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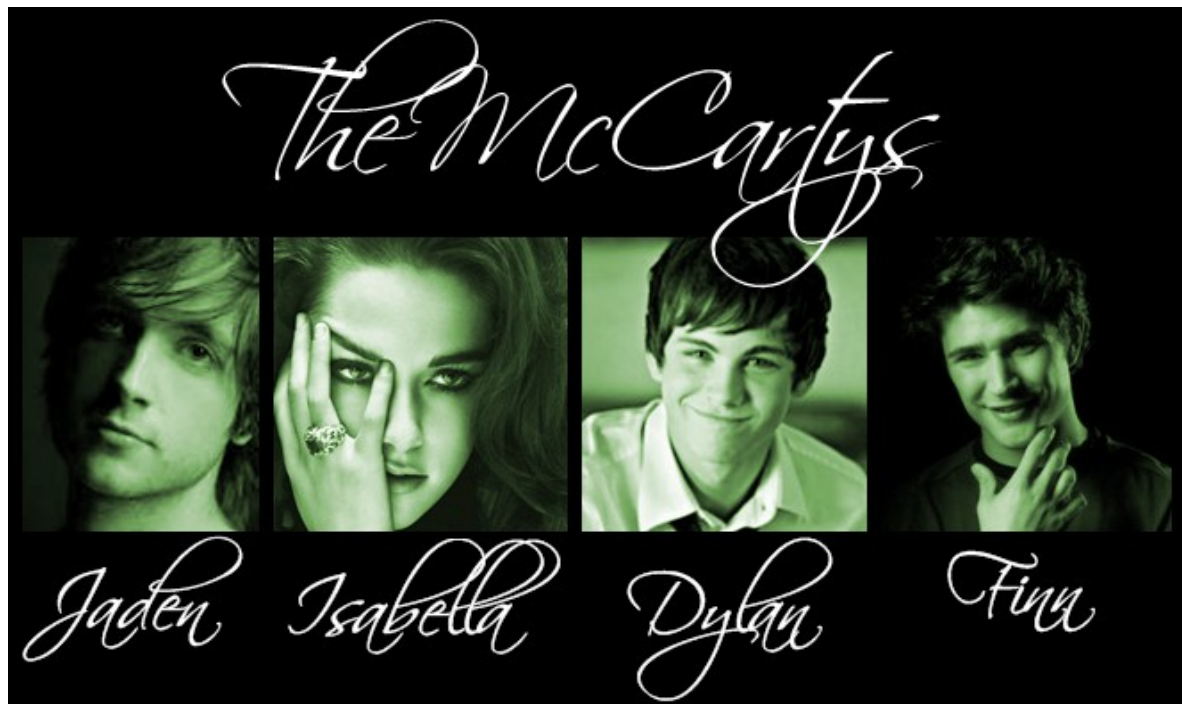
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^^Banner by JA Mash^^



BPOV

December 1st

"I don't care," I pant, speeding up on the treadmill. "Tell him it's time to come home." I let my oldest—Jaden—get away with a lot, but he's been on tour for months now. I've had it. He has a show in Philadelphia in two weeks; that's close enough. I want him here in the city for the holidays.

"I'd tell him if I knew where he was!" Emmett blurts out over the phone.

"WHAT?!" I shout and hop off the treadmill. Bending over, I place one hand on my thigh as I try to calm down my pulse and fucking heart. Behind me, I hear Rose hopping off her own treadmill. I also hear some random guy whistling.

If Emmett doesn't backtrack rather goddamn quickly, Rose will be a widow and I will lose my brother.

"You better not have said what I think you just said, Emmett Charles McCarty!"

I really wish I wasn't in a crowded gym right now.

"You heard me, sis," Em sighs. I grit my teeth together and walk over to a window. The view of Manhattan is one that usually fills me with warmth and joy, but not now. One of the few reasons I allowed Jaden to go on a nationwide tour was because Emmett is the band's manager. He travels with them. *"He left yesterday. All I have is a damn note."*

"And what the fuck does it say?" I hiss, wiping my forehead with the towel around my shoulders.

By now, Rose is standing next to me, looking concerned.

"It says not to worry and that he's gonna contact you in two days. Apparently, there's some surprise. And I found the note yesterday, so... tomorrow, I'm thinking."

Jesus fucking Christ. "And you didn't think it was a good idea to call me?! I swear to God, Emmett—I can make you disappear!"

I gotta guy who can make it happen.

Jaden is eighteen; I can't technically do shit, but come on. He's my fucking son. I trust him, I do, but I deserve to know.

"Bella! Calm the fuck down."

I will do no such thing. "What about his girlfriend?" I ask impatiently. Rose hands me a bottle of water, and I accept it with a small smile. "Did Haley leave, too?"

Haley Cullen—I've never met her, but apparently Jaden met her a week into the tour, and she's been with him ever since. I've spoken to her over the phone once, though, and she seems like a sweet girl.

"Yeah, they both took off."

"Fuck," I mutter. "Well, keep calling him. I'm gonna head home and see if Finn or Dylan has heard anything." I doubt Jaden has called Dylan—my youngest who is fourteen—but he's really close with Finn. He's sixteen and closer in age to Jaden, which matters. "Where are you now, by the way? Chicago or something?"

"We're about to leave Chicago for Detroit in a couple hours."

I scoff. "And how is the band gonna play without its drummer, huh?"

"Well, the show isn't until four days from now, so I'm sorta hoping Jaden will be back by then, obviously. Bella, you're not the only one who's worried. Or angry, for that matter."

"Whatever," I say dismissively. The last thing I care about now is the gigs. I need to know my son is okay. "Call me if you hear anything."

With that, I disconnect the call and turn to Rose.

Once I've told her everything, she has a wry grin on her face. "I guess Christmas shopping is out?"

"Yeah, no kidding." I fight the urge to stomp my foot. I'm thirty-five years old. Stomping my foot is not acceptable. "You have it easy," I tell her. "As long as you don't let Henry and Lily grow up." Henry is eleven and Lily is seven—I hope they stay that way.

