especially right now, I wish all our troubles could just disappear. I wish we didn't come with baggage or issues.

~CYE~

We don't talk too much at dinner. Unless it's about the kids. They're always a safe topic.

Jasper—God bless him—doesn't seem to silently judge Edward. He asks curiously about Sterling, Kenai, and how Edward likes it in Alaska.

Meanwhile, Jada's quiet. She just sits there. I can feel her eyes on me, but I'm so disappointed in her right now. I ignore her.

Another thing I notice is that Nathan, our little bugger, is territorial when it comes to Edward. The way we're seated around my rectangular table, Edward is sitting between Nathan—he's on one short end—and Olivia. I'm across from Edward, with Jasper next to me, and on the other side of Olivia, is where Jada sits. Then, on the other short end, is Madison. So, yeah, when Olivia shyly offers Edward a potato wedge drenched in ketchup and béarnaise sauce and he accepts it with amusement flickering in his eyes, Nathan has to up the ante. He gets Edward's attention by grabbing his hand, and then Nate offers him *two* potato wedges.

I snicker at the display and fork up a piece of meat.

Under the table, Cullen locks his feet with mine.

"Do I amuse you?" he whispers, a glint in his eye. I nod slowly, definitely on the verge of having a giggle fit. In the meantime, Olivia is talking to Jasper and Jada about...something. "I figured saying no would be rude."

I snort a laugh at that, quickly followed by a hand covering my mouth.

"Let me tell you one thing," I lean closer; he does the same, and I keep my voice hushed, "The word no is a godsend. If I always said yes," I raise an eyebrow, "I'd have dead birds buried on my balcony, jewelry made out of boiled pasta, and..."

"I get it," he laughs silently.

"Bella, this was really delicious," I hear Jada say.

I spare her a quick glance. "Thanks." Then I lean over to wipe some ketchup off Nate's face. "Want me to cut up some more, baby?" He nods, and I take my knife and fork to dice up his meat. "Don't forget your vegetables, okay?" I poke his nose, eliciting a giggle from him.

It's weird; he loves vegetables as snacks, but he can't bring himself to eat them at dinner. At least not without some pushing.

Returning to my own meal, I can feel eyes on me again. But it's not Jada. It's definitely Edward, and when I meet his gaze, he has a strange look on his face.

"What?" I mouth, smiling in curiosity.

He shakes his head, a slight crease between his brows. "Nothing," he lies quietly.

I let it go. For now.

~CYE~

"Thanks for dinner, hon," Jasper says, patting his belly. "Amazing as always."

"It really was," Edward agrees as I take his plate. "Thank you."

He's about to stand up, but I chuckle and push him down again. "Relax, Cullen." I grab a few more plates and then walk over to the sink. "Who wants coffee?" There are plenty of leftovers, so I make quick work of dividing it up into four plastic containers. Edward can take two with him home—one for him, one for Emmett—and then there's lunch for Jasper and me tomorrow at work.

"I think we're gonna cut our visit short this time," Jasper says, surprising me. As I walk to the table again to grab the rest of the dishes, I catch the

look he exchanges with Jada. I'm pretty sure they're gonna argue when they get home. It happens extremely rarely, but when it does happen, you can tell by the tension in the room.

"Yeah, Madison's getting fussy," Jada adds, lying. Madison is perfectly content in her highchair.

"I have lunch for us tomorrow, Jasper," I tell him and ignore Jada again.

"Sweet." Jasper stands up and moves to get Olivia. "I'll bring breakfast." I nod; it's usually our deal. If we don't eat with the women and children, we sit in his office. One brings lunch, the other breakfast. "It was really nice to meet you, Edward." He sticks out his hand for Edward to shake it again.

I smile at the gesture; Jasper is really sincere. He's also forgiving and understanding.

"You too, man," Edward returns and shakes Jasper's hand firmly. "I'm glad Bella's got great friends around her."

A few minutes later, we've said goodbye to the Whitlocks.

"Can I watch a movie?" Nathan asks.

I'm not the one who answers, actually. As we all still stand in the hallway, Edward replies to him, having been around our routine many times now.

"After your bath, buddy."

And the words come so naturally, too. I can't help but grin up at him.

It's not until he notices my expression that he realizes what he just said. And since I'm getting a better handle on this new Edward, I just know that he's about to apologize for...whatever...so I pat his bicep as I pass him.

"You've got this, Cullen." I go to the kitchen and clean up the remains of dinner.



From the bathroom, I hear the splashing of water, followed by Nathan's hysterical giggles.

I hear the muttered "Jesus", "holy puck", "dang", and "oh, God" coming from Edward.

It makes me laugh to myself as I wipe down the counter.

"Mommy, I'm squeaky clean!"

Knowing what's coming, I just lean by the counter and wait. Two mugs of coffee are ready. Some milk for Nate. And a small plate of oatmeal cookies.

"No, no, no, get back here, buddy!"

*And here he comes...*

Nate appears in the kitchen, naked as a jaybird, and wriggles his butt.

A soaked Edward is right behind him.

And for the first time in over four years, I look at him with new eyes. I see the man standing in the wide doorway, grey Henley soaked, a towel thrown over his shoulder, wet patches on his dark jeans, a few strands of damp hair falling in his face, a tired grin on his lips, bright eyes, bare feet, Nate's pajamas in his hand...

Aside from how handsome—*and let's be honest: he's a hot one*—he is, there's one more thing.

He looks like a dad.

"You can't catch me, Daddy!" Nate sings and starts running around in the kitchen.

I laugh. "You're such a goof, Nate!"

To make things easier for Cullen, I block the path that would lead Nate around the kitchen island. Our son is a fast little shit; catching him isn't too easy.

"Moovooove!" he squeals, slamming into my thighs.

By now, Edward has reached us, and he throws Nate over his shoulder. "Looks like I *can* catch you!" Before Edward disappears out of sight, he tilts his head in my direction, winks, and says, "Thank you, Mommy."

I sigh.

I don't know the last time I was this content.

~CYE~

Just as I sit down on the couch, Nate comes barreling into the living room wearing his Batman PJs.

"He's—he's *fast*," Edward pants, plopping down on the couch.

Nate laughs, though it dies down when he sees the cookies on the coffee table. "Can I sit over theuh with two cookies?" He points to his beanbag in front of the TV. As for the fingers he's holding up—three, not two.

"He's smart," Edward whispers.

I huff a chuckle.

"Two cookies," I tell Nate, holding up two fingers.

He pouts, wanting three but takes two. And his glass of milk. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I say and push play on the movie. It's hardly something I wanna watch—it's *Megamind*—but I know it won't be long until Nate falls

asleep. "Let me know when you're done, baby. We'll get your teeth brushed."

"Uh-huh—there's *Megamind!*" He waves at the TV, but he turns around to look back at Edward. "It's when he's a baby."

"Gotcha," Edward says with a smirk.

Leaning forward, I grab my coffee before I get comfortable again. Which reminds me... "Hey, that can't be comfortable." I nod at Edward's wet shirt. "I have a t-shirt that you forgot here last time. Want me to get it?"

"Oh, um, yeah—thank you."

Barely a minute has passed when I return with the black t-shirt he left here last week.

"You washed it," he states, and then pulls off his Henley. Um. Just like that. So, yeah, now he's bare-chested in my living room. "You really didn't have to do that." Funny, as I see his tattoos now, I don't see red. I understand more. "Thank you." And now he's not bare-chested anymore.

"No problem," I mumble and sit down again.

The next few moments are quiet, and I was right; Nate is already dozing off. But I'm too lazy to brush his teeth right now. I'll just wake him up before I carry him to bed. It's been a long day—I need to sit on my ass for a few.

"How come you never talk about your boyfriend?" Edward asks suddenly.

My head snaps in his direction, and I stare at him, incredulous. "Say *what?*"

He blows out a breath, appearing to be nervous as hell. "Over the past few weeks," he whispers, "we've been more open with each other, right?"

I nod, wondering...a lot right now. "Exactly. I mean, it's not all about Nathan anymore..." He runs a hand through his hair. "I'm just saying that you don't need to hide...*that*...from me. I get it." Um. I don't. "You're..." He lets out a little chuckle, though he doesn't sound particularly amused. "You're you—you're Tinks. Fucking gorgeous and amazing—inside and out." My cheeks heat up quickly. "Shit, I'm rambling." He tugs more at his hair. "I'm sorry."

"Are you done?" I ask quietly. He nods and tilts his head back against the couch. "I don't have a boyfriend." At that, he lolls his head to the side so he can stare at me. "I don't. I told you this before."

He gives me a tiny smile. "In that sentence you said no, like...six times? I don't know. I just figured it was something you wanted to keep private. I'm sorry."

"You caught me off guard—you mean with Riley...when he called?"

He nods again—hesitantly this time.

I shake my head. "He's not my boyfriend. I think we went on four dates. He wanted more—stuff I wasn't ready for." I release a breath. "He wanted to meet Nate, and..." I grimace.

"Oh," he mouths.

"Yeah..."

"Have...have you, uh, ever introduced Nathan to...?"

"No, not anyone," I admit in a breath. "Riley was the first," I clear my throat, "since you—he asked and I agreed to go out. But I couldn't..." God, why on earth are we talking about this? "I wasn't ready. For anything."

"Oh," he utters again, only audibly this time. He exhales shakily, and a small part of me wonders if he's thinking about the fact that he's the last one I was intimate with. Okay, the part of me wondering isn't *that* small.

Needing to occupy my hands, I grab a cookie from the plate and nibble on it. I don't really want it.

"You, uh..." He swallows. My eyes are trained on the flat screen—not that I know what's happening in the movie. "You're the last one, too, you know. For me, I mean."

I squeeze my eyes shut. "You really don't have to tell me this," I choke out. And, truth be told? I'm the last one? I...I kinda find that hard to believe. "And there's definitely no reason for you to come up with stories."

"Stories?" I can practically hear the frown in his voice. If such a thing was possible. "I'm not—Jesus, I'm not *lying* to you, Bella. You said it—I have no reason to come up with stories."

"Okay," I squeak out, embarrassed.

He sighs. "Fuck, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have...never mind. Can we forget about this?"

I doubt I can, but I'm willing to pretend. "Yeah."

We don't talk about...that...again.

I can't help but think about it, though. Um, not the mechanics of it, but what Edward said about me being his last. Like we both pointed out, there's no reason for him to lie about a thing like that. Nothing to gain, nothing to lose, really.

~CYE~

"Seatbelt stays on until I stop the engine, Nathan," I tell him sternly as I pull onto the road that leads to Edward's cabin. Over the past several weeks, Nate has become more and more impatient between point A and B—or, Sterling and Anchorage. Truthfully, the drive is getting tedious. I can't really believe Edward makes it twice a week, although he usually takes a flight at least once, but he comes with less luggage. I'm always bringing too much. Groceries, leftovers, clothes, toys...

"I promise," he says, bouncing in his seat. "Is Daddy's friend nice?"

I crack a grin in the rearview mirror. "Yeah, he is."

But I don't think Emmett is going to be the highlight of today, though. Edward called me yesterday, nervous, and told me that he has a surprise for Nathan, and he wanted to ask if it was okay...or if it was too early. He has prepared one of the guestrooms—turned it into a room that is now Nate's. I assured him it wasn't too soon; when he takes his naps, it'll be nice for him to have his own room. Not necessary, but nice. And I'm kinda curious to see it myself.

As I pull up in front of Edward's carport, I can see Nathan not-so-patiently staring at the ignition; he's waiting for me to kill the engine. I can also see both Edward and Emmett on the porch. Taz, too.

Once the key is turned, Nate unclicks his seatbelt, pulls on his beanie and jacket, and he's out the door.

"Daddy!" I hear him shout.

I chuckle and let myself out, too, and by the time I make it around the car, Edward and Nathan have met in the middle, both with wide grins on their faces. Edward's squatting down to be at Nate's level, and I'm pretty sure our son is rapidly filling Edward in on the two days since we last saw each other in Anchorage.

With Cullen and his mini-me busy, I walk up the porch to Emmett.

"Long time no see, Swan," he says, and his grin is also wide.

"Ditto, McCarty," I shoot back with a smirk.

He chuckles and wraps his arms around me, and I return the friendly hug with a strength I didn't know I possessed.

While Emmett has matured, too, there's still something boyish in him—something that Edward doesn't have. They're almost equally muscular now, though Emmett's broader shoulders make him a few inches wider. But he still looks young. He looks his age, actually.

"That's a pretty magnificent sight, isn't it?" He lets me go and jerks his chin at Edward and Nate. I nod, definitely agreeing. "You and Nathan," he lets out a low whistle, "you're all Cullen talks about."

I don't really have a response to that.

No, wait. I do. "Edward's talked a lot about you, too." I look up at him. "How's Rose?"

"Well..." He puffs out his cheeks then lets the air out slowly. A chuckle slips out, too. Then he sits down on the porch swing, which is actually more of a bench, and pats the seat next to him. So, I sit down, too. "Do you mind?" He pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

I shake my head. "Not at all."

"Rose..." He lights up a cigarette and takes a pull from it. "At least we're talking, right?" His smile is rueful. "A little bird told me that it's all about second chances." I beam at him. "I'm trying. We talk on the phone, but...I don't know. She wants to come up here."

I lean back against the front wall of the house and cross my legs. "Just take it at a speed you feel comfortable with. She's the one who messed up—you set the pace."

He nods slowly, leaning forward on his knees. Our eyes are fixed on the same two people in front of the porch. It looks like they're wrapped in a bubble, those two. "You've made Cullen happy. You know that? He was one messed up kid when I first visited him in prison." My heart clenches, and Emmett sighs. "Second chances, huh?"

"Works wonders," I whisper, watching as Edward says...something...to Nathan. They're so animated.

"Are you going to give Cullen a second chance, too?" he asks quietly.

I tilt my head in his direction, confused. "Isn't that what I'm doing?"

"Sorta." He purses his lips. "But, uh, he told me you're not ready to talk about your past? Or something."

Oh. That. "I'm getting there," I admit and turn back to Edward and Nathan. "He knows I'm going to forgive him—I just need time." But I've had weeks since I told Edward I knew I was going to forgive him, and I feel more ready now than ever to at least begin. It's been almost three months now. "He's already proven to be a great dad."

"Mommy!"

Not realizing that I'd had my eyes on the ground, I look up to see Nate and Edward coming up the porch steps.

"Daddy say he's gotta surprwise for me!" Nate is like a kid at Christmas.

"No way!" I act surprised.

He nods furiously. "C'mon!"



"Just a second, baby. Come here first—I want you to meet someone."

Nathan becomes shy and walks over to cling to me. Edward remains a few feet away and leans against the porch railing.

"This is Emmett, honey. Daddy and I went to school with him," I say, running my fingers through his soft hair.

"Hi," he mumbles and squirms closer to me.

"Hey, Nathan," Emmett chuckles quietly. He nudges me gently. "Don't let me keep you, guys. Your daddy's surprise is pretty awesome. Go check it out." He winks at Nate.

Nathan tugs on my hand, which means, "Yeah, let's go. NOW."

While Emmett stays behind, Edward leads the way upstairs. We pass the guestroom that he points out is Emmett's, then a bathroom, and Edward's bedroom. Farthest down the hall, we come to a stop.

"It's in theuh?" Nate points to the door.

Edward's eyes find me, and I give him a small nod. This is his show; he's more than capable of handling it.

I'm excited, I note. I wanna peek inside.

"Actually..." He squats down next to Nate. "This is, um...your room. For when you're here."

Nate's eyes widen. "I get a room?" he whispers.

"Yeah, you do. Open the door, buddy."

Which Nathan does very quickly. He pushes the door open and barges in, coming to a stop in the middle of the room.

Meanwhile, I freeze in place right there, still in the doorway.

"Holy shit," I breathe out.

The room is...fucking amazing. The walls are light green, like pear-flavored ice cream. The ceiling is wood—with the beams you can find throughout the cabin. The floor is of the same wood, but more polished. Each wall holds a piece of furniture in dark...I would guess cherry wood. No, that can't be it, 'cause I know cherry wood is more reddish than this. This is like the darkest chocolate. The wall to my left, that's where Nathan's armoire is. There are also a few shelves on that wall. The wall across the room—where the window is—holds two dressers. Then comes the wall which Nate's bed is positioned next to. Lastly, right next to me...two toy chests completely filled with toys. There's also a wooden box under the bed. And the fabrics in the room...*Christ*...pillows, carpet, drapes, the bedding, blankets...they're all in light green and brown.

The room belongs in a magazine.

The second thing that hits me is the scent. And, without my consent, my legs carry me into the room, toward the armoire to my left. My hand slides up the solid wood. And the scent...rich, woody, strong, earthy. It's the top coat—the finish. It smells like...like it's—like it's... "Handmade," I whisper under my breath. Behind me, I hear an overjoyed Nathan as Edward points out different things in the room, but I'm so stuck on the furniture. It's so smooth. Rounded edges. Thick—so solid. I open both doors to the armoire, and my eyes scan the surfaces for traces of... something. I don't know. It looks so professional; the hinges, the carved details, the knobs...but there's still something telling me that Edward hasn't bought all of this. I think he made it. And then I finally get my proof. Because inside the armoire, almost at the bottom, is a small circle carved into the wood...with two cursive letters within.

*E.C*

My eyes well up.

*"Study, Tinks," Edward says quietly, and I look over at him. His eyes are focused on his books, but I see the small smile on his lips.*

*"I can't," I say, pouting. "I'm bored." Now he looks up. "I need a distraction." I roll my eyes, 'cause I can see that his mind goes straight for the gutter. He can barely walk, but he thinks he can fuck? Please. "Not that," I chuckle, and he just shrugs with an impish grin. "Let's talk."*

*"No," he says right away.*

*Hard nut to crack. "Not about...that," I lie. "About something else." I tap my chin. "Did you always want to be a doctor?"*

*Slowly, as if he's hesitating, he shakes his head. Eyes focused on the bedspread. "Still don't," he admits. "Never did."*

*And I get it. It's Carlisle's decision.*

*He controls Edward in every aspect, it seems.*

*Killing Carlisle and Esme doesn't feel so wrong, after all.*

*"What did you want to become when you were little?"*

*He cracks a small grin, but he won't face me. "Um...a carpenter? Something with woodworking." His grin fades. "It's stupid, I know. I was just a kid."*

*I frown. "Why would that be stupid?" But he doesn't have to answer. "Let me guess. Your dear father told you it wasn't good enough."*

*He doesn't reply.*

*"Hey, Jesus was a carpenter." I smile cheekily as he finally meets my gaze.*

*"Right," he chuckles silently. "I'll be sure to tell Dad that."*

*And my smile is gone.*

I wipe at my cheeks, still staring into the armoire.

Nathan is all giggles somewhere in the room.

Edward...he's...well, I think he's standing behind me.

Taking a quick peek over my shoulder, I see that I was right. He's staring at me, brows furrowed, hands on his hips.

"You made this," I whisper tearfully.

His eyes show surprise—maybe because I noticed? Then he settles on a small nod and a nervous little smile. Like he's waiting for me to judge him.

"Is it okay?" he asks, biting on his lip.

Okay is definitely not the word I'd use. "How about amazing?"

He grins and looks down for a second or two. It's the time I need to close the distance between us.

"This is..." I clear my throat and swallow, eyes fixed on his chest. "This is probably something your parents should tell you, but..." I release a breath and look up at his face. "Um, I'm—I'm proud of you." He wasn't expecting that. "Sorry if it sounds lame," I chuckle awkwardly. "It's just...I remember when you told me about this. You said you wanted to be a carpenter when you were little."

His eyes become a little glassy, and I think he remembers that day, too. Because it was the last day we had together. He was so hurt. He tried to keep me out, but eventually he cracked and let me in. However brief it was.