Unlike Rose and Emmett who did everything right—dated, moved in together, started their careers, got married, *then* had children—I got

knocked up when I was still sixteen. Broken condom—age-old tale. I actually gave birth to Jaden on my seventeenth birthday.

Though, I didn't stop there. Jaden's dad, Peter—a preppy New Yorker I met down at Wildwood—bailed right away. He was there on vacation; the last thing he wanted was to become a father. And then, only a year later, I met Alec and became pregnant after a few months; I gave birth to Finn in October just after I turned nineteen. Alec and I stuck together for a few years, and he's the father of both Finn and Dylan. My youngest also came to me in October; I was twenty-one.

Then Alec left when Dylan was two.

The first thing I did was change Finn and Dylan's last name to McCarty.

So, at the age of twenty-three, I was alone with three boys. I was stupid, I know this. But it's not like I can regret it. I love my sons more than anything, and I've given them all I could. Thanks to Emmett and Rose, I was also able to go to college and make a life for myself. Emmett, being six years older than I, took over the role of a father to me when our parents were killed in a car accident fifteen years ago, and I owe him my life. *But...*couldn't he have called me the second he lost sight of Jaden yesterday?

Ugh.

"Don't get me started on Henry," Rose huffs. Grabbing our stuff, we walk toward the showers. "I'm suddenly fighting with him each morning for the fucking shower. I can't wait for the other bathroom to be finished." Ah yeah, they're redoing the tiles in their upstairs bathroom. I forgot. "I mean seriously, why does the kid need half an hour to shower every morning?"

Oh, please. That's an easy one. "He's eleven," I say flatly, opening the door to the women's changing room. "I'm sure you, a *doctor*, can figure it out."

Even if she gave up her job two years ago to stay at home with the kids in Staten Island, she still spent a gazillion years becoming a pediatrician. She says she might return to work when the kids are off to college. I don't know. She's thirty-nine; by the time Lily's graduated high school, she'll be over fifty.

"No!" Rose's eyes widen as realization dawns on her. "Is he—is he...?"

I grin and nod, while I scroll down until I see Jaden's number on my phone. "He's jacking it, honey," I say and pat her arm. Bringing the phone to my ear, I wait for my son to answer.

"How can you be so sure?" she asks as we reach our lockers.

I give her a pointed look just as my call goes to voicemail. "Three boys," I mouth, holding up three fingers.

"Hey, you've reached Jaden McCarty's phone. I can't answer right now, but leave a message after the beep. If you're lucky, I might just call back."

Beep.

"Jaden, this is your *mother*," I grit out, placing a hand on my hip. "If *you're* lucky, I won't wring your fucking neck when I see you again! Call me!" I blow out a breath and kick off my shoes. "Oh, and Mommy loves you. Kiss, kiss."

I click the end button, lose the clothes, grab two bath towels, my shower products, and enter the shower room with Rose.

"Oh, my God, go stand over there." Rose points at a stall farther away from hers. I give her a look in question, to which she groans. "I don't want you too close. It's bad for my ego."

For the love of God. "You need to stop that shit." I take the stall next to hers and step under the hot spray. "You're hot, Rose. Give it a rest." She's under the impression that she looks older than she is. At the same time, she claims that I look at least ten years younger than *I* am.

"But how do you do it?" she whines.

I snicker and reach for my shampoo. "I had my kids before twenty—that's what I did." Well, I was twenty-one when I had Dylan. But yeah, it obviously helped that I was so young. My body was able to return to its original state before I was twenty-five. And since then...regular exercising, eating healthily, moisturizing...oh, and I've never really dieted. None of that yo-yo thing. I've taken it slowly, allowing my skin and body to adjust. And curves aren't wrong. They actually make you look younger when you hit thirty. 'Cause that's when your skin starts to lose its own powers to slink back if you drop a few. So, now I carry some extra pounds, maybe ten or fifteen, and I refuse to lose them, because I'm pretty sure I'd get wrinkles if I did.

I get this cheesy grin on my face whenever my sons' friends make eyes at me.

"I have a few grey hairs, though." Maybe that'll comfort her.

She huffs. "You dye it—you look like you're twenty-five...not a fucking wrinkle. I can't exactly buy new skin." She pops her head into my stall. "Look under my eyes, next to my eyes, around my mouth. *Ugh.*" She disappears again.

I shake my head at her and start lathering up my body.

"When do you need to be home?" I ask, changing the subject. It's Saturday today, so the plan was to work out, go to lunch, shop for Christmas gifts for our kids, and then part ways.

"Henry and Lily are with the babysitter 'til four," she says.

I hum, nodding to myself. "Why don't you drive out to Staten Island and pick them up? You can all spend the night at our place." Since Emmett is Jaden's band's manager, he's not home a lot. In the past four months, he's visited New York two weekends every month, and Rose and their kids have flown out to visit him a few times, too. But that's it. "We could chill out with chick flicks and pizza."

"Finn and Dylan would love that," she chuckles dryly.

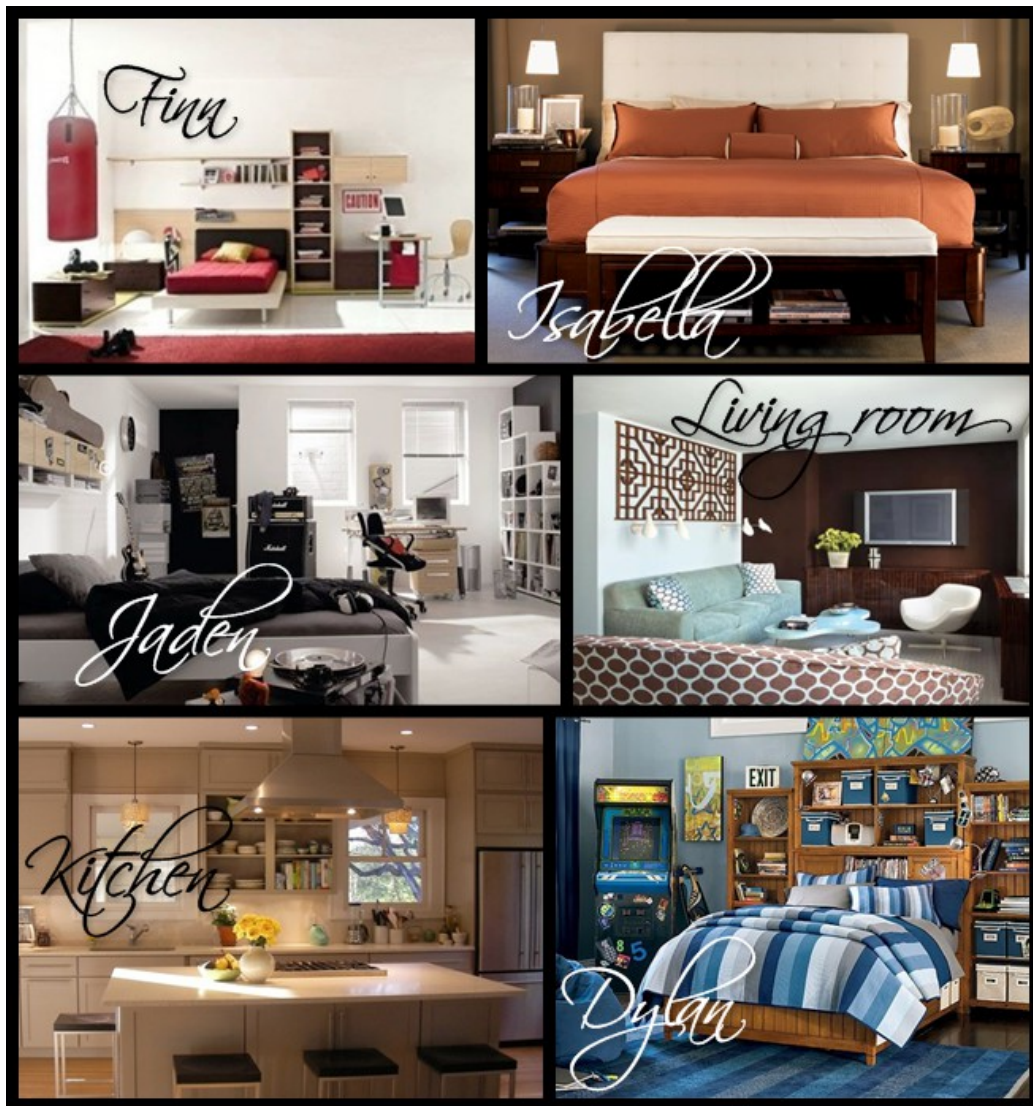
"They have TVs in their rooms," I retort. I live in a big apartment on the Upper West Side. It's expensive as *fuck*, but my job pays well, and we all love it in Manhattan. I've asked the boys if they wanted to move out to Staten Island or Brooklyn or something like that—maybe get a house, but...they're not interested. At least not now. For which I'm kinda glad. It wasn't until five years ago I could afford Manhattan; we lived in Jersey before. Born and raised there, actually. But I took a photography class here in the city when I was pregnant with Finn, and I fell in love.

"Okay, we'll be over—say dinnertime?" Rose sighs. "Hey, I think I'm gonna get a boob job. No, wait, just lift them, you know?"

I cup my own full Ds and tune Rose out.

I try not to listen to stupidity.

~oOo~



"Boys!" I holler from the kitchen. "Rose and your cousins will be here soon! I need to know what you want on your pizza!"

At the mention of food, both Finn and Dylan rush out of their rooms and into the kitchen.

"WE WANT-A PIZZA PIE-A!" they shout in unison, butchering any Italian accent out there. They're such goofs—always shouting that when we order pizza. *Goofy giants.*

They're all at least a head taller than I am, not to mention all buff and shit. Dylan, my sweetheart, is the only one who's a bit lankier. Finn is the worst; he's built like my brother.

Aside from their bulky bodies, though, they inherited most of their features from their mommy. Brown hair, dimples, brown eyes, and natural tans. Only Jaden is a shade or two lighter. 'Cause my boys are a mixed bunch. From me, they got a whole lotta Italian, and I even think there's some German from my grandmother on Mom's side. Oh, and my dad's great-grandfather was Irish—that's where our name's from. Finn and Dylan's dad—Italian. And Jaden's dad, Peter...yeah, fuck if I know where he's from, but he was very fair-skinned.

"Pepperoni and extra cheese," Finn says and goes for the fridge. Passing me, he gives me silly smile and a pat on the head. Like I'm some dog. Dylan, on the other hand, is a hugger. "Yo, Dee! Did you take the last of the milk?"

I roll my eyes. "Look behind the gazillion juice cartons, baby."

He finds another gallon there.

"Plain cheese for me," Dylan says quietly, rubbing his belly. "I'm hungry."

"Like that's news," I chuckle. "By the way, don't forget to tell me if you hear from Jaden."

Finn snickers. "Still can't believe he just took off with some chick. Hey, Ma—" he nudges me "—I bet they're eloping." He waggles his eyebrows.

I suck my teeth. "Don't give me a fucking heart attack."

Truthfully, it wouldn't surprise me. Jaden is always in love. Finn is the player, Jaden is the hopeless romantic, and Dylan is somewhere in between. At least when it comes to girls. However, I don't think he's gone far with a girl yet. I *hope* he hasn't. He still expresses more interest in video games and computers. Oh, and sneakers. His collection of Jordans is *ridiculous*.

"He's only eighteen-" I'm cut off by the beep of my phone. "Can you take it for me, please?" I point to the counter where Dylan's standing. He grabs my phone and hands it to me.

I almost faint when I see it's a text from Jaden.

I TOLD you there was no reason to worry, Mom. But since you're so persistent, I'll let you know right now. Haley and I are getting married!

"THE FUCK YOU ARE, SON!"

I read on, heart pounding.

We've rented an entire B&B up in Vermont. You, Finn, Dee, and Haley's family are welcome to join us whenever. Extended family can't come up until the twelfth. We're getting married on the fifteenth. Love you. –J

"Pack your bags!" I snap, storming out of the kitchen.