*Sitting there on the floor, I sob into my hands.*

*Tears stream down my cheeks, and I've never felt this sense of hopelessness before. It makes my chest ache at the same time as it feels completely empty. My stomach rolls, and I scream out, the sound muffled by my hands.*

*"Tinks."*

*My head snaps up, my eyes go wide, my mouth pops open, my breath gets stuck in my throat.*

*And I crumble again.*

*I hadn't heard the door open, and now a part of me wishes it never did.*

*"Edward," I whimper, bottom lip quivering. He looks so beat up, so broken.*

*Inside and out.*

*He can't blame his supposed friends in Seattle this time.*

*It's all on his dad.*

*"Don't fucking cry," he whispers, though his own eyes are full of unshed tears. "Stop, Tinks." He shakes his head, staring down at me. "Don't be weak."*

*Weak?*

*Fuck that.*

*Standing up, I approach him cautiously. I make sure to look him in the eye, as opposed to all the cuts and bruises on his face.*

*When I raise my hand to touch his cheek, he shakes his head again. "Don't touch me," he breathes out, and then he walks back into his room. Only this time, he leaves the door open. I take that as an invitation and enter behind him.*

*I remember offering him breakfast, and he told me he couldn't even go downstairs.*

*I take a breath. "Come on, I'll make pancakes."*

*He hesitates. "I..." Then he looks down and shakes his head. "I can't leave the room."*

*I frown. "Why?"*

*When he looks me in the eye this time, all I see is pain. Different kinds.*

*"It hurts to walk," he admits, and my insides constrict painfully. "Um..." He swallows. "My leg, and...uh, I have a cracked rib."*

*My right hand flies to my mouth. "Oh, God." I squeeze my eyes shut.*

*Before I lose the contents of my stomach, I run out of his room and into the bathroom across the hall.*

*"Tinks!" he chokes out.*

*My eyes burn as I throw up. I gag repeatedly and gulp for air.*

*Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God.*

*"Oh, God," I cry.*

*Carlisle broke his fucking rib? What kind of sick animal is he?*

*And Esme...*

*I could kill her.*

*All that neglect.*

*No wonder he's a bully in school. He gets pushed down at home, so he makes sure he's the one doing the pushing around with others.*

*"Tinks." And then I have arms around me. "Christ, baby, stop this. Don't cry."*

I drop my forehead to Edward's chest, silent tears streaming down my face.

His arms go around my shoulders.

"You told me Jesus was a carpenter," he murmurs in my hair.

I chuckle through my tears and nod.

I'm ready to talk. To hash it out. All of it. We need to get our past out in the open—deal with it, move on, repair the fucking cracks, and fill in the blanks.



*Chapter song – Rock Me, Baby by B.B. King, feat. Eric Clapton*

## **EPOV**

"So, what're you gonna do this weekend?" I ask, squatting down in front of Nathan. We're standing outside Jasper and Jada's house, and Tinks is talking to them, so I figured I'd make these few final minutes with Nathan count.

"Madison always chase me and Olivia," he says, giggling a little. "We hide sometimes."

I grin. "Oh yeah? Well, I guess Madison wants to play, too."

"But she just a baby. Olivia and me are big." He holds up his hand over his head. "This big."

"Okay," I laugh through my nose. "Be good, though."

Last week, after I showed Nathan his new room, Tinks told me that she was ready to talk.

I nearly pissed my pants, but that's neither here nor there.

We quickly agreed that having our talk was something we needed to do in private—without a time limit. So, Jasper and Jada are watching Nathan over the weekend while Tinks and I drive out to my cabin. However, the plan is also to have dinner with Emmett, Rosalie, Charlotte, and Peter. Which feels...fucking weird.

I know that Emmett keeps in touch with countless people from high school—Peter definitely included—so when he told me he was ready to face Rosalie again, he had a suggestion.

*"We could get together—all of us. Be young for a night. Have dinner, listen to some music, talk, chill out, have a few beers. I think we need it."*



I was skeptical—still am—but the idea of a night for the grown-ups does sounds appealing. Take the edge off for a night, just relax, and...yeah. So, I called Tinks, talked to her about it, and she was surprisingly all for it. She said we could use a night of some carefree fun—and then we're gonna talk on Sunday...tomorrow.

She called Charlotte and asked what her plans were; we all figured she'd be busy with life in Texas. But she was all for it, too. And, weirdly, especially when she found out Peter's gonna fly up with Rosalie.

It will be like some strange fucking reunion, and I have no idea what to make of it.

"Okay, we're gonna go, baby," Tinks says, walking over to squat down in front of Nathan, too. "Be a good boy, yeah?"

"I *will*," Nathan says for the hundredth time. "I promise, Mommy."

"Great." Tinks chuckles and kisses him. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He smiles and hugs her.

Then it's my turn. Tinks walks to the car, and I pull Nathan closer.

"Don't eat too much candy," I say, snickering. He giggles. "Love you, buddy." I kiss his forehead.

"Love you, too." He returns my hug. And those three words never fail to make my stomach do flips. When I first told him, weeks ago, it sorta slipped out. I panicked, and Nathan didn't respond, not that I expected it. But a few days after that, when I was putting him to bed, he said it first, so naturally, and I swear my heart fucking melted. It just went to mush.

"Mommy and I will be back tomorrow night," I say and stand up.

He nods and waves. "Bye."

As I head for Tinks' car, I look back one more time, but Nathan is already on his way inside the house.

He's eager for his sleepover.

Once around the car, I jump into the driver's seat and put on the seatbelt. As of late, I drive while Tinks is in charge of snacks and mans the radio.

"Are you gonna play tonight?" she asks as I leave the street. I give her a sideways glance, catching the cheeky smile on her face. I shake my head, amused...and a little regretful. "Oh, come on. I wanna hear you play."

"I wish I'd never told you that," I admit, sorta meaning it and sorta not. I don't know. It's nothing special. It's not like I can play the guitar or the piano. It's just one fucking song, and it's on the harmonica. My counselor in prison encouraged us to have a creative outlet. Safe to say, music ain't mine. Sam, my cellmate in prison, played the harmonica. He tried to get me into it. It didn't work, but I was still impressed with the way he could go at it. So, he taught me a few things, all of which I found incredibly lame. Then he put on some Muddy Waters one day, and I fucking love his music. I asked Sam to teach me one of his songs, to which he looked at me as if I'd gone insane. Safe to say, Muddy Waters...yeah, his songs aren't the easiest to play. But...after about four fucking months, I had that song down. However, it's also the only song. I don't know shit. I just managed to copy Sam well enough and then remember what I'd done.

"You have to play. *Please?*" And she fucking pouts. That mouth of hers...

"Distracting," I whisper under my breath and face the road.

I'm so fucked-up in love with her.

It's not some hero complex. It's just her.

She's my fucking Tinks.

"Fine," I mutter.

"Yes!" She actually throws a fist-pump in the air.

*So, that's where Nathan gets it from.*

The rest of the two hour drive is comfortable; there's idle chit-chat every now and then about nothing special. The only thing of significance we talk about is her standing disagreement with Jada. Their conversation is stilted, forced, and both are stubborn. Which sucks, I guess. I mean, I can see both sides. Jada only knows me from what Tinks has told me, and up until about three months ago, it was nothing positive. So...four years of thinking I'm nothing but a selfish prick to...whatever Tinks has said about me recently. And I tell Tinks this—that it would be kinda weird for Jada to like me—but she shoots back with, "She also knows the circumstances. She knows how you grew up." I kinda shrug at that, 'cause Jada *still* doesn't know. Only people close to me do. No one knows better than Tinks, and maybe that's why she's being so forgiving and understanding.

Reluctantly, Tinks says that *maaaaaybe* she gets my point.

She's fucking cute when she's being stubborn.

"I'm still glad she bowed out tonight, though," she says, folding her arms over her chest. And that's another thing, in the car she's always wearing too little. Those tight-as-fuck jeans, and...that shirt...*Jesus*...it's kinda loose-fitting, but it reveals a lot of her left shoulder and her lacy bra strap. It's purple, by the way—her bra. It's dark purple. Lace. So, here I am, trying not to lose my *fucking* mind.

I sigh and tighten my grip on the wheel. "She's just being protective of you. Only a good friend would do that."

"Ugh." She lets out a noise of disgust. "Please don't sound reasonable today, Cullen." I can't help but laugh. "But she didn't have to be so fucking catty—she was plain rude and mean."

I let it go.

In an attempt to change the subject, I ask, "You excited about tonight?"

"God, yes," she groans, cupping her cheeks. Sitting up straighter in her seat, she faces me more fully. "Am I horrible for really wanting this—for *wanting* a night away from Nate?"

I frown and scratch my eyebrow. "Why would that make you horrible?" That's just ridiculous. I haven't been around our son long enough to want a break, but I don't have four years of being there. I have little over two months. "Come on, Tinks. You think you're the only parent in the world who wants a night alone every now and then?" I chuckle.

"Tinks, Tinks, Tinks," she mimics and slumps back against her seat. It'd be a kinda comical sight if I wasn't constantly nervous about slipping—once again—and calling her Tinks. "I need to get over this."

My brows knit together. "Um, what do you mean?" Get over what?

"It bothers me that it doesn't bother me," she says frankly. "And I wanna get over it—I don't want it to bother me that it doesn't bother me. Make sense?"

Not even a little. "Sure..."

She laughs and slaps my arm. "You lie."

She's oddly lively today. I like it.

"What exactly is it that bothers you—bothers you that it doesn't, um, bother you?" Did I get that right?

I'm confused.

"That you call me Tinks again, Edward," she sighs. "A part of me wants to be upset, but I'm not. And that sucks."

Oh.

I...I don't really know what to say about that. Or, maybe... "Maybe it's because we haven't talked yet...?"

She hums and looks out the window. "Yeah... Maybe."

I'm honestly nervous as hell about tomorrow, but at the same time it's all I want. I want to plead my case—beg for forgiveness, talk to her about the past four years, and...I don't fucking know.

Over the past few months, I've seen my therapist in Kenai at least twice a week. One session is usually dedicated to the present, all things involving Tinks and Nate, and one session about my past. He tells me I need to forgive myself, but I've started to believe I need Tinks' forgiveness first. Maybe if she finds me worthy of it, I can, too. So, yeah, I hope tomorrow can bring me something to go on. Because whereas Tinks can read me very well—I can't lie to save my fucking life—I can't read her at all. She's so honest and open, but I don't have a grasp on how she really feels.

It's frustrating.

It's also what makes me so apprehensive and nervous whenever I'm around her and I don't have Nate to distract me.

Kinda strange if you think about it... For *years*, I had so many people fooled. I was a king. In Forks, I was treated like a god. I was feared. But a few weeks with Tinks and all that changed. She saw it all, and not just because we lived together. Then again, I let her see it. I didn't cover my tracks as well as I should have, and maybe it was a cry for help? I don't

know, but it's plausible. However, if that's the case, it makes me even more of a monster. To think that I went so far as to starve for her to be in the know—that I allowed for her to piece it all together—and then...then I did what I did. The things I called her, how I treated her, how publicly I ruined her, what I did when she told me she was pregnant with our boy...

My heart clenches, and I rub my chest to get the ache to dissolve. Only, it doesn't. It never fucking does.

I've been told the truth by a handful of therapists now; I know that I didn't deserve any of the blows my father delivered. My childhood became non-existent when Dad gave into his feelings for another man. I don't know if it was a side of him he always pushed down, or if his sexuality changed as he got older...I'll never know the truth about that...but he's a textbook case according to many.

There's speculation about my triggering Dad when I was a kid. My grandfather on Dad's side...I've heard stories about him; he died before I was born. But yeah, he was very strict. *His* views on society, gender roles, what's right and wrong...he projected them onto Carlisle, I guess? Anyway, it could've been something small—some action that was deemed girly, maybe—and I do remember one day when I was kid... I picked flowers to give my mom. I remember she was sick; a friend's mother drove me home from school, and I picked flowers for her? Something like that. And perhaps that triggered Dad—when he saw them. He got mad, furious, he snapped. Too girly, too gay...*too much like him*.

I think I was eight when that happened, but I'm sure I did something "girly" when I was five, too. And... Since then, he made it his mission in life to make me a man. But nothing was ever enough, which my therapists say is related to how he viewed himself: *he* was too girly, too gay, not man enough. In his own father's eyes.

Hence the abuse that I never deserved.

His self-hatred was thrown on me, on my face, my body.

All this began when we moved from Phoenix to Seattle; that was also when Dad met Liam—at his new job.

*I digress. Sorta.*

I know I never deserved his punches or my mother's neglect. I was a victim, but that doesn't erase the fact that I became Carlisle. It doesn't erase the fact that I knew what I was doing was so wrong, either. I knew what a fucking beast I was. I bullied people, pushed them down, made them feel like shit, and I didn't care. If I wasn't happy, why should others be? That's how my mind worked back then.

And now, because of how I acted in the past, I'm living with the constant pain in my chest; it's knowledge. Awareness. Of what I've done—of the pain I've caused.

I may not have deserved the shitty childhood I was given, but Tinks didn't deserve what I did to her, either.

In the span of a few months, she was betrayed and used by the teacher she thought she was in love with, she was humiliated in her school, and on that very fucking day, she lost both her parents. Then she was shipped off to Forks, where I was more than happy to bring her down with me. On her *second* day in Forks, I took her to that little cabin in the woods, smoked weed with her, and then *fucked* her.

I'm not saying she wasn't willing, but how fucking insensitive was I? Did I even give her my condolences for her parents' deaths? Did I give a shit? No. I didn't. My life was too full of misery, so I didn't want her crap on my shoulders, too.

She was a seventeen-year-old girl whose entire world had crashed down around her, and what did I do?

I fucked her. That's all I did. I ate her up and then spat her out.

There are no words strong enough to describe how ashamed I am.

And as I glance over at Tinks right now, I can only hope she will forgive me one day. I know she said she would, but I can't comprehend it.

~CYE~

"Yeah, okay, that's wrong, Cullen." Tinks shakes her head at me and grabs the spoon from my hand. "You've never made guacamole before?"

I snicker and lean my hip against the counter. "Of course I have. I go to the store, pick up some guacamole, and that's how it's done!"

She giggles and playfully elbows me in the gut. "Outta my way—you can check on the fries."

"Yes, ma'am." I walk over to the oven and take the opportunity to check the time on the microwave. Emmett should be back soon with Charlotte, Peter, and Rosalie. He's picking them up at the airport in Sterling. "The fries may or may not be done," I inform Tinks. She gives me a look that's supposed to be threatening, but I can see the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "What? What do you want me to say?" I chuckle and swipe up my beer from the kitchen island.

"Maybe you should go study that cookbook you bought," she teases.

I grin and shake my head no.

Last weekend, I made dinner for all of us, and...never again. Okay, I'll cook again, but I'd rather wait 'til I know how. It will magically happen one day, I'm sure of it.

"Can you at least pour the salsa into a bowl?"



I nod. "*That* I can do."

"Praise Jesus for small miracles," she mumbles under her breath as I pass her. In return to her words, I poke her side, causing her to jump and let out a shriek. "Ass!"

Opening the fridge, I laugh through my nose and ask, "Another drink?"

She gave me an entire spiel earlier about vodka versus gin for tonic. Apparently, she and some chick she works with—Mary, I think her name was—are both passionate about their vodka.

"Yes, please," she answers sweetly.

After grabbing the salsa and tonic from the fridge and the vodka from the freezer, I walk over to Tinks' little work station and fix her a vodka tonic before I get started on the salsa. Now, the salsa...that's a very complicated task...

I pour it into a bowl. "Okay, I'm done."

"You made it!" She claps her hands.

I scowl.

She pats my cheek and then points to a cupboard. "Tortilla chips next."

Talk about labor. "Just into a bowl?"

"Yeah." And she continues on to the stove where she's got her taco burgers in a pan. She's made them herself, and I don't fucking understand how she does it. She mixed ground beef with taco seasoning, and then—all of a sudden—the kitchen started smelling like a Mexican restaurant. Now, I saw when she made them earlier, and each burger is two-layered. In between, there's melted cheese, and I think, I think, I think that's my stomach rumbling.

As I pour two bags of Tostitos into a large bowl, I watch as she bends over to pull out vegetables from the bottom of the fridge.

*That ass...*

And while we're cooking, she's not even wearing that loose-fitting shirt she wore in the car. Now there's just a white wife-beater and—who could forget—that purple lace bra. Which holds full tits that she didn't have almost five years ago.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I empty the last bag of chips into the bowl as I will my cock to stand down.

*At ease, um, drill sergeant?*

"By the way, whose guitar is that I saw in the living room?" Tinks asks.

I blow out a breath and bring the bowls of dip and chips to the kitchen island. "Emmett's."

"Cool. I didn't know he played."

I didn't, either, but he has actually played since high school.

~CYE~

While Tinks is sharing some group hug with Rosalie and Charlotte on the porch, I walk down the steps and light up a smoke just as Emmett and Peter reach me.

"Been a while—good to see ya again, Cullen." Peter grins and extends his hand.

I shake it firmly, internally trying to get rid of the unease I feel. "You too, Pete." Alaska is my home now—I feel very comfortable here—so seeing someone from Forks stirs up some old shit. It'll pass in a moment or two,

but right now it's a clusterfuck of emotions running through me. "Emmett told me you ran the Newtons outta town." Newtons' Outfitters evidently didn't stand a chance when he opened his own store.

"Oh yeah, I'm the one you go to when you wanna fish or hunt now," he laughs.

I smirk and take a drag from my smoke. "And now you're running with the big boys up here in Alaska."

"Ha! You're saying Washington is safe?"

"I've seen three bears around here—that's just this month," is my response.

Granted, they were far away, but whatever.

"Cullen and I saw this huge one when we were on our way to Kenai last week." Emmett whistles. "Fucking beast."

I'm nodding along, agreeing with that.

"Hey, we have bears and all that in Washington, too," Peter huffs, still grinning.

"Yeah, like two," Emmett says with a snicker.

"Guys!" I hear Tinks shout from the porch. "You almost done with your pissing contest?!" All the chicks start laughing.

Walking over to the edge of the porch, I take a final pull from my smoke and then toss it into the pot I have next to the steps. Emmett does the same.

"We barely got started," I chuckle and come to a stop right next to her. She grins widely, and I wanna touch her so badly that I almost can't stop

myself from doing so. But I manage to squash that shit down and face Charlotte and Rosalie instead. "Long time no see," I greet with a nod. To be honest, I don't really like either of these two women. Charlotte's too persistent, loud, and knows no boundaries. Back when I lived in Seattle, for instance, she came and went as she pleased. And Rosalie...well, where do I begin?

Charlotte smiles. "Nice to finally see how you live up here. You look happy, Cullen."

"I am," I say, briefly looking down at Tinks.

"Enough of this," Emmett says, rubbing his hands together. "Something smells delicious from inside, and I'm willing to bet it has nothing to do with Cullen."

I punch his arm as Tinks giggles, "Hey, he poured the chips and salsa into bowls. That's something."

"Look who decided to be funny," I growl playfully and grab her in a headlock. She laughs and pushes, and when that doesn't work, she starts tickling me. "Okay, I'll stop." With a hand on her lower back, I usher her inside again, and everyone follows.

"We can deal with all the bags later," Emmett says, and I agree. "Just leave 'em here in the hallway."

We don't really know what we're gonna do about sleeping arrangements, but I'm pretty sure Rosalie will be in Emmett's room with him, regardless of where they stand with their relationship. Tinks will either sleep in my room while I sleep on the couch down here, or she will go with the spare bed we can set up in Nate's room. There's also a spare mattress for Charlotte which we'll set up in the living room, and Peter...he'll go with whatever option is still available, I suppose. I doubt he'll complain, and

then tomorrow... As far as I know, he wants to check some sights, maybe drive to Anchorage. Since Charlotte's heading there to visit Jasper and Jada, I think Peter will go with her. And Emmett and Rosalie were gonna drive to Kenai, check into a motel, and sit down and talk.

Tinks and I will do the same here. Talk, that is. But not now. Now I'm fucking starving, and Tinks has cooked up a feast, all of which is set on the table in the living room.

"We need music, right?" Emmett asks just as I take my seat next to Tinks. Rosalie and Emmett will be across from us, and Peter and Charlotte will be on each short end. "Maybe some-"

Tinks cuts him off. "Put on my list!"

I grimace and nudge her. "You kiddin' me? No offense, honey, but..." Her taste in music isn't the best. Actually, if I remember correctly, there are a few genres we both like, but Tinks is on a singer-songwriter kick. Tyler Ward is her obsession right now.

"I'm not putting on that sad motherfucker again, Bella," Emmett says, shaking his head. "It was all we listened to last weekend."

"Who're you talking about?" Charlotte asks.

"Tyler Ward," I answer.

Her face lights up like a goddamn Christmas tree. "He's amazing! Em, put it on."

I groan and palm my face.

"Exactly!" Tinks shouts in triumph. Then I feel her arm coming up and around my shoulders; she leans in close to me. "It's just while we eat," she pleads in my ear. "Pretty please?" I can *hear* the pout, I swear.

"That's not fair," I complain and tilt my head in her direction. "Quit pouting." Her bottom lip juts out a bit more. "Stop—or I'll pinch it." That makes her giggle, and I shake my head in amusement. I realize just how close we are, so I sigh and straighten up. "Fine. But only while we eat."

"Yes!" She high-fives Charlotte over the table. "That'd be some Tyler Ward, Em. Get going." Turning to me again, she grins and kisses my cheek. "You're easy."

I splutter a little, 'cause I'm *that* smooth.

"You suck, Cullen," Emmett grumbles, coming over to the table. In the background, Tyler Ward's version of OneRepublic's "Good Life" filters through the speakers. "I thought we were gonna rule the stereo with classics tonight."