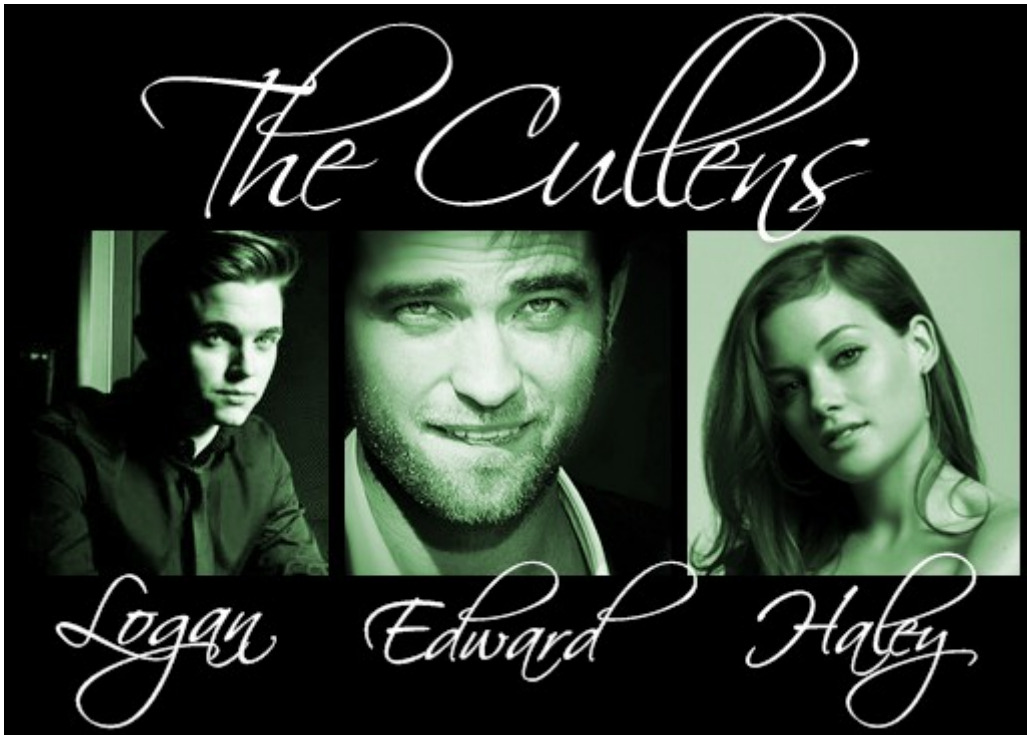
"Mom, what's up?" Finn calls after me.

"We're going to Vermont!" I shout. "I'll call your teachers—you're sick on Monday!"

"Fuck yeah!" the boys cheer.

Unfortunately, the first plane we can take doesn't leave until tomorrow, so we end up spending the night with Rose and her kids anyway. There are no chick flicks, though, because I'm too busy bitching and moaning about Jaden.

But at eleven AM on Sunday, I'm at the airport with Finn and Dylan, ready for whatever we'll face in Vermont.



EPOV

December 2nd

Removing my reading glasses, I scrub my hands over my face, knowing all too well that I've done it again. Another night has passed by, and I have been none the wiser, just typing away on my laptop. Fuck, being an author is dangerous for your health. Okay, maybe not, but this is not good.

"Good morning, Dad!" Logan shouts from...the kitchen, I think. I'm not sure. I'm in my study, so... "Bye, Dad!"

I groan and drop my forehead to my hands, elbows on the top of my desk.

A door is slammed shut, leaving me alone in our apartment here in the Village.



For a second, I think about calling Haley, but then I remember that she's probably on the West Coast somewhere, and it's still the middle of the night there. I'll call her later instead. Hopefully after I've gotten some sleep myself.

No, wait. Didn't she say something about Chicago?

Christ, I can't even remember. That's fucked up.

In my defense, she's on the move all the time. Keeping up with her schedule is impossible.

When Logan and Haley graduated from high school before the summer, I already knew what their plans were. Logan is now at Columbia studying business, and Haley's taking a sabbatical. I couldn't exactly say no to her

since I took a year off, too, after high school. It's actually something I encourage—to see the world and have some fun.

I'm glad I still have Logan living at home, though, because after raising my twins alone for the past fifteen years, I'd go nuts if I didn't have at least one close at all times. I may crave peace and quiet when I write, but my children are still my life.

My internal rambling is cut off when the phone rings, and I see that it's my little sister.

"Good morning, Alice," I yawn, holding the phone between my cheek and shoulder. The clock here in my study tells me it's only a quarter to eight. It's a Sunday, for chrissakes. "It's a little early."

"And let me guess. You haven't gone to bed yet," she chuckles.

I grimace. "No comment."

"God, you're impossible, Edward," she sighs. *"You need your sleep. I'm worried about you."*

"I have a deadline to meet," is my response, which is technically true. But while I do have a deadline, I'm actually ahead of schedule on my next book. "Why did you call? Everything okay?" Alice, my one and only sibling, lives in Pennsylvania with her husband and their four kids. The story of her life: someone is sick. With children between the ages of seven and sixteen, Alice and Jasper send their kids to three different schools, and one of them always brings home a virus.

"JJ fell off his fucking skateboard yesterday, so I've spent the night in the ER." She's referring to her oldest son, and now I'm worried. That kid is always taking shit to the extremes. He's a fan of, um, what's it called? X Games? I don't know, but it has something to do with skateboarding.

*"Everything's fine—just a sprain in his wrist and a fracture in his ankle—
but I won't be able to drive up to see Dad and Uncle Masen this month."*

I can't help but grimace again. Granted, I'm relieved it's nothing serious with JJ, but now I'm stuck on the fact that I have to go be social with Dad and our uncle.

See, twins run in our family, and it's—for some reason—always the men who pass on the gene. I'm no doctor, but I've always thought it was the women who pass that stuff on. Okay, not always, but most often. It's just something I've heard. But it's definitely not true in our family. Dad and Masen = twins. Logan and Haley = twins. And Dad's grandfather was a twin, too. It runs way back in the family, every other generation. Alice breathed sighs of relief when it never happened to her.

Anyway...Dad and Masen...Jesus Christ. I love them completely—I have a close relationship with them both, always had—but they're old and difficult now. At the age of seventy, they're always cupping their ears to hear properly, and *God*, the constant *shouting*... It doesn't help that they actually live together. My mother died of cancer when Logan and Haley were two, and Aunt Elizabeth had a brain aneurysm four years later. After that, Dad and Masen bought a condo together in Brooklyn.

It's where they grew up. Then, when they started making their fortunes, they moved. Alice and I grew up here in Manhattan, while Masen Junior—Masen's only child—grew up in Albany.

"I'll take care of it," I say tiredly to Alice. "When were you supposed to visit?"

"Next weekend."

I nod even though she can't see me and yawn again. "No problem. It's been a couple weeks since I saw them anyway." We're all supposed to get

together for Christmas soon enough, but I'm sure my dad and uncle could use some help with their shopping. But on second thought, they usually end up giving their grandchildren envelopes of cash.

"Great!" She sounds happy. *"So, how're things? Any news from Haley? I got a postcard from San Francisco."*

I smile at that and look up at the board I have on the wall to my left. Haley hates computers, stating that real letters and postcards are more fun. I'm definitely in agreement on that one, and I get this giddy look on my face whenever she sends something from wherever she is.

"She's good," I reply. "I think she's in Chicago now. I spoke to her three days ago." She was on the West Coast then, and when I zero in on the latest-received postcard, I see that it was Seattle. "She's met a guy, though," I mutter, annoyed. According to my baby girl, he's the dreamiest guy *ever*. She told me this before she got around to telling me his name. Jaden McCarty. What kind of name is that, *anyway?*

Alice giggles. *"You should follow your daughter's lead."*

"I'm straight," I deadpan.

"Coulda fooled me," she mumbles quietly, and before I can shoot back a sarcastic comment of my own, she goes on. *"I'm serious, big brother. You're forty-two, not eighty-two. Yet, you live like you're the eternal loner. Actually, you live like Dad and Uncle Masen—like you've lost the love of your life and are now content to live with your brother. But you know what? You gotta find the love of your life before you lose it!"*

I almost doze off during her rant.

"Are you done?" I yawn for a third time. It's really time I get some sleep.

She groans, exasperated. *"Fine! Your life—your business. I'm out. I need to wake up the kids."*

~oOo~

A few hours later, my phone rudely pulls me from sleep, which doesn't exactly put me in a good mood. Groaning, yawning, rubbing my chest, and stretching, I reach for the cell phone on my nightstand, only to see that it's a text from Haley.

Hi, Dad! You're invited to my wedding on December 15th!

I bolt right out of the bed, naked as a fucking jaybird, and stare down at the screen in horror.

"I'm invited to WHAT?!"

It must be some *goddamn* mistake. Rushing over to my nightstand again, I grab my glasses and put them on. Much to my suddenly-weak heart's devastation, I'd read the first line correctly.

You, Logan, and Jaden's family are welcome to join us at the B&B we've booked for December. We can get to know each other, and it's gorgeous up here! But Aunt Alice, Uncle Jazz, and the kids can hold off until the 12th. Same goes for Grampa and Masen. I know you can take a vacation. Or you can just bring your laptop! I can't wait to see you! Kisses! ~Haley

"I need to sit down," I whimper and plop down on the edge of my bed.

~oOo~



"Drive faster, Dad," Logan groans.

"Shutthefuckup," I spit out quietly.

I'm driving five miles an hour above the speed limit. That'll do. No matter how much of a hurry we're in.

"You know, this trip would go faster if—"

"Human beings belong on the ground!" I shout.

Logan snickers and slumps back in his seat.

Okay, so maybe I have a fear of flying. So what?

"Try calling your sister again," I tell him. I know the address we're heading to, but I'd much rather call her, tell her she's out of her fucking mind, make sure she comes home, and that's that. Why waste a trip?

"She won't answer—you know that," he sighs. "Christ, when we get up there? That fucking asshole—I'm gonna kick his ass!"

"Jaden's?"

"Yeah."

"I will let you."

"Thank you. His name is familiar, though."

"He could be the fucking president for all I care."

The next couple of hours pass by in relative silence. A few words here and there. Then we stop for more gas and some food before we get back in my black Lexus and continue north.

When we're about an hour away from Stowe, my phone dings with a text from Haley.

Jaden's family got here two hours ago. Are you on your way, Daddy? ~Haley.

"You bet your ass I am!" I shout at the phone. "Text your sister." I toss the phone to Logan. "Tell her she'd know if she only PICKED UP THE PHONE!"

Deep breaths.

"I never really loved her," I grunt, shaking my head. "Haley was always trouble. You're my favorite, Logan."

My son only laughs, though—a far cry from the shout-fest he honored me with when I pulled him away from his study group earlier. He was both pissed at me—for barging in to the library not-so-quietly—and at Haley for being so *stupid*.

"You're so full of it," Logan says, down to chuckles now. I am. I am full of shit. But whatever. "Okay, I told her we're an hour away. I also told her she's a brat."

"Good boy." Eyes still on the road, I reach over and pat his head. Only, I accidently whack him in the face.

"Jesus, Dad!"

I cringe. "Shit—sorry."

"Tough love," he grumbles.

I send him a sheepish smile.

The next hour drags, and I grow more and more agitated with each mile. We also have to stop and buy boxers, 'cause I forgot them when I tossed a bunch of clothes into two bags earlier.

"Did you pack toothbrushes?" Logan asks as we pass such items in an aisle. I scrunch my face, thinking. I remember throwing in jeans, long-sleeved t-shirts, socks, and hoodies. It's not like I plan to stay for more than a day or two. But toothbrushes? Meh.

"Get two," I tell him.

After paying for our stuff, we're back on the road, and the snow is coming down pretty heavily.