"We will," I vow firmly and plate a taco burger. Buns and fries follow. Oh, and fresh vegetables and dip.

Everyone else digs in, too, and comments about Tinks' mad cooking skills come right after. Then, to my surprise, talk is comfortable. We don't talk about the past. It's more about catching up. And since everyone knows what I've done in the past four years, they don't ask me that particular question. Thank God.

I'm mostly quiet, content to listen and eat.

Tinks is busy catching up with her girlfriends, one of whom—Rosalie—she hasn't spoken to since we lived in Forks, and the guys talk about everyday things in our life. I do talk a little, especially when Tinks speaks about Nathan, but that's about it. I'm enjoying this, really, though I'm once again convinced I made the right choice to buy a house in the middle of nowhere.

I'm thinking about buying or renting a small place in Anchorage, too, though. I wanna be closer to Tinks and Nate during the week, and if I can find a house in the city, I'm sure I can work there, too. Not that I'm really working now—with the woodworking—but I'm obsessed with it. I do it for fun right now, just wanting to get better. We'll see what happens later. There's still no rush.

There was one day last week when I was bored, so I created a chessboard. Just simple shit like that. It's fun. Relaxing and therapeutic.

"What are you thinking so hard on?" Tinks asks quietly, only for me to hear.

I chew and swallow the food in my mouth before answering.

"Woodworking," I chuckle.

She smiles. "You love it."

"I do." I nod and wipe my mouth with a napkin. "I love this, too." I point to my plate. "Ever thought about becoming a chef?"

"No way," she laughs. "It's fun—but to work with it? No, thanks. Besides, if I worked at a restaurant, who'd cook for you?"

Good point. "Don't become a chef." I place my arm at the back of her chair. "The restaurant business is nasty anyway. You don't wanna get involved with the likes of Gordon Ramsey."

"Right, 'cause every chef is like him," she says, nodding seriously.

I grin and lean a little closer. "You get it."

Unfortunately, our bubble bursts when Rosalie demands Tinks' attention again.

~CYE~

Several hours later, we have moved from the table to the couch and chairs, and better music is blaring outta the speakers. The coffee table is loaded with alcohol, mixers, soda, snacks, and I have the perfect buzz going on in my system. Tinks, who's sitting next to me on the couch, is definitely buzzed, too. Though, I think Charlotte—she's on the other side of Tinks—is the worst. Apparently, she's not loving it in Texas and believes alcohol will take her state of misery away for a night. I won't tell her that it's impossible to run away from your problems. Anyway, she's talking about wanting to move to Chicago, and blah, blah, blah. I'm not really paying attention. Instead I'm listening to Emmett telling Peter about awesomeness that is Alaska.

"You sound like you wanna move here permanently," Peter comments and grabs a handful of Doritos. He's sitting across from me, on a kitchen chair. I told him we could get one of the more comfortable chairs from either my bedroom or Emmett's, but he declined.

"I'm thinking about it, actually," Emmett admits before tipping back his beer bottle. At his words, I look to my right. Rosalie is in the recliner by the short end of the table, but judging by her expression, she didn't hear Emmett. She's busy talking to Tinks and Charlotte. "I love it up here." Emmett settles deeper into his own recliner. "If only people up here didn't feel the need to fly every-fucking-where!" His fist comes down on the armrest. "It's like—I mean...say I had a buddy around here and we agree to meet up for coffee or whatever, and it's like, 'Yeah, I'll be there. Let me just book a plane ticket!'"

I let out a laugh at that. "You gotta overcome that fear, man."

"Who has to overcome what?" Tinks asks, snaking an arm around my bicep. Since she's shifted in her seat, in my direction, I assume she wants in on the conversation. Automatically, I lift my arm for her to come even closer, but what stuns me is that she goes for it.



If I was sober, I'd be freaking out like a virgin on prom night.

"Emmett's fear of flying," I respond quietly, resting my arm around her shoulders. "He's thinking about moving here."

"Oh, you should," Tinks tells Emmett, nodding. "Hey, you could open a diner here instead!"

Emmett actually seems to like that idea.

He doesn't say anything more about it, but I can tell that the wheels are turning in his head. What this would mean for him and Rosalie, I have no idea, but I can't really bring myself to care at this moment. Heavier subjects come tomorrow.

"Having fun tonight?" I murmur in Tinks' ear. Fuck, she smells good. Her perfume or whatever it is...sweet, but not sickly so. It kinda pulls me in.

"Very," she replied in a hushed tone. She smiles up at me. "We needed this."

I nod, wanting to kiss her. "I agree," I say, hearing Rosalie and Charlotte say something about shopping in Chicago. Talk about boring topic.

"And when're you gonna play?"

My chuckle comes out in a groan, and my head lolls back against the couch. "Why did you remember?" I stare at the ceiling, my fingers drawing lazy circles on her bare arm. She's still just wearing that white tank of hers.

"Aw, why don't you want to?" She's pouting again—I can tell.

Still resting my head on the back of the couch, I turn to her. "I'm shy." I bullshit.

She wears a teasing grin. "Liar," she sings. "But seriously," her amusement is gone, "let me know if I'm being pushy."

I smile softly. "Nah, it's okay. You really want me to play?"

She nods enthusiastically.

"All right," I chuckle, sitting up straighter. "Emmett!" He halts his conversation with Peter and faces me with a what's-up look. "That guitar." I jerk my chin at the guitar case by the fire in the corner. "You wanna play?"

"Hell yeah." He shoots right up. "What made you change your mind, dude?"

*Tinks.*

See, Emmett's asked me a few times before if I wanted to jam with him, but I dunno. For one, I really only know one song. And two...uh, two guys sitting alone in a cabin playing songs together? I find that a little weird.

"The begger next to me," I tease and stand up from the couch. "She just went on and on and *ooon*." I throw her a wink to let her know I'm joking, to which her cheeks flush a little red for some reason, and then I say, "I'm just gonna grab my harmonica."

As I walk up the stairs, I hear Emmett say that he's gonna find the track on my iPod.

Once I reach my bedroom, I let myself in and take a quick moment to pat Taz. I wouldn't mind having him downstairs with us, but he's one for peace and quiet. After a few hours with Nate, for instance, he can sleep for days, it feels like.

A few minutes later, I return to the living room with the harmonica Sam gave me upon my release.

"Okay, time for some Muddy Waters!" Emmett announces.

While I was upstairs, they moved some shit around, too. Now there are two kitchen chairs between the TV and coffee table, and Pete's sitting in the middle of the couch, Charlotte on one side and Tinks on the other.

"One song," I say warningly and slump down on a chair. As Emmett plugs in the small amplifier to his half-acoustic, I mix myself a stronger drink and chug it down. Seeing the remote on the table, I toss it to Tinks. "Push play when we say so."

She fucking squeals. Is she that excited?

I chuckle and shake my head.

"You're gonna play along with the stereo?" Pete asks.

I laugh a little. "We'll leave the singing to Waters."

"We ready?" Emmett strums on his guitar. It's a far cry from a blues guitar, but whatever. I nod to him and let my lips brush against the cold metal of the harmonica. My right leg comes up to rest on my thigh, and I try to get comfortable in my seat. "All right, so it's 'Baby, Please Don't Go', and..." He tunes one of the strings. "Bella, you can push play."

Which she does rather fucking quickly.

The guitar on the track begins right away, and Emmett follows. I'm right behind him, glad I remember everything Sam taught me.

Muddy Waters' bluesy voice fills the air.

*Baby, please don't go*

*Baby, please don't go*

*Baby, please don't go down to New Orleans*

*You know I love you so*

Closing my eyes, I tap my foot to the beat and take quick breaths in between playing. Emmett and I play off of each other, always mimicking the singing with our instruments.

Between verses, Emmett does a few riffs along with the guitarist on the track; I do the same.

By the third verse, my shoulders relax.

*Turn your lamp down low*

*Turn your lamp down low*

*Turn your lamp down low; I beg you all night long*

*Baby, please don't go*

Coincidentally, Emmett and I mess up on the same riff, but we just laugh it off and slip into the next sequence.

Sweat starts to bead on my forehead, and when the last verse is next, I know that I'm gonna need a fucking smoke and some fresh air after this.

*You know your man down gone*

*You know your man down gone*

*You know your man down gone to the country farm*

*With the shackles on*

The song fades to a stop just a second or two after the final lyrics have been sung, and I sink back in my seat, a grin on my face and I catch my fucking breath. Emmett's on the same page.

"That was amazing, guys!" Tinks is so tipsy.

"Seriously—great." Peter nods and smiles.

I slap my hands down on my thighs. "And now I need a smoke." I give Tinks another wink. "Show's over."

As it turns out, I'm not the only one who wants fresh air, so we all step out on the porch.

I'm quick to light one up and take a deep drag from it. My eyes are trained on the dark nothingness ahead of me. The porch lamp only reveals that it's snowing heavily. The air is crisp, cold as fuck, and I shudder, standing here in only a t-shirt and jeans. Well, sneakers, too. But it's a stark contrast to the heat from inside.

"Time to let out Taz again, maybe?" Emmett asks.

"Fuck," I mutter. "I forgot. Yeah, it's time." But before I can put out my smoke and head back in, Tinks offers to do it.

"Thank you," I say with a smile, and the next minute sucks. 'Cause Rosalie is all about sucking up to Emmett, and I think there's something going on between Charlotte and Peter. I don't know. Doesn't she have a boyfriend in Texas, though? I recall Tinks saying something like that.

"I brought drinks, too!" Tinks comes out with three beers in one hand, one of Rosalie's ciders stuck in her front pocket, and two glasses in her other hand. Taz moseys down the steps and out into the night.

"Thanks," Rosalie chuckles, accepting her bottle. Charlotte is next with her rum and Coke, and then two beers are handed out to Emmett and Peter.

Then she joins me where I'm standing on the first porch step. "Here ya go."

"Thank you." I take the bottle of Heineken from her and twist off the cap. Tipping it back, I chug down half the contents, feeling parched. Fuck, that was good. I belch. "Sorry." I fucking giggle. That's not cool.

"No worries." She waves it off. "So," she grins and steps closer, "you were really good in there."

The left corner of my mouth lifts up. "Yeah?"

She bobs her head, taking another step. "Yeah."

I stare at her, seeing something in her eyes. I can't say it's unfamiliar; it just doesn't make sense.

My fuzzy brain tells me it's lust, but I'm pretty far gone, so...

*Wishful thinking.*

"I think this is my last one," she says, giggling drunkenly, and holds up her vodka tonic. "God, this night has been..." She sighs contentedly.

I know what she means. "Definitely." I take another swig of my beer, followed by a few pulls from my smoke. Looking out, I try to see Taz, but it's impossible. I can hear him, though, rummaging around in the snow. Maybe he's trying to find another bird—whatever.

"Hey, we're ready to go inside, guys," Emmett slurs.

I nod at him. "I'll be in soon. Just gotta let Taz run around a little."

Rosalie and Charlotte eye Tinks in question, so she says, "I'll be in in a moment, too."

Before they head in, Rosalie sends me a look that is less than friendly.

I don't give a fuck.

She doesn't like me, I don't like her...you can't like everybody in the world.

A few moments pass in comfortable silence; okay, as silent as it can be. The front door is still open, so we can hear music and laughter from inside the house.

"I love it out here," she whispers, setting down her empty glass on the porch railing. "It's so peaceful."

Noticing a shiver running through her, I instinctively close the distance between us, set down my beer, and place my hands on her arms. I move them up and down slowly and firmly. "You're cold." Hell, we both are.

She hums and drops her forehead to my collarbone. "This is nice."

I wish I could read her mind.

"It is," I murmur, breathing her in. Slowly, her hands come up, moving around my waist. I shudder and hug her to me; she lets out a breath and tightens her hold, too. Fuck. I love this. I love *her*. And I need this, crave it. The closeness, the fucking affection.

In the background, I can hear a new song coming on, and I think Tinks hears it, too, 'cause her hips sway to the beat. The movements are barely there, but I can still feel them since we're so close. It's one of my favorite songs: "Rock Me, Baby" by B.B. King. Eric Clapton's in this version, and it's actually...

Fuck.

It's pretty fucking seductive.

When she shivers again, I need to suggest, "Maybe we should go in."

But she just shakes her head against my collarbone. "Not yet."

Okay.

*Rock me, baby*

*Rock me all night long*

*Rock me, baby*

*Honey, rock me all night long*

*I want you to rock me, my baby*

*Like my back ain't go no bone*

I smile into her hair, hearing as she quietly, almost inaudibly, sings along to the lyrics. I didn't think she liked oldies.

"You like it, huh?" My hands roam her lower back.

Her response is to add a little to her lazy shimmying.

*Rock me, baby*

*Honey, I want you to rock me slow*

*Rock me, baby*

*Honey, I want you to rock me slow*

*Want you to rock me, baby*



*Until I want no more*

I find myself moving with her.

Eyes closed.

My hands, previously on her back, slide along her body in two directions. One to her hip, where I give her a little squeeze. The other up, up, up, and under her hair. I cup her neck. At the same time, I lower my face. With each intake of air, I breathe her in. My nose skims her hair, her temple, her jaw, her neck. *That scent of hers...* I can feel my cock stiffening.

The world spins a little when I open my eyes as she slides her hands up my arms. She locks them loosely around my neck.

I can feel each time she exhales against my skin.

*Roll me, baby*

*Like you roll a wagon wheel*

*Roll me, baby*

*Like you roll a wagon wheel*

*I want you to roll me, baby*

*You don't know how that makes me feel*

With a small movement, she traps my left thigh between hers.

She weaves her fingers through my hair.

I let out a quiet groan against her neck, and her small moan causes my cock to harden further.

*Rock me, baby*

*Honey, rock me all night long*

*Rock me, rock me, rock me, rock me, baby*

*Honey, rock me all night long*

*I want you to rock me, baby*

*Like my back ain't got no bone*

"Fuck, baby," I breathe out when she swivels her hips.

I'm gone—lost—in a fucking haze.

"Edward." Her nose grazes my jaw. "Mmm..."

Unfortunately, there's still a part of me that notes how cold we are. Especially Tinks. Shudders and shivers run through us like a steady current, and every now and then the wind carries snowflakes, only making it colder.

We have to go in.

"Tinks," I whisper, burying my face deeper into her neck. Here, she's warm and smells so goddamn good. "Let's get inside, honey."

She nods slowly, minutely. "Yeah..."

Only, she doesn't make a move to actually go inside.

With a lazy grin, I leave the warmth of her neck and settle my hands on her waist. "Come on." I kiss her on the forehead. She hums softly, and I regret not letting my lips linger. "Taz," I call out, not very loudly. He hears it and appears from the darkness.

Ushering Tinks inside, I subtly adjust my erection.

The heat from the cabin comes at us with force, causing us both to wake up a little.

"I'm tired," she says, releasing me to hug herself. "Christ, it was really cold out there."

Looking down at her face, I see that her lips are turning blue. "You wanna go to bed?" I touch her cheek. She lets out a shuddering breath and nods. "All right, I'll help you." I kinda want her to go to bed, too. She needs to get warm, and I'm thinking a soft bed and my covers will help.

As we go into the living room, Tinks grabs my hand.

I thread our fingers together.

My belly fucking tingles—like I'm nervous.

"I'll be back in a minute," I tell our friends. They look up, halting their conversation. "Bella's gonna go to bed."

They nod and goodnights are exchanged before I guide Tinks up the stairs.

"Where am I gonna sleep?" she wonders as we reach the second floor.

"My room." I lead her to said room and open the door. "I'll be downstairs or in Nate's room."

Once we're inside, I close the door and then walk over to turn on the lamp on my nightstand.

"I can't take your bed, Edward," she argues weakly. Moving closer, she comes to a stop at the foot of the bed. "That doesn't seem fair."

I grin and walk to her. "You know how many times I fall asleep on the couch downstairs?" I chuckle and slide my hands up her arms, gently cupping her elbows. "I probably sleep down there more than here." It's true. My bed may be more comfy, but after a night of watching flicks downstairs, it's too fucking easy to just fall asleep.

"Are you sure?" She once again drops her forehead to my collarbone, like she did outside. I take it as an invitation to squeeze her to me. "'Cause it looks awfully comfortable."

I smile and kiss her hair. Soft pecks. "I'm sure." Her hands end up around my neck again, and I swallow hard. She has no clue how *hard* she's making it—me. All those touches tonight... I don't know, but there's usually a lot more distance between us.

"You're tired." I dip down and kiss her cheek. "Get some sleep."

"Sounds so..." She sighs softly and tilts up her head. I kiss her jaw, lost again. "So..." I feel her lips ghosting over my neck. "...perfect."

As I cup her face, I don't think, and...before I even know what I'm doing, I brush my lips against hers.

Testing.

Once.

Twice.

She does the same.

Foreheads and noses touching, too. Hands roaming slowly. My thumbs swipe over the soft skin under her eyes. And the next time, I press my lips to hers a bit firmer. She copies my move, and then we're kissing.

I have to hold back, wanting too much, starved. But when I feel the tip of her tongue flicking my upper lip, all bets are off. In a breath, my lips part. She's there right away, and our mouths are completely locked when I taste her for the first time in almost five years. I groan quietly, our bodies molding together. Her hands move down my chest, and my own hands move down her sides.

Tinks breaks the kiss. "Edward," she pants, fisting my shirt. "Edward, I... I...please-"

My mouth comes crashing down on hers again. Gone is slow and tentative. We kiss hungrily, hands grasping and kneading now. Ripples of pleasure shoot through me—or maybe it's more like explosions. Everywhere. Fueling us. She takes a step back, bringing me with her, and a second or two later, she tumbles down on the bed. Since she still has my shirt in her grasp, I go with her.



Breathing labored as fuck, I start peppering her face and neck with kisses. In the meantime, she squirms under me, trying to end up higher on the bed. Each move she makes, I follow.

This, what's happening right now, is—sadly—sobering.

*She's so drunk.*

"Baby," I moan when she wraps her legs around mine. My cock, hard as rock, is nestled against her pussy. And this can't continue.

I want more, but what I don't want tomorrow is regret in her eyes.

"Oh God, what am I doing?" she suddenly asks, whimpering. I realize that I've stilled my own movements. "Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck." Letting me go, she palms her face. "I'm sorry. I'm so—oh, God."

Cringing, I roll off her and plop down on the bed.

My chest heaves.

My forearm covers my eyes.

My erection slowly dies.

My mind spins.

My fucking fears are back.



*Chapter 24*  
The Talk

*Chapter song – Calling by Dead By April*

**BPOV**

Staring up at the ceiling, I try to regain my breath.

The room is dark.

*I wish the world would stop spinning so fucking quickly.*

I wanted a night where I could let go of my inhibitions... Well, I got that in spades.

My fingers brush over my lips.

*He's still a fantastic kisser.*

"Don't—don't pull away?" he asks softly. Pleadingly, quietly, hesitantly.

I shake my head, so conflicted, and scoot closer to him. "I'm here."

My head swims as he embraces me on the bed, and we maneuver our way under the covers, but my chest feels lighter. I need this, I realize.

Companionship. I more than need it. He's warm; I feel protected and cared for, which are the reasons for the turmoil going on inside me. I mean...isn't it messed up that it's Edward, of all people, whom I find comfort in? Then again, he's...he's Edward. He's Nate's dad, my first

friend, my first kiss, my link to my past in Phoenix. And he's proved to be a mature man—sweet, kind, considerate, and patient.

There's no hostility left in him, and my resentment continues to fade away—little by little.

It's with those thoughts, I fall asleep.

~CYE~

The next morning, I'm alone in Edward's bed when I wake up. But the spot next to me is still warm, so I doubt he's been gone for long.

My first stop is the bathroom across the hall; I spend a solid fifteen minutes in there before I feel refreshed enough to show my face to the world. Sleeping with makeup on...not a good idea.

Back in the bedroom, I open my bag—which Edward must've brought up here—and change into a pair of black sweats and a matching hoodie. It's comfort food day, and you can't be all dressy for that.

Walking downstairs, I gather my hair into a messy ponytail. The living room is as messy as my hair, I note when I walk through it, and I can't say I'm looking forward to cleaning it. But right now I need painkillers, water, and coffee.

Edward's in the kitchen when I enter. "Good morning." His smile is careful and a little nervous as he holds up a large mug for me. "Black, one sugar."

"My hero," I sigh contentedly. Reaching up on my tiptoes, I kiss his cheek for several reasons. In thanks for the coffee, in an attempt to relax him, and...because I wanted to. While I'm not ready for...a lot of things...I still don't regret what happened between us last night.



His smile widens.

"It's awfully quiet here," I comment and hop up on the counter. The movement causes my head to spin, so I scream at myself internally for being so stupid. "Ugh, what time is it?"