~oOo~

"This is it," Logan mutters and I make the last turn. We're outside Stowe—in the middle of the woods—and they're warning on the radio for even more snow coming in. Fucking excellent. Just what I want. "Did they really book the entire place?"

"Haley didn't." I snort. "I checked her credit card statement online." As a matter of fact, she has paid for very little in the past couple of weeks.

"Maybe this Jaden douche is loaded."

"Maybe I don't give a shit." I come to a stop when we reach a massive house. It looks like it belongs in the English countryside or something. Had I not been so incredibly wound up and pissed, I would've appreciated the view, especially with the mountains in the background.



There are only three other cars as far as I can tell. One silver Porsche, one Volvo rental, and a big Ford pickup. The latter has a big sticker on the back—it's of the B&B logo—which clues me in to the fact that it belongs to the bed and breakfast. Or rather, inn. On a big sign it says...

"Ye Olde English Inne." Logan finishes my thought in a mutter.

I sigh, kill the engine, and step out of the car.

Near the front door, I see two teenage boys goofing around, and I wonder if they're a part of Haley's boyfriend's family. If that's how it is, I can't wait to meet these boys' mom and dad.

"All right, let's do this," Logan says and follows me.

When we approach, the youngest of the boys runs inside.

The guy who remains looks like he's Logan's age, so I can't help but wonder if this is Jaden instead.

He jerks his chin at me. "You Haley's pops?" he inquires with a grin, Jersey accent thick. Or is it a Brooklyn accent? I really don't know for sure. These days, it feels like they're all mixed together.

"Don't tell me you're the kid my daughter thinks she's going to marry," I say in distaste.

"Hell no!" he guffaws, slapping his knee. "As fine as Haley is..." He backtracks when I narrow my eyes at him, "Uh, I mean...as pretty and beautiful as yaw daughta' is, she ain't my type. I'm Finn—" he sticks out his hand "—Finn McCawty. Jaden's my big brotha'."

I reluctantly shake the kid's hand. I kinda wanna wipe his fucking grin off his face, though.

"Edward Cullen," I mutter. "And this is my son—Logan."

"Sup?" Finn gives Logan a chin-nod.

Logan just stares.

I sigh and turn to Finn again. "Are your parents here?"

"My motha', yeah—she's hea'." Almost all his "r"s have been dropped.

He nods and opens the door. Just as that happens, a young woman steps out. She has long, dark brown hair, and she's wearing tight-as-fuck jeans and a snug Led Zeppelin t-shirt, which looks thoroughly worn. She's...she's fucking sexy. With these big...you know. Her breasts are big. And she's short—in hot little ankle boots. She can't be taller than 5'3". If that.

That fucking mouth!

Plump lips in a shade of red that looks like blood.



What? I may not date or even socialize a little, but I still have eyes. However, I'm pretty sure I'm currently thinking Finn's older sister is sexy, so I let that thought go.

"You're Finn's sister?" I ask her. I don't want to speak to her as if she's a child; she does look significantly older than Finn, not to mention the other kid I saw run inside. Maybe...late twenties or so. "I'd like to see your mother."

She gives me an odd look before she breaks out in a beaming smile. "Oh, God bless you—we're off to a fantastic start. But no," she giggles and sticks out her hand, "I'm Isabella McCarty, the boys' mother."

Well, fuck me twice and call me Santa.

{3}

December 2nd

BPOV

As soon as we arrive at the bed and breakfast in Vermont on Sunday, the three of us barge in, yelling Jaden's name.

"Jaden Charles McCarty!" I shout, leaving my Louis Vuitton luggage behind. Walking farther into the seemingly deserted place, I rip off my gloves, coat, and beanie.

"Yo, Jaden!" Finn booms out.

"Maybe he's busy fucking." Dylan leans over the lobby counter. He rings the little bell, too. "Anybody here?!"

Then I hear it. It's quiet—in some remote corner of this B&B—but it's definitely my oldest son.

"Ma? That you?"

"JADEN!" I scream. "Get your ass down here right this minute!" I stomp my boot against the floor for good measure.

"Ooh, he's gonna get it now," Finn chuckles behind me.

"Word," Dylan says. I'm sure they just fist-bumped, too.

"I'm going to count to ten!" I yell, cupping my hands around my mouth. "One!"

"Dude!" Dylan guffaws. "She's counting!"

I give both boys behind me the stink-eye. "TWO!"

"I'm coming, Mom! Jesus!" Jaden sounds closer now.

I cringe. "You think I wanna know that shit?! Three!"

More laughs behind me.

"Four!"

I check my fingernails, happy with the blood red color I went with when Rose and I were at the salon three days ago. The color matches my lipstick, and, well, it's Christmas—the season of red and green.

"FIVE!"

I fluff my hair a little.

"SIX!"

Then I hear the sound of feet stomping down stairs.

When I get to "eight", Jaden storms into the lobby, only wearing pajama bottoms.

That's when I see Haley's name inked on my baby's chest.

"You've got to be fucking KIDDING me!" I cry out. "Get that little bitch down here, Jaden—"

I'm cut off when he picks me up and spins me around in a circle.

I'm relieved he doesn't smell like sex.

"Put me down!" I screech.

"You're here, Ma." He hugs me so tight and then finally allows my feet to touch the ground again. *Jesus*. I grab his arms for support while I regain my balance. "I'm gonna let that little remark about my fiancée go just this once." He grins widely and plants a sloppy one on my forehead. "I'm getting married!"

"The fuck you are!" I slap his chest. "Wipe that smile off your face! We're going home." I straighten my clothes and turn to the other two. "Come on."

"I'm not going anywhere, Mom. Haley and I are getting marr-"

I spin around to face him again. My hand may or may not slap his chest once more. Or maybe twice...three times.

"Oww!"

Finn and Dylan are in hysterics by now.

"You listen to me now, Jaden McCarty," I seethe and point a finger in his face. God, I would sound so much more threatening if I wasn't a midget compared to these freaks. "You're only eighteen years old, and you're outta your *fuckin'* mind!" Jaden's still smiling so wide that his face could split. "I'm serious here!" I twist his nipple. Not the one with the nipple ring. The other one.

"Quit hurting me, Ma!" he laughs, cringing as he rubs his nipple. "Okay, I want *you* to listen to *me* now." He bends at the knees to be at my level, and his hands go to my arms. "I've been thinking."

"Well, praise Jesus!" I throw my hands up. "Okay, let's go."

But he holds me in place. Fucker. "I want you to meet her—talk to her, get to know her. You'll love her, I swear."

I blow my bangs outta my face. "Hon," I say slowly, softly, 'cause I am speaking to a child. "I have no doubt Haley is an amazing young girl, but-"

"No buts."

"Plenty of buts," I counter with a sneer. "God, why can't you just be normal and *date* this girl? Why you gotta get married? Huh? You're

eighteen!" I flick his forehead. "Think, goddammit! Hell, you haven't even met Haley's father! That's his baby girl you're fucking!" I point to the stairs.

"I don't need to meet him to know that Haley's the one for me," he states confidently. "And we've been together for over three months!"

The boys laugh behind me.

Hell, I wanna laugh at that shit, too.

Three months. Please.

"You know what? If I can't talk some sense into you, maybe I can talk some sense into Haley." I nod, liking my words. "Bring her down here."

"Don't insult her, a'ight?" He cocks a brow.

"Pshhh." I wave him off, not making any goddamn promises. If she's not good for my baby...

I'm not one of those mothers who think no girl could ever be good enough for their sons. But after my own mistakes—thinking the boys' fathers were good men—I've learned a thing or two. And now I'm afraid Jaden's thinking with his dick—that it's his penis falling in love. I'm also afraid this Haley is after Jaden's money. We have plenty of it in our family—*now*—and Jaden's band is already reaching charts. He's got dough. I don't even wanna know what it cost him to rent this place for an entire *month*.



While Jaden heads upstairs to get his girlfriend, I walk over to the little area next to the lobby. It looks like a living room—four chairs, a coffee table, a thick rug, and an open fire. So, I sit my ass down in one of the chairs and cross my legs.

I could go for a drink or two now.

Finn plops down in the chair next to me, and he begins flipping through a pamphlet of sorts about the B&B's accommodations. "Nice. They've got a fully-equipped gym here."

I snort at him as Dylan sits down across from us. "Baby, if you put on more muscle, you're gonna look like a fucking juicehead."

"Nah, I gotta feed these bad boys." He kisses each bicep.

"Maybe you should work on your tan, too. And add more gel in your hair," Dylan says, smirking. "Then you'll look *really* stupid."

"Fuck you." Finn flips him off. "You're just jealous. Scrawny fucking baby."

"Ay!" Dylan shouts. "Why you gotta be so nasty?"

"Shut up," I snap. "Here they come." And I watch as Jaden and Haley join us. They sit down next to Dylan, and Haley ends up in Jaden's lap. She's a gorgeous girl, really. Her hair is slightly wavy—reddish brown—and her

eyes are round and bright green. Fair skin, supple body—but still with some nice curves—and she a shortie next to Jaden's 6'3" form. And unlike my son, she's fully dressed—jeans and a too-big hoodie. I figure it's Jaden's sweatshirt. It has his band logo on it, too.

"Guys, this is Haley," Jaden says, smiling like a lovesick fool. "Sweetheart, that's Dylan and Finn—my brothers—and this—" he winks at me "—is my beautiful mother."

Now the boy is kissing my ass.

Ignoring him, I face Haley and extend my hand over the table. "Nice to finally meet you, Haley."

She looks shy as she shakes my hand. "It's an honor, Ms. McCarty. I'm a *huge* fan of your work."

Hmm. I wonder if she's kissing ass, too. I can't really be sure. Maybe Jaden has coached her.

"You should see my mom during New York Fashion Week," Jaden tells her as I relax in my seat again. "She's in her element then."

"Right." I give them both a tight-lipped smile. "But that's not why we're here." I twirl a finger. "So, let's talk about that text you sent me, shall we?"

"Bro, did you knock her up?" Finn asks bluntly. "Is that why youse are gettin' married?"

Oh, Finn, Finn, Finn. I massage my temples, really needing that drink now.

"No!" Jaden shouts. "Jesus Christ!" He turns to me, eyes pleading. "I swear, Ma, she's not pregnant."

I wave him off. "I believe you. But this whole marriage thing? Seriously. What're you thinking?"

"It's what we want," Jaden says, wrapping his arm around Haley's waist. My gaze softens a little, 'cause they look so fucking cute together. But I still fail to see the rush. "We've talked about this for weeks—dreams of the future...stuff like that. We want the same thing, so..." He smiles boyishly. "I popped the question when we were in Seattle."

At that, my eyes immediately search out Haley's left hand, and I see the massive rock on her ring finger.



I sigh.

"What about you?" I ask Haley. "What are your thoughts?"

She smiles sheepishly. "I really love your son, Ms. McCarty. He's...he's amazing, and he's all I want." She makes googly eyes at Jaden.

Dylan pretends to gag.

"What do your parents say?" I arch a brow at her. "Do they even know?"

Her cheeks heat up. "Um, no. I—I think Dad's coming up here. And my twin brother."

God, I cannot believe this. "So, what's the plan? Youse rented this place—for what? Are we really alone here?"

Jaden answers. "I rented it fully staffed from December twelfth. Until then, just two people will be here. We can get to know each other—chill out. And we'll get married on the fifteenth. Then..." He bites his lip. "We kinda thought we could all spend Christmas here."

Just then, the front door opens and an older lady walks in. She beams at us, the newcomers, and introduces herself as Maggie. She and her husband run the place with their son, and as soon as we wanna check in, we can just ring the bell.

Once she disappears behind the counter, Jaden tells us there are rooms for all of us. Even Dylan will get his own room.

"That's very generous of you, baby, but..." I shake my head, feeling a headache settle in. "This is too much. Your brothers have school, I have work, and..." *Ugh.*

~oOo~

The next few hours pass by pretty quickly. In an attempt to give Jaden and Haley the benefit of the doubt, I let them run their show. We get to hear stories from the tour, places they've seen, and a little more about Haley Cullen.