"Noon," he replies, walking over to lean against the counter next to me. In his hands, he has his own coffee. "I woke up right before Emmett and Rosalie took off; they took Taz, too. Charlotte and Pete left around nine—Em told me."

I chuckle and peer down in my mug. "Is it just me or is there something going on between Charlotte and Peter?"

"Definitely not just you." He snorts a little laugh. "They sure as hell seemed cozy last night."

"Yeah..." I hum and nod slowly, thinking about another two people who were cozy last night. It was...nice—more than nice. I'm beginning to realize how lonely I've been over the past years. Maybe I've had amazing friends, and an even more amazing little kid, but... And if this is how I feel, I can only imagine how it's been for Edward. Hell, his entire life, almost, he's been so neglected.

Yesterday, when Edward called me "honey" and "baby", I reveled in it.

He's so familiar. Maybe more than that. A few steps away from *family*.

I blow out a breath, getting a little emotional. Too early for that. We have the whole day, and my head is pounding. "How about I make us breakfast?" I suggest, looking up. I can see he's been studying me; the slight furrow of his brows and intense eyes are proof of that. I know I've been hard to read. Most likely 'cause I've been all over the place. It's not until now I'm able to grasp a feeling and go with it.

"Sure," he says quietly, clearing his throat. "Need any help?"

I grin and *carefully* get down from the counter. "Nah, the company's plenty." Opening one of the cupboards, I grab what's left of the olive bread I bought yesterday morning before we got here. It's a little stale, but it won't be by the time I'm done with it. "Oh, wait. Could you grate some cheese?"

"Doesn't seem too complicated." He smirks and opens a drawer. "What're you gonna make?"

"You'll see." I wink. "By the way, do you have Tylenol or Advil or something?"

He nods. "Yeah—gimme a sec."

He returns a few seconds later, and I gratefully accept two painkillers and swallow them with some water.

"Headache?"

"A little," I chuckle and grab two tomatoes from the fridge. "But at least I don't feel nauseous." I don't know who, but someone was throwing up last night. I remember giggling sleepily at it, and I think Edward woke up from it too, unless I imagined his smile against my neck.

"That was Emmett." He snickers. "Apparently, after you and I went to bed, they played some drinking game down here."

I laugh as I slice the tomatoes. "I take it he lost?"

"Probably. You need more cheese than this?"

Seeing the pile he's grated, I shake my head. "No, that oughta do it. Is there still some left of the garlic oil I made yesterday?"

"I think so..." He trails off and leaves the kitchen for the living room, where we ate yesterday. And when he comes back, he hands me the small glass bottle of garlic oil. After thanking him, we go quiet for a few moments, and I use the time to sort out some thoughts and get breakfast ready. Four slices of olive bread...the oil...the tomatoes...the grated cheese...and into the oven.

Edward's stomach rumbles a few minutes later, causing me to almost snort into my coffee. He smiles sheepishly and just points at the oven in explanation. Which I love. He obviously appreciates my cooking, and that makes it fun.

I remember...

*For dinner, I make pizza with help from a simple recipe I Googled. He tells me pizza is his favorite, and we eat it together in his room. He asks for seconds and thirds, which makes me feel giddy. He also asks for more lemonade, and I feel warm.*

*"What's with the goofy smile, Tinks?"*

*I duck my head. "Nothing."*

*He burps. Then laughs. "Sorry. Um, thanks for dinner. It was really good. You should be a chef or some shit."*

*I kiss his cheek, and then I take the plates downstairs.*

But Nathan... He's all about fish sticks and mashed potatoes, mac and cheese, spaghetti and meatballs...oh, and ketchup. Ketchup goes with *everything*.

Shaking my head in amusement, I head to the fridge once more and bring out lettuce, cream cheese, and prosciutto. Then it's time to bring out the pan from the oven.

"Is it time to eat now?" he asks.

"Almost." I place the food on the counter and add the ham and lettuce before spreading some cream cheese on the opposite halves. "You can stop drooling, by the way." I shoot him a quick grin as I put one slice of bread on top the other. At the same time, Edward wipes his mouth to see if there was really something there. "Gotcha, sucker," I sing.

"You suck," he mumbles, not meaning it one bit. His kind eyes give him away.

That's it. He's become a kind man. Kind and humbled.

A stiffness in my shoulders I didn't even know was there melts away.

"Come on, you dork," I chuckle. "Let's eat."

Since the table in the living room is full of stuff from dinner yesterday, we settle on the couch instead. At least they've cleared the coffee table of bottles, glasses, trash, and bowls.

Edward digs in right away, moaning as he chews. "Fuck, yeah. This," he points to his food, "might be my new favorite."

I smirk. "It really tops pizza?"

His eyebrows furrow before he looks a little stunned. "You remember that my favorite is pizza?"

Hey, he remembers my coffee; I remember his pizza. "I remember a lot about the past," I admit quietly, eyeing my plate. A part of me is starving, but the other part—the part that is so anxious—can barely stomach the thought of food. Compromising, I only take a small bite, and then I greedily drink my orange juice. Edward brought it all from the kitchen, it seems. Orange juice, iced tea, water, Coke, and Sprite.

"So do I," he whispers. "I think I remember everything from when...when you lived with us."

In silence, he finishes his sandwich. I can see that he's preparing himself.

I'm doing the same.

As he quietly thanks me for breakfast and wipes his fingers and mouth on a napkin, I know we're seconds away from opening up about the past.

I gulp down some Sprite, still parched after the alcohol I drank yesterday.

Blowing out a breath, he runs a hand through his hair, pain evident in his eyes. "I remember how I treated you," he starts by saying. "Even before the day you left Forks." He cringes and averts his eyes. "I treated you like a whore," he whispers, and I flinch. "I—I remember a few days in particular... One time, I told you to be a good girl and strip for me. I needed a good fuck, and..." He chokes. "I'll never forget the look you gave me, Bella... I hurt you and I didn't give a shit. You said something like, 'That's what I am: a good fuck.' And I agreed." Tears burn in my eyes, recalling the same event. "I also remember how I literally tried to make you forget about condoms. I distracted you when you reminded me. I made sure you smoked more. I...I humiliated you."

My bottom lip trembles, causing me to bite down on it.

I didn't expect him to remember things like that—and so vividly.

"You were in no place to take care of me, Edward," I say, weakly but honestly. He was dealing with way too much to be a concerned friend to me back then.

He shakes his head, eyes downcast. "I could've ignored you. There's no excuse for dragging you down with me. I didn't have to be so fucking cruel." His voice cracks. "I didn't have to treat you like shit."

I wipe at my cheeks, countless emotions running through me.

"Back then...when it came to you..." He clears his throat. I see a bitter smile tug at his mouth. "I cared about the next time we'd fuck—whether or not I'd be able to make you forget about a condom. I cared about what you could do with your tongue ring, and how good you could make me feel."

I snort softly. I haven't worn my piercing since I was pregnant with Nathan. And, for the record, in the beginning of my stay in Forks, my thoughts weren't exactly noble, either. Which I tell Edward. I used him, too. To forget, to get away, to feel good for a moment. We used each other in that sense.

He concedes with a small nod, but I can see that he still thinks he was worse.

"Did you know I was jealous of you?" he whispers. I frown, confused, and he continues. "I used to sneak into your room and look at the photos of you and your parents."

My face crumbles, and I remember a few weeks ago when I saw him staring at the photos I have outside my bedroom in Anchorage. They're the same pictures I had in Forks.

"Those photos..." Pain flashes across his features again. "God, they loved you, Tinks." Looking up at me, I see his eyes full of unshed tears. "You were everything to them, and I was so fucking envious. I wanted that. I wanted my parents to love me, too."

I push down a sob and stretch out my legs to tangle them with Edward's in the middle of the couch.

There was never a single moment in Forks where I believed his parents loved him.

*"Bella," I hear Esme say, sniffing, as she comes from the kitchen. "Here."*

*I pause while Charlotte walks out the door.*

*I'm a little surprised when Esme hands me a wad of cash. "There should be two thousand," she croaks. "I'm sorry—this is the only way I can help you." I still plan on emptying the debit card account they gave me months back. They owe me that much, for fuck's sake. "I doubt Carlisle will make an honest effort to find you." I raise a brow at her; she really stated the obvious. Of course he won't try to find me. I'm just trouble for him. "I..." She lets out a breath. "I know you don't believe me, but I love my son."*

*I stare at her. "You're right. I don't believe you at all."*

Edward's next words bring me back to the present. "I wanted someone to care about me, and..." He releases a breath. "But when you did, I pushed you away. Like, when you—when you tended to my face that first time... you remember?"

I nod slowly. Of course I remember. It was the day I realized I actually gave a crap. I didn't want to, but I did. I cared about Edward, and he made me worried sick.

*I'm not a damn doctor, so I don't really know what I'm doing. I just grab a few tissues, dab them in cold water, and then position myself between his legs. I swallow hard, looking down at his bruised face. As carefully as I can, I swipe a corner of the tissue under his bottom lip.*

*"Maybe you should let your dad look at it," I suggest nervously, gently wiping away some dried blood.*

*"No," he replies flatly, quietly. "It's okay. I have some antibacterial gel in my room."*

*Who has that stuff in their rooms?*

*Maybe people who want to become doctors.*

*I chew on my lip. "Wanna go get it?"*

*"Tinks..." He sighs and rests his hands on my hips. "Don't...don't do this, all right?" My brows knit together, and he drops his forehead to my ribcage. "I'm fine," he mumbles. "I just need some sleep."*

"You wanted to be strong," I croak. "You thought accepting help was for weak people."

"I was so fucked up," he chuckles humorlessly. "I wish I'd listened to you. I wish..." He sighs. "I wish a lot of things. But I think, most of all, I wish I never broke the promise I made you—that I never hurt you."

"What promise?" I ask.

His head tilts back against the couch; his gaze is trained on the ceiling. Vacant look. Eyes unseeing. "You told me everything about what you'd been through in Phoenix," he rasps, and I stiffen. "You asked me to never tell anyone." Now he squeezes his eyes shut. His hands ball into tight fists. "Not only did I break that promise, but..."

I close my eyes, reliving one of the most painful times of my life.

*I see more writing on the walls.*

*A WHORE IN PHOENIX, A WHORE IN FORKS*

*SHE GIVES IT TO EVERYONE*

*The blood leaves my face and my knees almost give out.*

*Hit by nausea, I cover my mouth with my hand.*

*Not again. Not again. Not again.*



*Whispers and cackles surround me as I somehow reach my locker.*

*More writing.*

*JUST DON'T TRUST HER!*

*ONCE YOU STOP FUCKING HER,*

*SHE WILL FAKE A PREGNANCY*

*"I don't care!" a grown-up yells—maybe a teacher. "Kick that door open!"*

*More moans and groans.*

*I feel dizzy and slow. It's surreal.*

*"Oh, you guys weren't in the cafeteria earlier?" I hear Jessica Stanley giggle. "Cullen didn't want Bella anymore, so the bitch told everyone she's preggo with his kid."*

*"Bella?" someone laughs behind me. I'm still staring at my locker. In disbelief. Or rather, I don't want to believe. I don't want this to happen to me once again. "Hey, if Cullen doesn't want you, I'm here. Hell, there's probably a line forming right now!" More laughs.*

*My bottom lip quivers, and I can feel my face crumble.*

*Slowly turning around, I see countless students looking at me.*

*And Edward's one of them.*

*He's smirking, and I can practically read his mind. I told you I'd destroy you.*

*"Sorry, Bella," he chuckles, that cocky smirk still on his face. "I guess I'm not as gullible as the teacher you fucked back in Phoenix. You know, the teacher who had to quit his job?"*

*I swallow, realizing that it's not working. My throat keeps closing up.*

*"Oh my gosh, you fucked your teacher?" Jessica cackles.*

"I'm so sorry," Edward cries quietly, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. He presses the heels of his hands to his eyes, shoulders shaking with silent sobs. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

I stare at him, for a moment actually not feeling a thing. As painful as it was back then, I've worked hard over the years to get over those events. Therapy has helped me come to terms with his actions. The reminder still stings like nothing else, but there are explanations good enough to help me—not necessarily to justify those actions, but understand them.

All the circumstances helped me move past this.

He was a boy—a kid. While vicious, undoubtedly harsh and cruel, I pushed him into doing *something*. It never had to be *that* monstrous, hence some lingering hurt, but he knew I wasn't going to cave for a small sting. He'd already tried to bully me, after all.

*He shrugs. "I'm leaving in June, and..." He averts his eyes. "I'm used to it. I can take a punch."*

*"And that's fucked up!" I shout. "Listen to yourself!"*

*He smirks. "Fuck you, Bella. You don't know what the hell you're talking about, so I suggest you just drop it."*

*"I can't—I won't." I shake my head.*

*"You can and you will," he argues. "We're talking about a few goddamn weeks. Then I'm out of here. Just...just close your eyes or something. Pretend you don't know what's going on."*

*Just close my eyes.*

*Yeah, not happening.*

*"I'm not gonna kill myself," he laughs through his nose. The laughter dies, and what's left is a glare. "I'm not some pussy. Only weak people take the easy way out."*

*I ignore that and refuse to welcome Alice's image in my head. "Your eyes give you away, you know."*

*He stares at me, acting indifferent—a bit condescending, even—but I won't give him the satisfaction of having the last word.*

*In those eyes, I see so much pain that it's physically painful for me.*

*How can he not want...revenge or something?*

*"You want out," I say. "And-"*

*That makes him explode. "Of course I do, you bitch!" he screams. I flinch as he gets off the bed. His eyes are murderous. "You're blind," he grits out, advancing slowly. "You grew up with the loving parents, the smiles, and all the fucking bullshit." He points to his chest. "I didn't. And you know what that means?" He towers over me. "It means you don't know shit," he whispers. "Aw, look at that. You're gonna cry now? You're gonna cry just because I raised my voice? That's strong." While I try to control my goddamn emotions, he smiles menacingly, making me feel insignificant and small. Weak. "I don't need a savior, Bella. And if I did, I sure as hell wouldn't go to you."*

*I squeeze my eyes shut.*

*He chuckles. "That right there. Good girl. Keep your eyes closed. I'll be outta here in no time." He steps away. "Fucking pussy."*

*Don't let him bully you, Bella.*

*My eyes flash open.*

*I take a deep breath.*

*"If you don't leave with me tomorrow, I will take down Carlisle myself," I tell him firmly. He blinks. I see amusement then rage. "We could leave." And now I'm pleading with him. Fuck. "Hear me out, Edward. We can pack up our shit and just go. I have my parents' money coming as soon as I'm eighteen. We could sell the cars-"*

*He cuts me off with a laugh, which seems to hurt his ribs. "Will you listen to yourself?" he wheezes out through laughs. "How fucking naïve are you?"*

*"I'm seventeen fucking years old, Cullen!" I scream. "I'm sorry for not being some mastermind!"*

*My chest heaves.*

*My vision blurs.*

*"I'm trying," I choke out. "To...to do the right thing."*

*He gives me a blank stare.*

*"I won't quit." I'm down to whispers. "If you don't do it, I will. He belongs in prison. Shit, so does your mom."*

No, I wasn't going to give up. I knew that. Edward knew that.

Though, this isn't why I've resented him, hated him, for almost five years.

It has nothing to do with what happened in Forks.

It's about Nathan. Edward has known about our son since two weeks after he was born. Not a single phone call. No emails. No sign whatsoever that

all he needed was time to get better. By ignoring me, he made me think Nate was unwanted and uncared for.

A letter from him would've sufficed. He could've told me he was in a bad place and being around Nathan would cause more harm than good. Sure, I probably would've scoffed at a letter like that at first, but that's only a first impression—a first reaction. I, of all people, know that you need more than one glance to see clearer, to understand, to get it.

"Edward," I whisper, scooting closer to him. I wrap an arm around his shoulders; he's still crying, still beating himself up, and I'm so ready for him to stop. "Everything that went down in Forks..." I blow out a breath and comb my fingers through his hair. My chin drops to his shoulder. "I forgive you for all that. We both made huge mistakes, and..."

Squeezing me to him, he continues to cry silently into my neck. His shame and self-hatred roll off of him in waves, almost making me nauseous.

"You shouldn't forgive me," he whimpers. "I should've gone with you to—to Alaska."

I crack a smile at that, a sad one, recalling our last night together.

*"Please," I breathe out.*

*He knows what I'm pleading for.*

*"It's not that simple, Tinks," he whispers. "I can't just run."*

*"Why?" I don't care about the tears forming in my eyes. I don't care if that makes me weak. "We could disappear. I—I..." I take a breath. "I always wanted to go to Alaska."*

*In the darkness, I can see his grin, but I can also see the emotion in his eyes.*

*"Alaska, huh? I thought you hated the cold."*

*I do, but I remember seeing pictures... "Never mind," I mutter, looking down at his chest. "It was stupid."*

*He sighs and squeezes me a little.*

"We're here now," I say softly.

"I'm sorry," he repeats tearfully. Sitting up straighter, he wipes at his cheeks and shakes his head. "You can't possibly forgive me, Tinks."

"That's up to me," I say matter-of-factly. Instead of smiling, he grimaces and wipes away more tears. I sigh and close the distance between us again. "Wanna take a break?" I lean my forehead to his shoulder.

"No." He clears his throat. "I need to get this stuff out." I nod in understanding and reach for his hand. "What's next?"

I smile ruefully. "Unless you wanna talk about every event that led up to my leaving..." I sigh and he squeezes my hand. "I guess I want to know what happened after I left. I mean...you graduated, went off to college... and then I sent you that letter."

This is where the knot in my stomach appears again.

Like a flip of a switch.

My stomach rolls as I think about everything I've believed since Nate was born.

"College—I thought it was gonna be my escape," he says quietly. "It wasn't. I studied, slept, and thought about you. And I felt completely fucking rotten." Really needing to hear this, I return to my corner of the couch and pull up my legs to rest my chin on my knee. "My parents visited

me twice—short visits. I did well in school, so Dad didn't have a reason to hit me..."

"Did he ever need a reason?" I whisper, and it was a rhetorical question.

Edward just shrugs and looks down. "Then when I got your letter..." His eyes close, causing a tear to roll down his cheek. "I was filled with anger, sadness, regret... I had this physical need to get back at my parents. I wanted revenge. Retribution... I don't know. I wasn't thinking very clearly."

I swallow hard. A part of me wonders why he didn't have a "physical need" to see his own son.

As soon as Nate was born, he became my number one. Everything else was suddenly secondary, and it happened so naturally. Also like a flip of a switch.

Again, there were extenuating circumstances. I grew up in a loving environment—Edward didn't. Speaking with his fists came before anything else.

Still...I'm bitter about it. I'm unable to understand.

No matter how abused and neglected Edward was, he still hurt me.

Over the next few minutes, Edward tells me in detail about his trip to Forks. About how he ran into Emmett and Rose at Sea-Tac, about their giving him a ride, about how he stared the two photos I'd sent while they drove, and then that he entered his parents' house and overheard his father on the phone with Liam.

Due to my curiosity, we get sidetracked when I ask about the shit that went down with that man—Carlisle's "piece on the side" for thirteen years. And Edward divulges that Liam apparently wanted them to be a couple out

in the open. "I never met him," he says dryly. "I mean, I did—but never after the truth got out. I was still in recovery when he supposedly threatened to make their affair publicly known. Dad was obviously awake, but I remember that he had so many surgeries planned, that... Fuck, I don't know all of it. But yeah, Liam visited Dad when he was awake, and..." He blows out a breath and then goes on to tell me about Liam—he snapped. After thirteen years of promises, he'd had enough. Apparently, Carlisle had promised him their affair was only temporarily a secret, and Liam had gone along with it for way too long. "One night, while Dad was still in the hospital, Liam snuck past the two police officers and shot Dad." And when I ask how the hell that could've happened, he shrugs a little and says, "I have no idea, but since Liam was a doctor, too...maybe he faked clearance to enter Dad's hospital room. I don't know. All I know is that Dad died and Liam's in prison now. I think..." He scratches his forehead. "I think he got twenty years or something. There are things I don't understand, but..." He shrugs slightly. "We don't always get our questions answered."

I nod slowly, processing, and puff out my cheeks before exhaling. It's all so crazy. We sit here now, calm, in the middle of nowhere, happier, more at ease...but the past we share and Edward's entire childhood—what a fucking train wreck.

As I reach for another can of Sprite, Edward returns to our previous subject. He fills in the blanks about the trial, how it was to see me there and know that I had given birth to his son, and how he then contacted a therapist. And I know that story. I know. I've heard it. But not...not *once*... not a *single fucking time*, have I heard *shit* about his feelings toward Nate. Edward tells me that he missed me, that he wished he could've been the father Nathan deserves, but that's about it. I know our son is everything to Edward today, but what about all those years ago when I was single-handedly raising that son of ours? Did he love Nathan then, too?



In the end, I can't keep quiet anymore. I can't sit still and listen to his stories about his failed attempts at going to his shrink.

"...hated myself for hurting the only girl I've ever loved."

I make a choking sound, like a strangled cough, and whip my head to stare at Edward. What the fuck did he just say? I shake my head quickly, wondering if I heard him wrong.

"The only girl you ever, *what?!?*"

He frowns, appearing to be confused, but then he just looks nervous. "The only girl I've ever loved," he says slowly, quietly, so damn anxiously. "I'm sorry—I didn't really mean for it come out that way." He pinches the bridge of his nose. "But it's still true. You have no idea how much I still—how *in lo-*"

"No!" I cry out and shoot up from the couch. I'm shaking my head again, eyes welling up, and I can't believe this. No, no, no, no. I can't believe it. I can't believe him. "Too much," I choke out, heart pounding. "No, you can't—you can't throw that at me, Edward!"

He looks absolutely crestfallen, which hurts so fucking much, but *no*. Oh, God, how can he just bring this up now? He *loves* me? Has loved me for *how* long? No. Head shaking again. I pace in front of the coffee table, in disbelief. I'm angry, too.

"Do you know how *I* have spent the past *almost five years?*" I grit out the last words as I point to my chest. "I may have been blessed with amazing friends—*who I didn't throw away*—but I was still a single mom at eighteen, Edward. And whenever someone asked me where Nate's dad was..." I wanna scream, sob, kick something. "I made up excuses for you," I spit out, and he flinches as if I've slapped him. "The only ones I ever told the entire truth are Jasper, Jada, and two therapists. Everyone else..." I

laugh bitterly. "No one knew the only truth *I* knew—which was that you didn't FUCKING CARE!"

"Tinks..." He stands up and tries to approach me.

But I take a step back. "*Don't.*" I clench my jaw, furious. "We've barely begun this conversation, and now you tell me you *love* me? That you've loved me for *years*? Are you fucking insane?!" I palm my forehead, too many emotions surging through me—too many, too quickly. "You've been back in my life for three months." I even hold up three fingers for emphasis. "Three. Fucking. *Months.* You can't..." I choke on a sob. "I can't erase more than four years of hatred that quickly. I'm *trying*—I'm trying so hard, and I definitely don't hate you now, Edward..." Tears stream down my cheeks, and I'm not the only one. I can see that my words are painful for Edward, but I can't keep quiet about this. I've been understanding—I *do* understand—and I've been cooperative and so willing, wanting Nathan to have his dad, but... "But I thought you didn't want him," I cry. "Do you know how it is to live with that feeling?" He screws his eyes shut as he cries, too. "Or the first time our son asked why he didn't have a dad? Can you imagine how much my heart broke—how I dreaded the day I'd have to tell him the truth? *That his own father didn't want him.*"

As it happened, I won't have to tell him the truth. If Nate finds out one day, it will be because of Edward telling him. That's fine by me, but I would never be able to take it alone. Not now when Edward's actually in our lives.

"You could've fucking called!" I scream. Feeling dizzy, I collapse down in one of the recliners and sob into my hands. Even when I loathed Edward the most, I sat down and wrote him that letter about Nathan. I didn't have to. I wasn't obligated—not after his reaction to my pregnancy. I didn't have to send him photos, either.

"I'm sorry." He's close, hesitant to touch me. I'm not sure what I want. No, I know. I'm fucking aching for him, but I'm still so torn. "Tinks—I'm so sorry," he croaks, and I feel his hands on my knees. "I wasn't ready—I..."

"I know," I groan through my tears and look up. He's right in front of me, kneeling on the floor. "I know you weren't ready." I let out a breath and wipe my cheeks with the sleeves of my hoodie. "A letter would've been enough—you had my email," I whimper. "You could've just told me you were trying. You didn't even have to make any promises." I snifle. "But you have to understand me..." My face crumbles once again, but I push forward. "I thought you hated us."

"Never," he cries, dropping his chin to his chest. "I could never hate you. I love you both, baby..."

"How was I supposed to know?" I whisper hoarsely. "Even when I came to Seattle for the trial... You didn't even *look* at me. And..." I exhale harshly. "You've told me about the time you made the appointment with your first therapist. You said you were so ready to get better—so that you could contact me. Then—you should've sat down and written to me *then*. I know you were years from being ready, but at that point, at least you knew what your goal was. You wanted to be part of Nathan's life back then, too. But how was I supposed to know?"

For a while, he says nothing. He weeps silently, his forehead now resting on my knee.

"I'm sorry," he chokes out for the millionth time. I believe him. I'd have to be blind not to see how sorry he is. "I'm so sorry. I should've—" He gulps and looks up at me, eyes full of raw emotion. Oh, he's sorry, all right. "You're right." He lets out a shuddering breath when I cup his cheeks and brush my thumbs under his eyes. "I should've contacted you. I should've let you know—at least—what my intentions were. And I'm so fucking sorry

for being a coward." He hiccups and covers my hands with his. "I'm *sorry*."

An out-of-control sob rips through my body, and it's filled with nothing but relief.

"I should've contacted you, baby," he says again, voice still so thick. "I should've..."

I keep crying, internally thankful for his admission. I needed to hear that *so bad*.

I needed to know that my anger wasn't wrongly placed or ridiculous or unjustified. And only Edward could've given me that, and now that he has...

Wrapping his arms around me, he comforts me, repeats his apologies, and lets me cling to him. I don't even know how long we sit there. The only thing I'm aware of is when Edward picks me up, takes my spot, and then sits me down on his lap—sideways, with my legs hanging off an armrest. I'm too gone to register much else, because...because after years of fearing that my anger is displaced, it doesn't matter anymore. Not since he understands me, agrees with me.

I drift in and out of—well, I wouldn't call it consciousness, but...at times I don't hear much; I'm only aware of what's going on inside me. The sadness. The letting go. The relief. But...after several moments, I'm back to listening to his whispers. Soft kisses in my hair. More apologizes. Words of comfort.

Until he whispers this, "I did write to you, but I was too scared to actually send the letters to you." At that, I lift my head to face Edward, and he wipes away my tears. "I'm so sorry, Bella." His pain is still so evident.

I shake my head. "It's Tinks. But...what about those letters?"

He smiles first, a small but genuine one, maybe because I told him I'm Tinks. I don't know. And then he sobers and nods minutely. "Yeah—I wrote to you. To Nate, too. I have..." He looks up at the ceiling for a second, in thought. "I think there are about a hundred and fifty of them."

"Hundred and..." The mouthed amount dies on my lips.

He bobs his head slowly and swallows thickly. "You and Nathan were always on my mind. I'm just sorry I didn't let you know that, but..." He releases a shaky breath. "If you want, you can read them—find out what my thoughts were exactly."

"You..." I chew on my lip, still astonished by the number of letters. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Definitely not. It might even be good."

I think I agree. It will give me a whole new picture of Edward's past four years or so.

"I'm really sorry, Tinks," he whispers. "About everything."

I nod and rest my forehead in the crook of his neck. "I know—me, too."

We'll need time to process, let this sink in, and just...think about everything...but for the first time, it feels like there's nothing in the way. We're free to move forward, regardless of the pace we establish, and this day won't set us back.



*Chapter 25*  
First Kiss

*Chapter song – Trying Not to Love You by Nickelback*

*...only makes me love you more...*

## **EPOV**

I kinda expect Tinks to pull away after we have our talk, but the couple of months that follow prove me wrong. Since I wrote so fucking many letters all those years ago, she reads them one by one and often calls me afterward. We speak at length over the phone, as well as when we see each other, and nothing is ignored.

It's...cleansing, I guess you could say. She never judges and she doesn't pity me. She's more concerned and worried, and she has asked me several times how the hell I even made it out alive.

I'm just glad I did, because my life is better now than it's ever been. Our routine is still going strong—actually, our routine has changed. We've added time for me to be in Anchorage. 'Cause three weeks ago, I bought a small house on the outskirts of the city, and now we spend the weekdays in Anchorage and the weekends in Sterling. And since money's not an issue, I've been able to build a workshop in my backyard in Anchorage, too. Well, the workshop isn't ready yet, but it will be soon.

All this means I get to see Nathan every day; I've even spent several occasions alone with him. It started one day when Tinks had to work late,

and instead of calling Jada to pick up Nate, I was close enough to do it myself. Luckily, though, I didn't have to let my son suffer my less-than-stellar cooking skills. Tinks just gave me a key to their place, and I was able to pick up leftovers that she always keeps in her freezer.

I'm actually at my new house right now, waiting for Nate to finish his day at preschool so I can pick him up. Emmett's here, too, having helped me settle in over the past few weeks.

His turn is coming up next month when he moves into his own apartment here in Anchorage.

Aside from a few trips to Forks where he's getting ready to sell his diner, he's a permanent fixture in our lives.

Not so much in Rosalie's. While he did forgive her for running out on their wedding, he's had plenty of time to think things through, and he doesn't see what he once did. He says they want different things. Rosalie doesn't want the small-town life; she doesn't want "remote" or "isolated". Which she says Alaska is. So...there was really no point in trying.

To be honest, Emmett hasn't spoken a lot about it, but I can see that he's happy with his decision.

He knows where he's at now in his life. He has goals, plans, and no doubts.

*Good for him.*

I wish I could say the same for myself.

I'm trying not to be greedy, but I still wish I knew what Tinks' thoughts are. She knows I love her—that I'm *in* love with her, that I want everything with her—but I have no idea whether or not she can ever feel the same. Not that I don't understand her hesitance and doubt; I

definitely do. Recently, I told her I love her—that I even loved her back in Forks—but I sure as fuck never showed it. And, to be honest, I'm still not positive. All I know for sure is that I realized the depth of my feelings when I lived in Seattle. It's just...I remember how she became my world so quickly when she moved in.

I only happened to wanna ruin that world.

It's frustrating to be so confused, so I'm grateful I still have my therapist. I only see him once a week now—every Friday; Tinks and Nate head to the cabin while I go to Kenai for an hour—but now there's also Lisa. Here in Anchorage. I speak with her once a week, too. She's nice. Blunt, understanding, straightforward, kind. Most of all, as I'd stupidly feared, she doesn't side with Tinks just because she'd been her therapist longer.

Just last week, Lisa put my struggles in a good perspective.

"You've had more than four years of preparing yourself for this," she'd told me. "You never hated Bella, never held a grudge, and you had time to let your feelings grow, mature, and turn into more. She's only had a few months. Plus, she's literally getting to know a new man, Edward. You aren't the boy you once were, and Bella needs time to catch up."

Lisa's right. It's not weird that I'm several pages ahead. I've had time that Tinks hasn't.

Anyway...

No matter how I felt in the past or when I started feeling it, I love Tinks as much as I love Nathan, and I wish I knew if my feelings will go unrequited forever.

Since we had that talk in my cabin, I've focused on the important things—being her friend, being Nate's dad, continuing to build up my life...

Basically, I've fought to not let my romantic feelings for Tinks show. The



only problem is that it's made me fall harder, deeper. It's now close to impossible to hug her and not sneak in a fucking kiss or something. And that's the thing: she's hasn't backed off at all when it comes to affection. She's even admitted that she feels lonely. She needs closeness as much as I do, I think. So, we're usually very close. Especially after Nate's gone to bed. We drink coffee, watch movies, talk...and the constant touching is still there—driving me insane.

I don't know. It's all up in the air.

I know she needs time, though, so it's not like I'm going to pressure her. She hasn't even read all the letters yet. That shit takes time. I'm not sure I could ever go through them again. I was in a too-dark place back then.

~CYE~

"Daddy!"

I grin and scoop him up. "Hey, buddy." We Eskimo each other, 'cause we're cool like that. "How was school?"

"Good. Miss Chelsea say I drewed—drewed the best picture," he announces proudly just as his teacher joins us in the hallway. "It's in my backpack."

I chuckle. "I bet it's awesome as always." He loves to draw; I have a whole wall at the house full of his art work. Noticing that Nate's teacher obviously wants to say something, I look up with a polite smile.

"Mr. Cullen, I just wanted to remind you of the field trip we're going on tomorrow," she says kindly.

I nod, knowing all about it. Nate's class is going to the Alaska Zoo here in Anchorage tomorrow. "Bella has a staff meeting at eight, so I'll drop him off here at 8:30," I reply. "I'll bring the snacks, too." Much to my dismay,

the gazillion chocolate chip cookies Tinks made yesterday are for Nate's class. Not for me.

"Excellent," she says, smiling widely. "Please thank Bella from me again, will you?"

"Will do."

A few minutes later, I'm helping Nathan into my Rover as one of the parents approaches. Martin's mother, I think. A blonde in her early thirties. Nate has loads of friends, and remembering their names isn't easy for me, but I do remember a Martin.

"Mr. Cullen?" she inquires, her name failing me.

"Yeah?" I turn to her fully after making sure Nate's buckled in in his car seat. "What's up?"

"Oh, I was just wondering..." She fidgets with the strap of her purse. My eyebrows rise, and I wonder why she looks so uncomfortable. Or shy. I don't fucking know, but it'd be nice if she could just spit it out. "Are—are you by any chance single?"

*Well, fuck.*

"Uh..."

"If you are, I—I was wondering if you'd like to go on a date some time?" she asks nervously.

I sigh internally. In the past, I would've laughed and said something rude. But I'm not that idiot anymore. "Sorry." I offer a tight-lipped smile. "I'm not available." Single, sure, but available, no.

"Oh, okay." She hides her disappointment quickly and wishes me a good day before walking away.

"Whatsa single, Daddy?"

*Great.*

I shake my head, a little amused. "It's a CD with only one song." I'm so bad. Closing his door, I walk around the car and get in behind the wheel. "Ready to see Mommy?" The engine purrs to life, and I put on my seat belt. "She's working late so she wanted us to stop by and visit."

"I like it there lots," he says frankly as I pull out of the parking lot. "Lisa or Mary always gots candy."

I laugh, and I can't help but think...*like father, like son*. "Candy rocks," I agree. Although, I'm more into cookies and cake than candy.

The ride over to Whitlock House only takes a few minutes, so it's not long until I park my car between Jasper's truck and Tinks' SUV. I see that Jada's minivan is here, too, so I assume she's also here to visit. Since she only works part-time over at the hospital, she often comes in with Olivia and Madison when Jasper's working late.

"Can I ride on your shoulders?" Nate asks as I help him out of the car. "Mommy say I'm too heavy."

"You got it," I chuckle, and once I've locked the car, I pick him up and position him on my shoulders. "Jesus, Mommy's right," I grunt. "You're a big boy, Nate."

"Like a grown-up?" He lets out a giggle and grabs two fistfuls of my hair. Luckily, he keeps the grip light. "I wanna be biggest!"

"Enjoy being a kid, baby." I laugh and open the door to Whitlock. As I enter, I duck my head to make sure Nate doesn't bang his head. I wouldn't wanna take *that* to Tinks. "You're already growing up too quickly for my liking," I mumble under my breath. At the desk, I see Mary. I met

her a few weeks ago for the first time when Emmett and I arrived here in town with my first truckload of stuff for the new house. And I'm pretty sure some weird moment passed between Em and her—talk about awkward on my part, but whatever. "Hey, is Bella busy?"

"Oh hey, guys," she greets, smiling up at Nathan. "Wow, you're really up high, sweetie."

"I'm the *biggest*," he answers.

She chuckles and faces me again. "Bella's in her office preparing for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" I tilt my head, which causes Nate to squeal when he leans to the side. I right him quickly, though.

Mary nods. "The new aggression therapy Lisa's introducing—that's tomorrow."

Ah, right. Tinks told me about it after I saw the boxing gloves on her kitchen table a few days ago. Some kickboxing instructor is coming here tomorrow, and the women living here are gonna try to learn how to channel their anger—the anger they feel toward their ex-husbands, ex-boyfriends, and so on. Tinks also told me that Jasper had purchased fourteen punching bags—one of which Tinks now has at home, too.

Through donations, they've been able to turn the basement into a gym.

"Maybe she's too busy—"

She cuts me off. "She's expecting you. In fact, she ran Jasper and Jada outta the office. They're upstairs." She smiles. "Oh, and she said something about muffins?"

Fuck yeah. "See ya later, then." I make a beeline for Tinks and Jasper's office. Knocking once, I hear her say "come in", so I do, ducking my head again. And I smell it...them...something. "What're you hiding?"

She grins, sitting behind her desk. "Whatta greeting." When she stretches her arms above her head, her snug t-shirt rides up, revealing a glimpse of her stomach.

*Not what I need.*

Wearing a sheepish smile, I let Nate down onto the floor. "Sorry, but something smells delicious in here." Our son has also picked up the scent, so he runs toward Tinks' desk. "You've been baking today?" I know they do that here sometimes.

"Yep," she says and reveals a plate of muffins from a side table behind the desk. "I figured you two would want a few."

"Good call." I walk forward and grab one, giving it a long sniff. "What's in it?" Not that I really care; I'm already stuffing it into my mouth. "Jefuf Chrif." That's good shit.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," she scolds playfully.

I chew and swallow and mumble a sorry before taking my next bite. Then it's more chewing and swallowing before I say, "You're an angel, I swear." Wanting to get comfortable, I sit down on the couch a few feet away. "So good," I groan. The muffins...she's gotta make them again. Looks like an ordinary, plain...muffin...but it's not. There's something in it. And there's icing—like, *in the fucking middle*. A man's heaven. If only Tinks were naked. And, uh, Nate wasn't right in this room.

"It's not *that* special." She grimaces at our manners, I think, 'cause we're both stuffing our faces. Nate's age is his excuse; the fact that I haven't

eaten since breakfast is mine. "Oatmeal muffins with honey and bananas... buttercream filling—God, you're both pigs." She laughs and looks away.

Two minutes later, I've devoured two and Nathan's finishing his first.

"Thank you," I rub my belly, "that was fu—amazing." Good save.

"Nice." She smirks at me before looking down at Nate. "Honey, why don't you ask Mary for some milk—Daddy and I have some boring stuff to talk about."

Nate flees at the word "boring".

What kid wouldn't?

*I wish I was a kid.*

"Boring stuff?" I ask, scrunching my nose.

She shakes her head and snickers. "No, I just don't want Nate here for what I'm about to say." My brows rise at that, and I'm suddenly a little nervous. "In about a month, it's June twentieth." Pointed look, and I want to whine like a bitch. "Someone's turning twenty-three," she sings.

I groan and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "No fucking party, Tinks. Seriously."

She gives me a look. "If you want, I can call our son back in here and he'll decide for you."

Hell no! Nate will order us to have a massive costume party—some shit like that. And that's only okay if you're turning five. Not twenty-three.

"Quiet dinner," I say, ready to bargain.

"Fun barbecue," she shoots back.

"*Quiet* barbecue."

"There's no such thing as a quiet barbecue. Be real."

Leaning back in my seat again, I fold my arms over my chest. "*Small* barbecue, then."

"Medium-sized."

I cock a brow. "Who're we gonna invite, *anyway*?"

"You, me, Nate, Jasper, Jada, Olivia, Madison, Mary, Lisa, Emmett, Peter, Charlotte—"

I stop her there. "Peter and Charlotte are in the middle of their move." Yeah, they're together again, and they're moving to New York. "And," I lower my voice, "I barely know these people, *Bella*. Why don't we just stick to the three of us and Emmett?"

Admittedly, Jada has warmed up to me, but I'm not the most social guy in the world. I'm more than content to have *acquaintances*. I'm close to Emmett, and I've started talking a bit more to Pete again—over the phone—but the rest...I'm not looking for friends. All I want is my family.

"More people means more gifts." She pouts.

I can only laugh at her. She's too fucking cute. "Since when do you—or I, for that fucking matter—care about gifts?"

She shrugs. "You deserve it after everything you've done for us here."

Oh. Right. That.

The majority of the money for the new gym here may or may not come from me.

Whatever. It's not like I need it all.

"You wanna know what I want more than anything?" I ask quietly, seriously. She nods quickly, and I take a breath. "I want a nice dinner—just you, me, and Nathan." I point to her. "You cook."

That last one definitely lightens the tension. "Fine—you get your wish," she giggles, causing me to smile. "The cabin?" I shrug and half-nod, not really having a preference. All I care about is the company. "Okay. I'll take care of it. But you gotta tell me what I can get you."

"No gifts."

"I'm not gonna budge," she says flatly.

I sigh really fucking heavily. This woman... "Nate can give me a picture."

She makes a farting noise and gives me two thumbs down. "Boring. I mean...not boring, but...ugh! You'll get that, too, but what about me? I'm not gonna draw you a picture, Cullen."

I purse my lips. "Necklace made outta pasta?"

"I swear to God!" She actually picks up her stapler.

"Okay!" I laugh, holding up my hands in surrender. "Fuck, honey, I don't know!"

The pout appears again. "You have to. Please? Just...make a wish."

My amusement is pretty gone with that request, and I can't help myself with my next words.

"You already know what I want," I whisper.



Expecting her to stiffen or cringe, I'm more than a little surprised when her gaze softens and a small smile tugs at her mouth. "I do know, yeah." She exhales. "But, um, is there anything else? Besides...that?"

I stare at her.

I stare some more.

Frustration wells up inside me, and I wish...I wish I could just fucking read her already!

"Surprise me," I sigh, shrugging.

Narrowing her eyes at me, it's her turn to stare.

Don't ask me what she's looking for.

I'm an open book.

"I read another letter this morning," she says suddenly, her voice soft.

I tilt my head. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." She nods with a dip of her chin. "It was one of your fantasy letters."

At that, I can't help but cringe a little. Looking down, I remember those letters. About twenty of 'em, I think. Twenty letters that started with, "*If I hadn't pushed you away, destroyed you, maybe I would have...*" And then I go on with a scenario I've wished for. Dating Tinks, taking Nathan to McDonald's, spending lazy Sunday mornings with them in bed, picking out a Christmas tree as a family... Stuff like that. Things I never had with my own family. Things—ordinary, everyday things—that I would never take for granted.

"You described a day where you took Nathan to a toy store," she says quietly.

Eyes still downcast, I nod. I remember the letter, obviously.

When I was a kid, I wanted this cool little tool box for children. But Dad steered me in another direction—toward the medical kit for kids. He didn't care that I wanted a hammer instead of a stethoscope. So...in that letter to Tinks, I wrote about letting Nathan pick his own path. There's no way I'd ever judge him, think too little of him, or try to change his mind.

I'm too deep in thought to realize that Tinks is approaching—until she's right in front of me.

"It's weird," she murmurs, straddling me on the couch, and I can no longer form words. "Reading about your past helps me get to know the man you've become." I swallow, not knowing what she's doing; meanwhile, she just sits there. Straddling me, watching me pensively, hands on my shoulders. "You're amazing—you know that?"

I let out a breath but say nothing. I don't think I can.

"Can I see your tattoo again?"

I don't understand shit, but I nod and unzip my hoodie. I pull up my t-shirt next, revealing the ink on my ribcage.

She hums and stares at it. Her index finger lightly traces the lines.

At the same time, I keep studying her, hoping for a miracle—hoping I can get a glimpse of what's going on inside that head of hers.

A shiver runs through me when she brushes the tip of her finger over the Peter Pan quote.

*"To live will be an awfully big adventure."*

Tinks mouths the words.

"Have you started yet?" She looks to me. "Have you started to live?"

"Yes," I whisper, not missing a beat. I started living the second I took the first step toward recovery. And I think I know now why Tinks has my tattoo on her mind. Because there's another fantasy letter where I add to the ink. Another little person. A son or a daughter. "Did the letter offend you?"

She knows what I'm asking. "No." She smiles softly, eyes on the tattoo again. "It's a beautiful dream. Your letters are beautiful, period. Heartbreaking, but...so honest. Eye-opening."

"I have nothing to hide," I murmur.

"Which makes it easier for me to let go—forgive and move forward." She gives me another smile. My heart is stuck in my fucking throat. "Can I trust you, Edward?"

I answer right away. "You know you can." Bella Swan is a smart woman. She wouldn't be on my lap if she couldn't trust me. I don't think she doubts me anymore, either. It's her own feelings she needs to sort out, regardless of what those feelings are. Settle, come to terms with, embrace, or ignore—I don't fucking know. All I do know is that it's not my feelings she's confused over. My cards are on the table.

"I'm scared," she admits, dropping her forehead to mine. In my ears, I can hear my own heartbeat. Or pulse. Whatever it is. I have to swallow again.

"I wouldn't hurt you again," I whisper in a rush, my stomach dropping. God, I hope she doesn't fear that. Then again, it's understandable if she does. "You—you're..." I swallow, tongue-tied. "You and Nathan, you're everything to me." She *needs* to see that, know that. Tentatively, I place

my hands on her hips. "I won't pressure you into something you don't want, but..." I bite my lip, not having planned to admit all of this. But now I can't see a reason why she can't know. "Pretending that I don't want you, that I don't love you? I can't do that, Tinks. I can't pretend I don't need you, either." When she closes her eyes, the knot in my gut grows larger, heavier. "But if you want me to be your friend—I'll be there. Anything you want. 'Cause..." I blow out a breath, feeling her fingers rubbing small circles on my neck. "I'm counting my fucking blessings here," I chuckle quietly. "You've given me more than I could ever hope for—well, in the beginning, anyway." I touch her cheek, causing her eyes to open again. "You kinda make it difficult to not want more, you know."

A miniscule smile plays on her lips. "You kinda took the words out of my mouth, you know."

My brows knit together. Either she's being cryptic, or I'm fucking stupid.

"Meaning?" My voice cracks as if I'm some pubescent teenager.

Jesus fucking Christ, can't I catch a break?

"Meaning I'm already pretty sure of what I wan—"

I could *scream* when the door opens and Nate pops his head in, a toothy grin on his face.

"Hi!" He runs over to us and jumps up on the couch. "Look what Lisa gotted me at the store!" He shoves a piece of chocolate in Tinks' face, and we both break apart a little. "S'my favorite!"

"Um, did you thank her, baby?" Tinks asks, running a hand through her hair. She looks as flustered as I feel. "Maybe you should go and thank her."

"I did," he giggles, wearing a silly smile. "Olivia also gets some."

"You need to wash your hands, buddy," I blurt out and point at his chocolaty fingers.

Tinks and I suck, but come on. I'm *dying* to find out what she was about to say when Nate barged in.

"I will when I'm done," he says, getting comfortable on the couch. He munches happily on his chocolate as Tinks and I exchange a look saying... *he's not going anywhere.*

We sigh at the same time, which breaks the tension, and we laugh a little.

"Hey, Nathan?" Tinks chuckles. "Um, Daddy and I are just gonna go outside for a minute, okay?"

"Okay," he says, shrugging.

Getting off my lap, Tinks grabs my hand and ushers me out the door, pausing at the front desk to ask Mary to just keep an eye on Nate for a moment. She nods and heads straight for the office while Tinks and I go outside.

"Can you fucking tell me now?" I plead, though I fail at hiding my amusement. I think I get it now when Tinks says that *sometimes*, you want a few minutes away from the kiddos in your life.

As Tinks seems to think about her words, I zip up my hoodie again and pull out my smokes to light one up. Since I'm spending the night with Nate, I avoid smoking as much as I can. Still, Rome wasn't built in a day, and I can't quit cold-fucking-turkey.

"Your letters—they've opened my eyes," she says, looking up at me. When I notice her hugging herself, I unzip my hoodie once more and take it off. "Thank you." She smiles softly as I place it around her shoulders. I just shrug in response. It's way too big on her, but seeing her in my

clothes? *Jesus*. "I have about forty-five letters left, and...how long has passed—since we talked in your cabin? Two months?"`

Sixty-three days, but who's counting? "Yeah, something like that." I tilt up my face and exhale some smoke.

She nods. "That's roughly fifty letters a month. I need..." She puffs out her cheeks, slowly releasing a breath. "I need another month then, I guess. Um, I talk to Lisa a lot—maybe too much," she chuckles and ducks her head. Taking a step forward, I grasp her pinky and give it a squeeze. Time—I have time. She can have as much as she wants. "Same goes for the talks with you," she whispers, looking up again. I know she's referring to the talks we have after she's read something new, especially if the topic of that letter is particularly horrible. "I, uh, I think it's important we don't ignore anything."

"I agree," I murmur, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

She's so fucking beautiful.

She offers a quick smile. "God, you make this so difficult." She palms her face, and I frown, a bit thrown off by the sudden shift in her demeanor. "Stop looking at me like that."

My frown deepens. "I can't read your mind, honey. How do I look at you?"

She actually whines and playfully slaps my chest, but then she closes the distance and hugs my midsection so tightly.

*Whiplash, anyone?*

As I take a final pull from my smoke, she peers up at me pensively.

I gotta smile. "What are you searching for?" I shake my head in wonder and break away from her for just a minute. Next, I put out the smoke

against the underside of my boot before I stick the butt in the pack. Then I wrap my arms around her shoulders again and wait for her answer. "You always look so thoughtful."

She hums. "There's a lot going on in this noggin'."

I arch a brow, swaying us a little. "Care to share with the class?"

"Let's just say I've got an Edward Cullen on my mind a lot lately." She snorts a giggle. I grin. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

She chews on her lip. *Distracting*. "Kiss me?"

I won't lie—my breath fucking stutters.

"A *first* kiss," she says, softly but so imploringly that I understand she has another letter flying around in her head—the letter where I describe the first date I'd take her on if I had the chance.

It wouldn't be something cheesy. I'm not like that, and I can't say I'm very romantic. At least not if you're into the classics. I'm a totally different Edward.

Back when I wrote the letter, it looked a little different, but if I was given the same option now...

A date with Tinks...I'd take over for an evening. I'd do the cooking and probably fail. And then we'd eat the grilled sandwiches I actually know how to make now—thanks to Tinks teaching me. We would talk and get silly. Maybe I'd give her something I've created—I don't know. I would make sure to have her favorite snacks on the coffee table and her favorite movie in the DVD player. I would pamper her in the only ways I know how

—by giving attention and affection. Which happens to be the opposite of what I grew up with.

The tip of my tongue darts out to wet my bottom lip as I gauge her reaction. As far as I can tell, she's serious, and I lower my mouth to hers slowly. A first kiss, she asked for. I hope I won't fuck up.

Brushing my lips against hers, once, twice, I start the kiss softly. Then I add a little pressure as I force myself to exhale. 'Cause breathing is vital and shit like that. Kissing Bella means I gotta remind myself of something as natural as breathing. That's...messed up, I'm thinking.

When she lets out a tiny little whimper, I cup her cheeks and part my lips slightly. For a second, I worry about my breath, but Tinks doesn't seem to care, so...

"Baby," I whisper against her lips. I breathe her in and slowly swipe the tip of my tongue across her upper lip. Closing my own lips over it, I gently suck it into my mouth. Meanwhile, she does the same to my bottom lip. She also tightens her hold on my waist.

Eyes closed, I easily tune out the rest of the world. I kiss her. I kiss her passionately, deeply, making shit clear. I want her, but I won't get presumptuous. Presumptions don't belong on a first date, right?

"Edward," she moans quietly in my mouth.

*Time to end it, man.*

As slowly as I began the kiss, I end it. Soft pecks while I brush my thumbs over her cheeks.

"That..." I breathe heavily and swallow hard, our noses touching. "That should've been our first kiss."



"Yeah," she exhales and drops her forehead to my collarbone. "That was—yeah."

I smile and kiss her on the forehead.

"Um, I..." She takes a step back, cheeks tinted a little red, and points toward the door. "Unfortunately, I have to be there for Lisa's next session."

I nod, now understanding that it's time she needs. I mean...privacy. She needs to let this settle in.

That our attraction is mutual is something I've known for a long time, but it's what goes beyond that...

"I'm gonna go, too," I say. "I think Nate needs to run all that sugar off before I even attempt to give him dinner."

"You're most definitely right," she chuckles. "By the way, is he spending the night?"

"I don't mind—you know that," I reply, leaving it up to her. With Tinks working late and our plan to have me drive Nate to preschool tomorrow, it's probably easier if he just stays. He has clothes and everything he needs at my place, anyway.

"Can you stop by at my apartment tomorrow and get the cookies for the field trip? Or you could drive over there now before you go home."

"Of course." I pause. "If I can have at least one."

She grins and shakes her head at me. "Oh, Cullen."

Yeah, I'm not budging. "Oh, Swan," I deadpan.

"Fine!" she laughs and opens the door to Whitlock. "If you're nice, you can even take two." Her eyes widen in mock-excitement.

"You're funny," I tell her, motioning for her to enter first. "And I'm so taking two."

Maybe even three. I mean, she's not gonna be home. She won't notice a fucking thing.

I'm a genius.

Hell, I'm taking a handful.

"There you are!" Mary groans, laughing at the same time. She's behind the desk, and Nathan is sitting on top of it, with Mary's hands making sure he sits still. "Your son asked me what a date is—I have no idea what to tell him." She faces Nate and says, "Go. Ask Mommy and Daddy."

Tinks chuckles and picks him up. "A date? Where did you hear that word, baby?"

I kinda want to know, too.

When Nate points at me, I get confused as hell. "Martin's mommy said it to Daddy."

Oh, *shit*.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

Looking at Tinks, I'm met with a raised eyebrow.

Let's repeat: *Shit, shit, shit.*

"Uh..." I clear my throat and chuckle, nervous for no reason. At least I don't *think* there's a reason. I mean, it's not like I've done something

wrong. Right? I turned the lady down! "I told her no!" I blurt out. "She asked me out—I said no. All right? I also said I wasn't available." I fold my arms over my chest, an attempt at coming off as strong, confident, butch, and fucking manly. "I'm innocent here, just sayin'."

Now, on the other hand? Tinks just looks amused.

The fuck?

"Look at you, Cullen," she giggles. "So nervous. Nate, isn't Daddy cute?"

I scowl. "*Cute*?" Please. That's a word you use for babies and puppies.

She pouts and walks over to pat my cheek. "Fine. Handsome. Better?"

*Meh.*

"You really told her you're not available?" she whispers.

I keep my voice low. "Are you fishing for compliments? You know I'm only available for you, Tinks."

"That!" She points at my face. "That right there—stop saying things like that. Same with the looks. You gotta...ugh!" She palms her face again. Then she peeks through her fingers, definitely catching the smirk on my face. 'Cause I've figured it out now. Seeing that I want her so badly messes with her head. And since I'm an open book, like I said, she can obviously see it. She can see all of it. "Christ, just... Go. Go before I..." She waves herself off.

Snickering, I hold out my arms for Nathan. "Come on, baby. How about we go to the park before dinner, huh?"

"Yes!" He throws himself at me. "Bye, Mommy! Bye, Mary!" He waves furiously.

~CYE~

Sensing Taz's eyes on me, I look down to scowl at him. "It's *my* ice cream, dude," I say, the sound muffled by the spoon in my mouth. But goddammit, the last time he ate ice cream, he got a serious case of the runs. Thank God the rain took care of that. Anyway, I ain't giving up my precious mint chocolate chip goodness. "Go chase a bird or something." I return to stare at the table in the middle of my workshop.

Emmett has decided to open a diner outside of Anchorage after the summer near a ski resort, and he's gonna call it The Lodge. He wants a cabin theme—a classic hunting lodge. And he asked me to do the woodwork. The counter, the tables, the chairs, the stools, the shelving system that'll go behind said counter...

I'm fucking ecstatic.

But right this fucking minute, I'm drawing a blank, hence taking an ice cream slash smoke slash coffee break.

I think I'm unable to work since I know Tinks will be here any minute.

It's my birthday on Friday—two days from now—and we decided that she and Nate would drive out on Friday morning, skipping both work and school. I've been here at the cabin since last night, 'cause I need to lay down designs and finish the prototypes for Emmett. But Tinks called me a little over two hours ago, stating that she had something important to discuss—something that evidently can't wait.

Nate's gonna spend the night with Jasper and Jada now instead, and then Tinks will return to Anchorage tomorrow...and be back with Nate on Friday. I have no idea what could be so fucking important, but it has left me a nervous goddamn mess and now I can't work because of it.

I try to rack my brain for an answer, but I come up with *nada*. The last few weeks have been calm. Tinks still calls me at night, unless we're together, and my talks with my therapists are fine, too. Emmett's fine, thinking about asking Mary out, and I spoke to him this morning, so it can't be anything that concerns him. Pete and Charlotte have settled in their apartment in New York—fine there, as well. And Nate is as perfect as always. So, what the fuck could it be?

I shove some more ice cream into my mouth and glare at the clock on the wall.

I've been out here since nine this morning, so when Tinks called, I was covered in sawdust, hence taking a shower an hour ago, but I can still smell the wood and oils on my skin. It's in the fucking air. I happen to love the smell, but I'm too anxious to have a positive outlook on shit right now.

Then, at last, I hear a car pull in, and Taz moseys out of the workshop. It's pretty warm out today, so the door to the shed remains open, and I'm only dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. Summer in Alaska is nice as hell, though a bit colder.

With my bowl of ice cream still in my hand, I follow Taz and cross my backyard. *Gotta mow the fucking lawn, by the way*. When I reach the front of the cabin, I see Tinks just as she knocks on the door.

She sees me, too. "There you are!"



## Chapter 26

### Moving Forward

*Chapter song – To Be Loved by Train*

#### **BPOV**

I grit my teeth and let out a frustrated breath before I'm *finally* able to pass the old fucker driving way too slowly. I'm sorry, but senior citizens just don't belong behind the fucking wheel. Not when I'm in a hurry anyway.

I've been taking shit slowly for three months, and suddenly I'm *desperate* to move on. At last. Finally. I need this. Three months of therapy, talks with Edward, reading, settling, coming to terms, realizing...

Realizing that Edward Cullen is a man I've fallen head over heels in love with.

He's not the person he once was, and the new man he is now barged into my life six months ago and took up a shitload of space in my heart.

"Oh, come on!" I slam my hands down on the wheel when I pull up behind a fucking tractor. What's that damn thing doing out here, huh?

With oncoming traffic in the other lane, I can't exactly pass the tractor right now, either.

Sitting back in my seat, I count to ten and force myself to calm the fuck down.

The letters keep swirling in my head, but for once in my life, I *know*. There's no confusion, no doubt, no questions unanswered, and no fear. I'm sure. I'm out of my fucking mind and it feels amazing. Okay, that didn't sound right, but whatever. It feels messed up—crazy. What I feel, it runs so deep. It's exciting, refreshing, mind-blowing. I feel wired. *Alive*. So...when I finally get to pass the goddamn tractor, I wear this cheesy grin and step on the gas.

*I'll be in Sterling soon, Edward.*

I kinda wonder if he already knows why I'm coming out to see him.

Then again, probably not. I've been so focused on dealing with the rollercoaster of emotions running through me over the past three months that if he hasn't been able to read me in the past, I doubt he's been able recently. But now? Now I know. Now I'm sure. I've worked through my issues, let things go, and done some major soul-searching. It's been necessary, but I'm glad it's over. I'm so ready for this.

In the beginning, I expected the letters to weigh me down. Instead they gave me clarity. They lifted this weight off of my shoulders—made me carefree and, and, and I don't even know. But it feels right.

Obviously, the first thirty, forty letters or so were incredibly difficult to read. Edward's anguish shone through in his writing. I could feel how regretful and remorseful he was. I could also sense his pain, his despair, and how lost he was.

I sobbed my way through, basically.

*—Bella*

*My therapist said that writing could benefit me. Like, it can be a way to get it all out? I just don't know where to begin, what to write, or how this would work. But since I need this to happen—I need to get better—I'm*

*going for it. And I'm writing to you. You're kind of this voice in my head. Maybe that sounds weird, but you're always there. In some way. You're there when I make a decision, you're there when I look back on my day, and you're there when I fuck up. I always wonder, "What would Bella say about this?" Fuck, this is weird. What am I supposed to say? Am I just gonna sit here and type down the shit I've been through? 'Cause that might take time. My head's not working right, I think. I have these thoughts, but they're fleeting. I can't get a fucking grasp on anything. I thought this would be easier—recovery, I mean. I'm not good at this.*

*—Edward*

He was confused, impatient, still angry...

Edward hated himself.

*—Bella*

*You know what I wish? I wish someone could just erase my memory. I could start over and do everything right. But see, when I think like that, it always comes down to one thing: where would Nathan be? If I hadn't been a prick and fought so hard to make you forget my not wearing a condom, he wouldn't have been born. It hurts to think that way. Then again, what the fuck do I know? I'm a nobody. Everything I do is shit. Everyone I love, I also fail. Maybe Dad had it right. Maybe I'm this loser who can't do anything without ruining something—or someone—in the process. Maybe I'm to blame for everything, you know? I mean...Dad thought I was a disappointment. And Mom didn't love me enough to save me. I wasn't worth it.*

*I'm still not worth it.*

*—Edward*



I shake my head, heart constricting. I'm actually afraid of thinking about the what ifs. He was in such a dark place back then, and he had *no one* until Emmett stepped in. He was all alone when he struggled with his own demons. He was destructive, lost, afraid, *morbid*, and a few of the letters that followed made me fear how quickly he could've ended it all.

Like Alice did.

—Tinks. *That's you.*

*It's the middle of the night, and I have a random thought. If I chose to take the coward's way out and commit suicide, who would I write the goodbye note to? Or is that too cliché? Maybe you only see that in the movies—that they actually write letters to their loved ones. But if I did that...would you even get the letter? Would Nathan? And what would I say? That friend of yours who hanged herself, did she write a note? Did she tell her family that she loved them? I can't really remember her story. I know you told me. I'm sorry. What I do remember is that you told me she died when her neck broke. Which means she severed one or several of her cervical vertebrae. There are seven of them. I've studied all of that. Dad made me. He told me it was good to know—good to know the alternatives we have if we wanna end our lives. So yeah, I've read about the hangman's fracture. Fascinating stuff, really. Death by hanging is just one, but the actual cause of death could be a few things. You could choke, of course, and you could break your neck. If you use a wire, you can also die from blood loss. 'Cause, you see, it cuts into your skin. Like, the skin gives way, but the wire isn't thick enough to cut off your air supply. And, I guess, if the jump is really high and the rope is weak, maybe you can die when you fall down to the ground again. That's just a guess, though. But in my opinion, that's gotta be too painful. I'd probably go with pills. And you know I'm a coward; I'd rather not feel any pain. Must be nice to just drift away and not be aware of your life seeping out of you. The life in*

*your eyes would just flicker until there's nothing left. Though, that wouldn't work with me. I would have to have life in my eyes to lose it.*

*Another thing I wonder: should I be buried or go with cremation?*

*Who would visit my grave? What would it say on it? Who would miss me?*

*I'd like to be missed.*

*I should probably get some more sleep. I have another session tomorrow.*

*—Edward*

That's just one of four letters that were about suicide.

They scared me half to death, and I remember calling Edward in the middle of the night, needing to talk to him. I *needed* to hear his voice.

Some letters screamed of how lonely he felt.

*—Bella*

*I wonder what you're doing. It's a Friday night. Are you at home, just you and Nathan? Or maybe you have a babysitter—maybe you're out with friends. Do you have a boyfriend? If I was a good person, I'd wish you did have one. A nice guy who appreciated you. Someone who laughs when you crack a silly joke. I don't even know if you like jokes. Because I never took the time to get to know you. I wish I had. Anyway...I'm not that person—the one who wants what's best for you. I hope I can be a guy like that one day, but I'm not there yet. 'Cause I don't want you to find someone else. I'm sorry for that. But this sucks. God, this really sucks. I hate this, you know? I just miss you. I know I don't have the right to miss you, but I do anyway. I miss the comfort you gave me. I miss the way you'd carefully touch me after I'd gotten a beating from Dad. I miss your*

*concern. But most of all, I think I miss your hugs. Shit, that sounded gay. I need a drink.*

*—Edward*

Then he started writing to Nathan, too, and it started on our son's first birthday.

*—Nathan Anthony Swan*

*I wish I knew you. I wish I could be there to celebrate your first birthday. The only thing that comforts me is that I know your mom. I know that she's giving you the best birthday you can ever dream of, because that's who she is. Maybe one day, I'll get to be there, too. I hope so. I also hope your birthday wishes come true. Okay, so maybe there's no such thing as wishing when you're one year old, but there will be one day. I remember many things I've wished for and still do wish for. Adults have more wishes than you can imagine. You are one of my wishes, Nathan. It's up to me to make them come true, and I'm working on it. I promise.*

*I love you, and I hope you'll have a very happy birthday. I've never met you, but I still know you deserve the world.*

*—Your dad*

I don't know how many times he erased, crossed out, and re-wrote several words. For instance, when I looked closely, I could see that he had written Nathan Anthony Cullen first. But then he erased it and wrote Swan. Same goes for the last word, or rather, title. Underneath "Your dad", I could see "Edward" and "Your father", too.

In many of the early letters, it's easy to see that he was scared to hope. He wanted so badly, but since he's never really had a good thing in his life—at least, something lasting—he was afraid to hope. Even now, he's struggling with coming to terms with the idea that he actually deserves

good things. He's still afraid someone's gonna rip it all away from him. And, last but not least, he's constantly afraid of making mistakes.

I try to tell him that making mistakes is inevitable. Humans make mistakes.

*Humans make mistakes.*

Those are words I've repeated in my head a lot lately.

Edward's letters have helped. They've made me see that he's not the one who made those mistakes anymore.

I started seeing it after about forty letters—the progress he was making. Even if he was in prison at that point, a place that doesn't exactly provide happiness or...I mean, it's not an environment I'd feel content to be in, you know? But Edward did, and I get it. Prison grounded him—forced him to move forward.

—Bella

*Dealing with the past hurts like a motherfucker, I won't lie. But it kinda works. I know what I did. I know I have no excuses. And I'm not making any. What I did to you was vile. Back then, I was trying to protect myself. You, too. But there's still no excuse for anything. Despite the stupid shit I've done, I'm still a smart guy. I was creative enough to destroy you. I know I could've used that creativity to run you out of town without actually ripping you apart.*

*You and Nathan are all I think about. Sam, my cellmate, talks about his kids all the time. He tells stories, jokes, shares memories. And it hurts so fucking bad, 'cause I don't have anything to say in return. I don't know when Nathan took his first step. I don't know what you do when he can't stop crying. I don't know which stories you read to him.*

*Sam is here because he robbed a gas station. He went in there with a gun, waving it around, and demanded money. Because he had just been let go at his job and he couldn't afford to feed his family. And his youngest son had pneumonia. The kid needed to see a doctor, but they were uninsured and had no means. He was desperate, and he knew very well that he'd probably get caught. But if he could only get his hands on some cash to send off his boy to get help... Maybe you're thinking that there was most definitely something that could've been done. Perhaps you're right. Where there's a will, there's a way, right? But he wasn't thinking clearly. Would you if Nathan was in possible danger? Would you think rationally?*

*I'm just writing. I guess for two reasons. 1) I wish I could say I've done everything for my son. But that's so far from the truth. Sam, he's a real dad. He'd do anything for his kids, consequences be damned. This is how I feel now, Tinks. It really is. I'd do anything for you and Nathan today. If only I thought the same in Forks, huh? Anyway. 2) I was desperate. In Forks, I was always wound tight. Always on high alert. Always ready for a punch. Always ready to punch someone else if he looked at me funny. Offense and defense. I never felt safe. Then again, I didn't have a man like Sam as my father. It's not weird that I'm fucked-up, I think. Shit, I had a point in all this, I swear. Right. I was desperate. Not thinking clearly, maybe? When I did all that to you, I mean. On the other hand, perhaps that's just bullshit. I took the time to plan it all.*

*I'm just gonna quit this rambling right here.*

*—Edward*

It was the road to recovery from there.

He brings up memories in some letters. In some, he asks questions about Nate and me. In others he apologizes, and several letters have dried tearstains on them.

Reading these...it's been cathartic.

The fantasy letters, the memories, the confessions, the ramblings, the raw honesty...

It's been a journey, and somewhere down the road, I started looking at Edward in a different light. That actually started before Edward gave me those letters, but it's deeper now. Attraction and the fact that we share a past...that's one thing. But to fall in love with the man he has become is another.

Granted, I've had help to figure all this out.

Lisa's been my rock. She has helped me dissect and understand. She's given me different perspectives and...yeah.

Two days ago, when I told her that I've fallen for Edward, she grinned at me.

*"Oh, I've seen it for a while," Lisa chuckles. "But you needed to figure this one out on your own. I knew you would."*

*"How...how did you know? I mean—what have you 'seen'?"*

*She smirks. "You really have no clue?" I shrug, helpless, and she grins again. "Ah, Bella. It's been pretty easy. He moves; you move. You move; he moves. And you remember the dinner we had here a couple months ago?" I nod. "No matter how far apart you were, you always kept an eye on each other. If you were talking to Mary, your eyes would scan the room every now and then until you found him. When he was talking to Jasper, he did the same."*

I'm brought back to reality when I see that I'm halfway up a big truck's ass, and I slam down on the brakes, wondering if maybe someone should revoke *my* license. Fuck, I'm worse than old people.

"Shit," I breathe out, placing a hand over my racing heart.

Shaking my head, I refocus and think about the fact that I'll be in Sterling in about ten minutes.

And a few minutes later, when I reach Edward's private road, that racing heart of mine takes off again.

It feels like my skin is prickling. My breathing is almost labored and choppy, and I can barely sit still. I'm like Nathan, for chrissakes.

"I will be calm." I try to talk myself down from this...this...high? Yeah. "I will talk to him." Admit to him that I want what he wants. I'll tell him that I love him. "We will sit down and discuss things." As two grown people, we will move forward together. Maybe he will ask me out? Maybe I will ask him out? God, I don't know.

Pulling in behind Edward's Range Rover, I kill the engine and take a couple deep breaths before I leave the car. The sun is out and it's relatively warm. It has nothing on Arizona or Tennessee, obviously, but it's still very nice, and I'm only dressed in a pair of jeans and, um, one of Edward's black t-shirts. What? It was the shirt my hand found first when I got dressed this morning. Nothing weird about that. But yeah, I'm wearing it, and since it's pretty damn huge on me, I've tied it in a knot on my hip. Otherwise, it'd be a short dress.

As I walk up the path leading to Edward's cabin, I smile briefly at the new cobblestones he and Emmett laid here a few weeks ago. We had lunch on the porch. Homemade pizza, homemade lemonade. Nate was running around with Taz. And I want this. Christ, I really want all of it. With Edward. 'Cause I remember this little moment we shared when I told him and Emmett it was lunch. It was just a small touch—Edward brushed the pad of his thumb over my chin. I don't know why I recall it so vividly, or

why I can't forget the soft smile that played on his lips. Regardless, it left girly butterflies in my stomach. Just thinking about it brings them back.

I take another deep breath and walk up the porch steps, suddenly filled with a harsh need. Or maybe harsh is the wrong word. But it's there, almost consuming me.

Last step. Fear of rejection jolts through me for a second, but I quickly smother that pinch of insecurity. It's almost insulting to Edward if I started doubting his feelings. After all, ever since I saw him again, six months ago, he's been nothing but sincere, kind, genuine...*and fucking amazing.*

I just needed this time to end up where he's been for a while.

I needed to let go, forgive, and get to know the Edward he is now.

I can't let the past rule my future; I need to take a chance on this.

The great thing about all this is that it doesn't even feel hard. It's right now as easy as breathing. I won't ever forget the past—neither will Edward—but we will move forward. Together.

Heart stuck in my throat, I knock on the door.

Almost at the same time, I see something moving in my periphery—to my left—and I tilt my head in that direction just to see Edward walking over, most likely having been in his workshop out back.

I try to swallow but find it impossible.

"There you are!" All air pretty much leaves me as my body moves of its own volition. *Edward, Edward, Edward.* His name goes on a loop in my head at the same rate as my heart is pounding. *Edward, Edward, Edward.* I run down the steps, taking a sharp turn to my right and continue to run



toward him. I vaguely register the fact that he's holding a bowl of ice cream in his hands, but soon it's not there anymore. His eyes are wide as I literally jump him, accidentally knocking the bowl out of his hands, but all I can think of is, *close, close, close*. Then it's *closer, closer, closer*. I wrap my arms and legs around him as he stumbles backward a little, and then I crash my mouth to his.

He oomphs. He chokes. He coughs. He chuckles breathily. In quick succession.

When he slowly but firmly starts to kiss me back, tears well up behind my closed lids.

It feels like my heart is about to explode.

"Tinks," he pants as we continue to kiss. It's not slow anymore. It's deep, frantic, and passionate. "Baby, what..."

Locking my feet around his ass and tightening my arms around his neck, I kinda hoist myself up higher. "Tell me if—you want me to stop." I tilt my head to the side and kiss him deeper, tasting his tongue on my own. *Mint, chocolate, coffee*. "I—I..." I swallow and try to breathe. His bottom lip ends up between my own lips. My teeth nip a little. He groans, and then I'm pressed up against the house wall. I moan and weave my fingers through his hair. Between kisses, I inhale his delicious scent. It's his body wash, his shampoo, the sawdust, those oils... I love it. I love *him*. Which I was about to tell him, so... "I..." God, he starts kissing my neck. That feels so good. And when the tip of his tongue swipes across the spot below my ear, I can't help but whimper. The softness and wetness from his lips and tongue combined with the two-day old scruff... Too good for words.

"Yesss." I hiss when I feel his erection in all the right places. There's no way he did that intentionally, 'cause he's about to shift his lower body away from me, but I put a stop to that bullshit by rolling my hips over him and pushing the heels of my Chucks into his ass.

*What happened to sitting down and talking—calmly?*

Edward happened.

"I love you," I admit in a rush, capturing his mouth with mine again.

"*Fuck*," he rasps and stills completely.

He breaks the kiss, his breathing as labored and heavy as mine, and stares at me through hooded eyes.

I smile and touch my thoroughly-kissed lips. "I love you."

First, there's confusion in his eyes. Then, as it slowly dawns on him, or as my confession settles in him, countless emotions flit across his features. There's elation, happiness, love, relief, and when those beautiful eyes of his become glassy, I know for sure that while he may have known very well that our attraction was mutual and strong, he hasn't dared to really believe I'd love him in return.

After a moment, he lets out a shaky breath and drops his forehead to my shoulder. But that's about it. He makes no other move, and it's the way I want it. I'm still trapped between the house wall and him, and I still have him perfectly close.

"I love you," he whimpers quietly.

I kiss his neck softly, lingering. "I love you right back."

Lifting his head, he shudders and kisses my jaw, my cheeks, my eyelids, my nose, and ends with a kiss on my forehead.

Without commenting, I wipe away a stray tear that's falling down his cheek.

Then he kisses me on the lips. Deeply, hungrily, delving his tongue into my mouth. Lips locked, hands grasping, breathing ignored.

We're all smiles.

Although, I'm all giggles when I see what's going on slightly behind Edward.

"Taz ate your ice cream." I point.

Looking over his shoulder, Edward sees what I see—Taz licking ice cream off his nose.

"Just great." He groans and chuckles and faces me and kisses me again.

~CYE~

Later, we're in Edward's bed together, down to our underwear, and under the covers. Well, I'm in panties and his t-shirt, and he's in boxers. We've been here for hours now, I think.

We talk a lot.

We kiss a lot.

We hug even more.

I tell him I've forgiven him for everything. I won't forget, which I also tell him, and I won't ignore it, either. But I'm free to move on, I admit, and there's nothing I want more than to move on with him by my side.

He goes pretty silent for a while, resting his head on my chest.

My fingers play absentmindedly with his hair.

A few times I feel small drops trickling down my sides, but I say nothing, knowing it's an emotional day.

And perhaps half an hour or so later, it's his turn to comfort me when I get all weepy.

It's overwhelming, not to mention startling. Startling—to realize that I've felt so lonely for years and not really known it. I've known it, felt it, but I had no clue it was on this level. But here, in Edward's strong arms, it comes crashing down on me. And the thing is, as I also realize, that it can only be Edward. I can feel it in my heart, deep in my bones, that I'd never be able to feel this way about someone else.

He's...different, in a way. From whom, I don't know, but there's still something that makes me think he's unlike others. There's a roughness around him; he's strong, undoubtedly manly, sometimes awkward with his words, completely clueless in the kitchen, pretty foul-mouthed, has a dirty sense of humor, and he's gruff. But at the same time, he's also the most affectionate person I've ever met. He's thoughtful, sweet... Sometimes, he's a lost little boy, which causes my heart to ache, but then again, I think I'm a lost little girl sometimes, too. We'll just have to guide each other and make sure we keep talking.

We certainly don't have all the answers to everything, but we don't pretend we do.

We'll probably screw up many times over, though I'm comforted by the faith I have that we'll never go too far. Our past will ensure that. I already know, for instance, that we will never walk away from each other in the middle of a fight. Walking away is just out of the question.

"What are you thinking about?" he murmurs, placing soft kisses along my collarbone. His lips trail, never really leaving my skin until he applies pressure for another kiss.

I sigh contentedly and hitch my leg over his hip. Honestly, I can't really remember us losing all our clothes; it just happened somewhere between talks, kisses, talks, and kisses.

"That I'll never walk away," I answer. He hums and gives my body a firm, long squeeze. "What are you thinking about?"

He lifts his head and kisses my chin. "That I'm fucking thankful," he chuckles quietly. "You and Nate make living feel...*more like living*. If that makes sense."

The corners of my mouth curl into a smile. "It makes perfect sense." Giving his chest a playful shove, I have him on his back in a flash. I grin and straddle his hips, enjoying the brightness in his eyes. Now, more than ever before, Nathan looks like him.

Edward sits up and steals a quick kiss, the covers pooling around us. "You're so fucking beautiful—you know that?" I tilt my head back as he murmurs more words against my neck. "I can't really believe my luck, you know." I shiver when his fingers caress the skin under my t-shirt, near my hips. "You could have anyone."

Shaking my head, I cup his cheeks and give him a wet, sensual kiss. "I'm only available for you." That's what he said to me after declining a date with Martin's mom. Edward's only available for me, and it's the same the other way around. "You're the only one who makes me feel this way," I admit, a little out of breath. With a slight swivel of my hips, I feel how he slowly hardens under me.

"Fuck." His fingers dig into my hips. "I love you, honey."

I let out a shuddering breath and nod. "I love you back."

"No. I don't think you get it," he moans quietly when I roll my hips again. His cock is hard under me, waking desires that have been dormant for so

long. It wasn't until a few months ago that I started feeling this need. Need for more than being a mommy. Edward, he makes me crave being a woman, too. "You... I fucking adore you."

A drawn-out shiver slowly makes its way through me, setting me on fire in the process.

I need Edward to understand that I feel the same. He has to get it. I'm not settling. He's... "It's mutual, baby." I stare at him, forehead to forehead, noses touching too. "Head over heels," I whisper. "You're my family. You and Nathan."

Letting out a groan, he flips us over. He kisses me so hard, so hungrily, so deeply. At the same time, he finally gives in and moves, too. It was only me before, but now...

"Oh, fuck," I whimper, wrapping my legs around him. "Please, Edward." I arch my back as his cock rubs against my pussy. My hands fist his hair, and I try to pull him impossibly closer. "I—I need..."

"Tell me," he whispers gruffly. "Dammit." He pushes harder, sending jolts of pleasure through me. "Anything."

I nod, trying to breathe. "Everything. I want you."

"Now? I mean..." He ceases all movements and looks at me, brows furrowed, cheeks a little flushed, and eyes full of desire. I just stare back, because...yes, now. "Jesus Christ." He uses one hand to scrub his face.

"Unless you think we're rushing," I say, nipping at his jaw.

He shudders. "I'm a man, baby." Oh, I'm aware. "Rushing—not a word in my vocabulary. But..." He groans again and shifts his weight, applying pressure on my pussy. It makes me moan. "I don't want any regrets."

"No regrets." I squirm under him and reach for his boxers. "Please." That word is whispered against his throat, and I feel the way he swallows—so hard. "I love you, and..." I blow out a breath. "It's been years."

At that, he looks down at me and cocks a brow. "*Believe* me. I know how you feel, Tinks."

"So..." I arch a brow, too, as I let my fingers dip under the waistband of his black Calvin Klein's.

He chuckles a little and shakes his head. "There's no need to twist my arm." Lowering his face, he kisses me again, never stopping when one of his hands goes under my shirt. "Fuck, how I've fantasized about this." He groans and palms my left breast, touching me expertly. He always knew what he was doing. And God, I remember his fingers, how they brought me to orgasm after orgasm. Back then, when he was seventeen, what he lacked in stamina, he made up by using those fingers of his. Then again, neither of us has gotten laid since the last time we were together, so I doubt stamina has improved—hell, for either of us. Just this, being with him so close, makes my insides quiver.

"I love seeing you in my clothes," he admits...just as I wrap my fingers around his thick cock. "*Goddamn*." He bucks his hips into my touch; I stroke him firmly. He's warm, smooth, and heavy in my hand. "Time to lose the shirt, baby. I need to see you." He raises his body but remains kneeling between my legs.

Sitting up slightly, I pull off my shirt and drop it on the floor. And while I'm in this position, I take the opportunity to push down Edward's boxers. Christ, his body... He's changed so much. My fingers trace his defined abs, his ribcage where his ink is, his chest... I swallow, feeling my mouth water.

We're both staring, I note.

"Lie back," he instructs softly.

I do, watching as his eyes keep roaming my body.

Keeping his eyes locked with mine, he tugs on my purple boy shorts.

I lift up my hips, sure there's something weird crackling between us. Whatever it is, it's heavier than anything I've felt in the past.

My legs shift so he can slip off the fabric.

"Jesus," he mutters, tossing my panties somewhere behind him. He's definitely not looking me in the eye anymore. Instead he's watching my pussy, and only a few seconds later, the pad of his thumb skims over my wet slit. "So fucking hot." I shudder when he adds the tiniest amount of pressure. At the same time, he grips his cock and strokes it slowly.

I lick my lips.

He's too far away. "Edward..."

And then he's here, covering my body with his large one. More kisses. Greedy touches. He's all lined up.

His teeth nip at my lips. First one...then the other. "I wanna taste you. It's been..." He rolls his hips, and his cock slides between my slick lips. "Fuck—so long. Let me."

I'm shaking my head no. "I need all of you." My breathing stutters. "Don't make me beg."

"Never." It's a small chuckle he lets out. "So..." He exhales shakily, seeming nervous. For some reason. Then there's a sheepish smile. "Protection?"

I can't help but grin.



He knows so well what I'm thinking about.

He's thinking it, too.

And I can't resist... "Why, Edward Cullen. Are you *asking* for a condom?"

Half-amused, he shakes his head. He tries to glare but fails. "Shut up."

My grin widens. "I love you."

That does it. Those eyes of his become soft, tender, sweet. "I love you, too."

*I can feel that.*

"I'm on the pill," I whisper. It's not like we need to talk about STDs.

"Oh," he mouths.

I nod and pull him down on me, kissing him 'til I feel feverish.

I'm hyperaware. And sensitive to the smallest of his touches. But if there's one thing I know about Edward, it's that he's not gentle in the bedroom. Make no mistake, I'm willing to bet he'll be amazing at making love. But he's not careful. Hell, I'm not, either. I think the difference between making love and fucking is what you feel. It has nothing to do with how slow or fast you go.

"Now," he mumbles into the kiss. Lining up again, he pushes in an inch and stops. "*Tinks*." I hold my breath. "I think I need to apologize in advance." Another inch or two.

I giggle, all breathless and horny and stretched.

"No giggling." His voice is strained, face buried in the crook of my neck. Then, in one smooth motion, he's all in. "Damn."

I'm not breathing. Again. I should.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I focus on the pleasure, the sting, the emotions.

Like a rollercoaster.

"No, baby," he whispers and drops a kiss on my forehead. "Look at me."

I open my eyes, and there he is.

"I want it all with you," he says, swallowing. He slides out, then quickly back inside. Like I knew, he doesn't do gentle. One hand grips my hip tightly, fingers digging in, and the other hand cups my neck. And his cock... He gives it to me hard but slow. Long, deep strokes. But his eyes? His eyes hold the softness. "You're my family, too."

"Yesss," I hiss, meeting each push of his.

He fills me completely—over and over again—in fluid movements.

Mouth by my ear, he goes on. "The dirty, the fucking sweet. Morning sex, shower sex, kitchen sex... The arguing, the bullshitting, the movie nights, the early mornings where we rush around to get ready." I throw my head back as he fucks harder. "You'll always have me in your corner." I moan, and he returns to the kissing. Now down. Down my chest...to my tits.

"Christ." He grinds his cock deep inside of me, creating friction against my clit. I whimper, moan, gasp.

He wraps his lips around my right nipple, sucking it into his mouth.

"*Edward*." When his hand moves from my hip to my pussy, I know it won't be long. No toy can fucking compare to the real thing. "Oh, *God*." His fingers are still magic. "Faster, baby." He complies.

My thighs quake and tense, almost locking him in place. But he keeps moving in and out of me.

"I can't wait for all of it," I gasp, wanting the same things he wants. The crazy, the difficult, the sweet, the sexy.

Allowing my hands to roam, I feel the rippled muscles along his upper back. His shoulder blades, his shoulders, his spine... I feel them flex with each thrust.

"Tell me," he moans around my nipple.

I go with honesty. "Sucking on your cock." I happen to miss that. "Your face..."

He spits out a curse and slams into me. "Go on."

I cry out.

"I remember your face..." I breathe heavily and drop my legs back to the bed. I spread them wider, making it easier for me to lift my hips. "...when —when I slid my tongue up the base of your cock."

"Fuck!" he groans. "I remember, too—*Jesus*. You're *killing* me."

Faster, harder, deeper.

"I want all of it," I whimper. "The dirty, the fucking sweet." His words said it all, so I figure I'd go with those.

"I need to kiss you," he grunts, claiming my mouth again. He pushes his tongue into my mouth, and I meet him, pushing back. "Too good, honey." He starts panting and rubbing me harder. Our lips brush together, our bodies slide. "I'm there."

He gets me there with a swivel of his hips. Deep, so fucking deep inside of me, he curses and apologizes before I see the pleasure taking over him. However, I'm going down, too. Screwing my eyes shut, I grit out a moan

as I come so hard. It's not a long-lasting orgasm but several small explosions. Small gasps slip through my lips between each one.

When it's all over, it still feels like I'm high.

I slowly open my eyes again, my breathing far from regulated, and see Edward's face, so close to my own.

His teeth are imbedded in his bottom lip, his eyes are closed, his brows are furrowed.

"Did you at least come?" He peeks at me, only one eye opening.

This weird, breathy laugh escapes me, which makes Edward groan since he can most definitely feel it. Down there.

"Can't you tell?" I wheeze out through laughs.

He breathes out in what seems to be relief. "Sorry." Slowly, with a slight grimace, he pulls out and collapses next to me. "I was drowning in my own orgasm—I couldn't tell left from right." He chuckles and throws an arm over his eyes. "I think I gotta work on my stamina."

Hey, he lasted far longer than I thought he was going to.

"You were perfect," I murmur, scooting closer. He hums and lifts his arm, and I roll half my body on top of his. My chin rests on his chest, still heaving a little with each labored breath. "You're all I want."

He smiles and finally uncovers his face. His eyes show that softness again.

"I should probably take you out on a date," he blurts out. I laugh again, 'cause he's all cute and silly. "Stop that." He narrows his eyes at me, failing to hide his happiness. "You're you—my Tinks. I wanna give you all that." He makes a bubble face and stares up at the ceiling...while I feel

lightheaded from his sweetness. "I've never been on a single date my entire life. I think I need Google."

"I'm already yours, you know," I say softly.

His smile widens, eyes constantly bright now, and he tucks me into his side. Arms securing me, a leg hitched over my hip, and his lips kissing my forehead.

I sorta need to go to the bathroom, but I don't want to. Not right now, anyway.

"It's gonna be a while before I can wrap my head around it," he whispers, fingers playing with my hair. "God, I love you, Isabella."

Curious and surprised, I peer up at him. "*Isabella?*"

He offers a one-shouldered shrug. "Your name is beautiful." He kisses my nose. "Isabella, Bella, Tinks...honey, baby." A playful growl against my cheek. "My woman."

I just grin and lower my gaze to his ribcage again.

I feel loved, cherished...and more than a little amused when I study the tattoo of Peter Pan. I've seen it many times, but it just hit me. I mean...I know Edward is Peter Pan. Nate is the Darling boy, and I'm Tinkerbell. But...*Peter Pan*. Of all people.

*The boy who didn't want to grow up.*

Yet, no one has grown up more than Edward Cullen.

*"To live will be an awfully big adventure."*

Oh, I'm definitely ready to move forward with Edward.

I'm all in, and I have a feeling it will be a pretty amazing adventure.



*Chapter song – Open Your Eyes by Snow Patrol*

## **EPOV**

In the past, I hid. I didn't face my problems until it was almost too late.

I kept my eyes closed, hoping shit would just solve itself.

I didn't want to see my own issues, and I didn't want to see others'.

It's different now.

Tinks is right next to me, in bed, sleeping, and it feels like I have a new life to begin.

With her and our son. *Together*. In every sense.

There's a lot I don't know, but I do have a good feeling that we'll just deal with everything together.

I can't predict the future, but that's okay. I'm only twenty-three years old—today, actually. I don't need to know how things will pan out. As long as I have Tinks and Nate.

They both love me for who I am—that's all I want right now.

I'll just keep my eyes open, work hard, hope for the best, and make sure to keep my family safe, loved, and protected.

Those are things some take for granted. I think it's physically impossible for me to do that.

Scooting closer to Tinks, I drop soft kisses on her naked shoulder.

Nate will probably be up soon and want breakfast.

We picked him up from Jasper and Jada's last night, only to drive back out here.

When I see Tinks' mouth curve into a slow, sexy smile, I know she's awake.

My words are whispered against her soft skin.

"Open your eyes."

She does, and I'm not gonna say shit about seeing our future in her beautiful brown ones.

Like I said, I can't predict that.

I do see that she loves me, though.

I skim my nose along her jaw. I kiss it. I kiss her nose. I fucking love her.

She kisses me back. She loves me back.

Maybe one day in a couple months, I'll ask her to move in with me. Permanently. Maybe sooner. We can live in Anchorage during the week. The cabin can be here for weekends, quick escapes, and holidays.

One day, in approximately a year, maybe I will ask her to marry me.

Maybe she'll say yes.

The day we get married, maybe I will be so nervous that I'm afraid I'm gonna throw up...until I see her coming down the aisle. It's the day beginning with one Cullen and ending with three.

When Emmett and Mary get hitched, a couple years from now, maybe Tinks will smile through her tears and tell me, while we're at the reception, that she's pregnant.

Maybe we'll have a baby girl who we'll name after Tinks' childhood friend and Tinks' mom—my godmother.

*Alice Renee Cullen.*

I will cry when I hold her for the first time...maybe. And I will be there to take a photo of her tiny little self lying on Tinks' chest.

Maybe the scale will balance out. After our unfair pasts, maybe Tinks and I will get to grow old and grey together.

The sound of little feet padding down the hall outside brings me back to the present, and I exchange a knowing smile with Tinks.

Time to start the day.

*The first birthday I've ever looked forward to.*

**The End**

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**Futuretake/Tinks' Curry Soup**

*Chapter song – Good Life by Tyler Ward and Heather Janssen*



## **EPOV**

"Bella said a skillet," Em comments, eyeing the wok I set on the stove.

I shrug. "This thing is bigger." And there's a shitload of vegetables going in there.

"Still..."

"Let's just do this," I huff. "How hard can it be?"

*Famous last words, Cullen.*

"Um, okay. What's first?"

I scratch my chin and look down at the recipe. "We gotta cut up the vegetables." Two large green bell peppers, eight carrots, and half a white cabbage head or whatever the fuck it's called.

Grabbing one knife for me and one for Em, we get started, standing on either side of the kitchen island. It kinda makes me wish we were at home in Anchorage, 'cause our kitchen there is bigger, but Tinks needs to rest, so the cabin it is.

We're all here for the weekend to unwind a little—Tinks, Nate, me, Emmett, and Mary. Jasper, Jada, and their kids might come here on Sunday for dinner, but it's not set in stone. There's a helluva cold running around, which is actually Em's reason for being here in this kitchen with me. Mary's on the couch in the living room, sniffing and coughing. Tinks and Nate are the same, though Tinks' cold is thankfully not as major. My reason for offering to make this fucking soup is 'cause she's craving it.

Pregnancy cravings? I always thought those involved going out in the middle of the night to pick up weird shit, like ice cream and pickles.

But all the wife eats these days is soup and her iron supplements.

That's why she needs to rest—the baby doc told her she needed it until her iron levels are better. Otherwise, she could become anemic. And I did study medicine once. I know the importance of this shit. Tinks is on bed rest, and that's fucking final.

"Dude." I look at the carrots Em is slicing. I wave my knife at them. "You gotta do them thinner than that. That's not how Tinks makes 'em." His pieces are almost an inch thick. "Turn one of your fat fucks into three."

"Who made you Wolfgang Puck?" He scowls.

I chuckle. "Who?"

"Never mind."

I return to dicing the bell peppers. Sorta the same size as the carrot slices are *supposed* to be. "I'm just saying that Tinks makes me this soup whenever I'm sick. It's like a rule." It really is. The wife is extra maternal and sweet when Nate and I get sick—always fussing and making sure we're okay.

"Daddy!" Nate shouts from the living room.

"What's up, buddy?" I holler back, pushing the bell peppers to the side. The cabbage is next.

"You gotta come quick! The baby's kicking Mommy!"

I grin and fly outta the kitchen.

Baby girl is a calm one, so we rarely feel her little kicks. At least, according to Tinks, she's calm. She said that Nathan was a kicker.

"Lemme feel." I round the couch and kneel down in front of Tinks. Mary's half-asleep on the other side of the couch, and some lame chick-flick is running in the background. Tinks laughs a little and slips down the covers

she's bundled up under, revealing her rounded belly. At almost eight months pregnant, I'm pretty sure Tinks has never been more gorgeous. "Holy shh—there it is." Both of my hands splayed on her belly, under her—or my, actually—t-shirt, I can feel our daughter's soft nudges. There's no describing this. With a goofy grin, I look up at Tinks' happy expression. "She's really going at it." I look down her belly again and lower my face to kiss her skin. "Be easy on your mommy, Alice," I whisper. "She's very important to us."

"Is it my turn yet?" Nate asks, crawling over Tinks' legs. I nod and make room for him, and soon we're both leaning our cheeks to Tinks' stomach. "I can't feel it." He frowns.

Guiding his hand to the spot under Tinks' belly button, I murmur, "Right here." I apply a little pressure and watch as Nate's eyes light up. "You feel it now?" I chuckle.

He nods and snuffles, his nose red from his cold. "I want her to be here now."

"Six more weeks, baby," Tinks says softly and weaves her fingers through Nate's hair. "Six Saturdays."

"Waiting is no fun," he grumbles.

I laugh and kiss his forehead before standing up. "Can't argue with you there, buddy." Leaning over the wife's form, I pull up her covers again. "Love you." I steal a quick kiss. "Anything I can get ya?"

She shakes her head and smiles. "Nope, we're all good here. Love you, too."

I leave them in their little world of pillows, covers, blankets, cups of tea, and tissues.

"Took you long enough," Emmett mutters as I rejoin him in the kitchen.

I smirk. "You're just jealous."

He is. Right now, he's working hard to convince Mary to let him knock her up.

"Fuck you."

"No, thanks," I laugh. "Oh, you already chopped the cabbage." I nod, placing my hands on my hips. "Sweet. What's next?"

Truth is, Mary has told Tinks that she wants to surprise Emmett. She's already off her birth control or whatever, but there was something that made her nervous. Tinks kinda likes gossip; I don't. So, I don't really remember exactly what she told me, though I vaguely recall her saying that Mary's sisters have had problems getting pregnant, hence her wanting to downplay it a little.

"The vegetable broth." Emmett brings out a stock pot. "How much?"

I check the recipe. "Six cups. I'll get started on the, um..." I wave a hand at the stove. Time to fry up the vegetables. After dropping ten and a half tablespoons of unsalted butter into the pan, I rummage through the cabinets to find that damn curry powder. "Honey!" I shout for Tinks. "Where's the curry?!"

"Cabinet nearest the stove!" she calls back.

*Found you.* "Thanks!"

"Let me know if you want help, baby!"

I shake my head and grab the measuring cups. "Is there a stove next to the couch?"

No reply.

I grin. Woman needs to rest.

"Okay..." I sigh and pour five tablespoons of yellow curry powder into the melting butter.

"Is this gonna boil?" Emmett asks, stirring the broth.

"Yeah." *I think*. To be sure, I check the recipe again. "Yeah." After letting the curry and butter sizzle for a few minutes, I add all the vegetables. And that's when Nathan walks into the kitchen, his hair messy from a day of sleeping and chilling. Too fucking cute. He's even wearing his pajamas. "What're you doing up, baby?" I help him up to sit on the counter. "You should be resting with Mommy." Feeling his forehead, I'm glad it doesn't feel hot anymore. He had a slight fever this morning.

At the age of seven, Tinks and I are rarely allowed to baby him, but when he's sick we have free rein. It was actually just two weeks ago he turned seven.

"Mommy and Auntie Mary's movie is so boring," he mumbles and drops his forehead to my chest. I chuckle and kiss the top of his head. "Can I walk Taz?"

"Sorry, bud," I murmur. "You need to stay indoors—it's too cold outside."

He pouts. "Ugh. I hate being sick, Daddy."

"I know." I touch his cheek. "But you're getting better, right?" A shrug is what I get in response, and I can't blame him. As a kid, you don't want to wait for anything, regardless of whether it is your little sister's arrival or the next Saturday when you're allowed to eat candy. And speaking of... It's actually Saturday today, not that my son isn't painfully aware, but maybe that's how I can cheer him up. "Hey—" I gently bump my forehead

with his "—if you promise not to tell Mommy, I'll give you one chocolate bar before dinner."

That sure does it.

While he's munching on a Hershey bar, I have a beer with Emmett and talk about nothing in particular as we wait for the vegetables to soak up the butter and curry.

Approximately fifteen minutes later, I add all the vegetables into the stock pot, not forgetting to lower the heat to a simmer. Nathan also deems that Daddy's boring when he cooks, so I help him down from the counter, wipe his mouth of chocolate, and send him off to the living room again.

"He looks more and more like you every day," Emmett chuckles.

I sigh contentedly and lean back against the kitchen island, eyes focused on Nathan's retreating form. He really does look more and more like me. "I hope Alice will take after Tinks, though." I smile and tip back my beer.

When we found out we were having a baby girl...

*Jesus Christ.*

I won't lie; I got a little emotional.

I remember feeling the same warmth tingling its way through my body, much like I felt when I found out Tinks was pregnant with Nathan. Only this time, I didn't have to shove any feelings away; I didn't have to run away or push. I acknowledged every emotion—embraced them.

~CYE~

Another twenty minutes and some fussing over our wives later, Emmett and I are more than ready to get this shit over with. Not that cooking is that fucking horrible, but we're seriously starving here.

"Emmett!" Tinks calls as I squeeze a lemon into a bowl.

Emmett frowns. "Again?"

Tinks answers in affirmative, and Em walks out of the kitchen to tend to Mary, who started getting sicker a minute ago. Or more correctly: fifteen minutes ago. Literally, she just flew off the couch and ran to the bathroom to puke her guts out.

But I don't wanna think about that when the cabin smells this fuckawesome.

Just as I pour five tablespoons of lemon juice into the soup, that hot wife of mine enters the kitchen. She's taken to wearing my clothes, much to my cock's delight. Now, for instance, she's wearing a pair of grey sweats and a black t-shirt. Although, she also has a blanket wrapped around her.

"What's wrong with people these days?" I shoot her a wry smile. "First Nate, and now you. Is resting so fucking bad?"

"You're the same when you're sick, you know," she points out and grins cheekily. Like Nate, Tinks likes to sit on the counter, and, again like Nate, she can't get up on her own. Not now when she's all belly.

"Maybe it's a Cullen thing, then?" I wink at her before heading to the fridge. Once there, I grab the crème fraîche and another beer for me. I also grab a bottle of multivitamin juice for Tinks.

"Thanks." She smiles and accepts the bottle. "Yeah—" she nods and chuckles a little "—a Cullen thing for sure. Nate and I blame you."

"You would." I snort and check the soup. The recipe says, "*It's important that the soup isn't boiling when you add the crème fraîche*", and the words are underlined like a thousand times. So, I assume that's a rule to follow.

"How's Mary, by the way?" I ask and add the one cup of crème fraîche. "I hope you don't catch it." I frown, worried.

"Oh, I've already caught it." She snickers. "But that was several months ago. Anyway—" she twists her body and opens the small window over the sink "—I just came here to open this. I have a feeling Mary's gonna appreciate it."

I'm confused. "What, fresh air?"

"Yep." She nods and grunts as I help her down. Then a giggle. "I'm a whale."

"You're hot as fuck," I tell her matter-of-factly. Dipping down, I nuzzle the spot behind her ear and whisper, "And beautiful, gorgeous, fucking sexy."

"Fuck," she moans quietly. "You and me later, hubby—you do all the work."

I laugh and watch as she returns to the living room.

I've learned that Tinks is a horny mess when she's pregnant, but she hates that she can't move around like she usually does. But you won't find me complaining.

Waiting for Emmett to get his ass back here, I focus on stirring the soup to make sure the crème fraîche dissolves. Or melts or whatever it does. Then I add the last written ingredient, which is dill. A little less than a tablespoon.

For the final ten minutes, I keep the heat on low.

I taste it and add a little salt and black pepper. An extra teaspoon or so curry, too.

And when it's all said and done, Emmett decides he wants to return.



"Perfect timing for you," I mutter sarcastically, pretending to be annoyed with him. "It's all done."

"Women are fucking weird," is all he has to say.

"What?"

He shakes his head and takes a swig from his beer. "Mary's suddenly decided that she doesn't like curry anymore." He looks incredulous. "She *loves* curry, man. What the fuck is up with that, huh?"

My brows furrow.

But yeah, then it kinda hits me—what Tinks said before.

*"Oh, I've already caught it. But that was several months ago."*

I'm guessing about eight months ago, in fact.

"Oh, dude," I chuckle and squeeze his shoulder. "I'm gonna enjoy this little moment here while we set the table. C'mon." I keep chuckling, which just confuses Emmett even more.

I'm happy for my buddy; his wish is about to come true.