I find out that she's taking a year off her studies—between high school and college—to travel and have fun. Otherwise, she lives with her dad and brother in Manhattan. Apparently, there's no mother involved; I don't wanna pry about that. In the future, she wants to become a nurse, and her plan is to start pursuing that dream next fall. And while she speaks, Jaden's eyes are glued to her. Anyone can see he's in love, but what I notice—as his mother—is that he's completely owned, more so than

before. Because I wasn't kidding when I said that Jaden's always in love. That's true, but there's more to Haley.

Still, marriage? No, it's too soon. They've been on the road together; they've had fun. They haven't faced the real world or lived in their everyday surroundings together yet.

Why can't they date each other for some time, then maybe try living together for a few years, and *then* talk about marriage?

'Cause that's what you did?

Shut up.

"Christ, this—you're fuckin' boring," Dylan complains. "Ma, I'm disappointed in you." He stands up, and my eyebrows shoot up at the same time. "I expected you to go nuts on their asses. They're kids—getting married." He gestures with his hands as he speaks. "Yet, you just sit there? I'm outta here."

He walks out.

A laughing Finn follows.

"I need a fucking drink!" I blurt out. *And a horse tranquilizer...*

"I'll fix one for you," Jaden offers. Haley gets off his lap, sits down in the chair Dylan just left, and watches Jaden's ass as he walks away. Dear God, can this day get any worse?

I've always prioritized being my boys' mother—they've got friends in school and so on—but once they became teenagers, I found it easier to talk to them, interact, if I treated them more like equals. We've found a middle ground over the past few years, but now I'm wondering if that was wrong. Maybe if I was stricter... Ah, fuck it. I love the relationship I have

with my sons. When those three are in a group, they're cocky and funny, but when I have alone time with any of them...they're so sweet. They're a bunch of mama's boys.

"Here you go," I hear Jaden say as he arrives with my drink.

I smile tiredly and accept the gin and tonic he knows I love. "Thanks, baby."

"So..." He sits down in his chair again. "Did you talk while I was...?"

I shake my head no and guzzle my drink.

Heaven.

Shit, Jaden makes one strong GT.

"Mom! Mom! Mom!"

"For the love of God." I turn to Dylan as he runs in. "What's with the shouting?!" I shout.

"You better come here," he tells me. Like a child, he tugs on my hand. He looks way too happy and eager. But I let him drag me to the door. My drink is still in my hand. "Look." He points out the window, and I see two men approaching Finn. "I think that's Mr. Cullen."



"Hot damn," I mutter into my glass. I see where Haley's good looks come from. The man is fucking gorgeous. Tall, broad-shouldered... Same hair color as Haley's but streakier and wilder. I'd say he's in his forties, and he looks to die for in those dark jeans and peacoat. I wonder what's underneath.

"You think he's pissed?" Dylan whispers excitedly as we watch Finn greet the newcomers.

"Um, yeah," I chuckle wryly. He does look pretty angry, actually.

I can relate.

After chugging down the rest of my drink, I set down the glass on the windowsill. Then I retrieve my lipstick and mini-sized mirror from my left pocket and reapply some color to my lips. For good measure, I fluff my hair a bit, too, and then I'm ready to have an ally. Surely, two adults can prevent two children from making a mistake.

"You stay here," I tell Dylan. With that said, I pinch my cheeks a little and then open the door.

Freezing cold!

I hug myself, cursing my thin t-shirt, and catch the amusement in Finn's eyes. I'm not surprised. He loves a little family drama, as long as it doesn't involve him. But the fact that it's about Jaden...yeah, he's having a field day with this.

Just as I'm about to tell him to go inside, Mr. Cullen speaks.

"You're Finn's sister?" he inquires. I blink. "I'd like to see your mother."

Wait, what?

Sister.

Christ, did Finn say something stupid? That's plausible.

But when I quickly seek out Finn, I see that he looks shocked.

Holy shit, that means this sweetheart actually thinks I could pass as the boys' sister.

"Oh, God bless you!" I smile brightly, ready to kiss the shit outta him for already making this day better. *Finn's sister*—whatta kind man. "We're off to a fantastic start," I giggle. "But no—" I extend my hand "—I'm Isabella McCarty, the boys' mother."

"Oh," he mouths and slowly meets my hand. "Uh—I apologize."

"Don't," I chuckle. "You just made my day! Now, how about we take this inside? It's freezing cold out here, and we appear to have two stupid kids who think they're getting married."

That seems to snap him out of his haze. "That sounds like a plan to me."

{4}

December 2nd

EPOV

"Dad!" Haley rushes over to me as soon as I enter the B&B and throws her arms around me. "I'm so glad you're here."

I stand stock still.

"Hon, this is where you play the Daddy card," Isabella advises wryly, sauntering past us. Damn, I still can't believe she's the mother of three teenage boys. Someone must've started early. I thought *I* started early.

After subtly watching Isabella shimmy her bubble ass over to a seating area, I gently push my daughter away from me. Isabella is right. If there's any occasion to play the Daddy card, it's now. However, that shit won't work, either.

"Are you really mad at me?" She pouts at me.

I clench my jaw and stare her down. "You have no *fucking* idea," I whisper.

Her face falls, and I leave her there. Taking off my coat, I walk over to the open fire where I sit down in the empty chair next to Isabella's. Though, this time my eyes are trained on the boy sitting across from us. And yeah, I see the fucking tattoo on his chest—my Haley's name.

"Jaden, I presume," I bite out, pushing up the sleeves on my grey button-down.

"Yes, sir." He nods, eyes flicking between his mother and me. I hope he isn't counting on her saving him. "Uh, it's good meeting you."

"I'd say the same, but..." I trail off.

"Daddy," Haley huffs and sits down in the chair next to Jaden. "You don't have to be rude."

"I'm not talking to you," I snap.

"Finn," Isabella beckons. "Can you get Mommy another drink?" I tear my gaze away from Haley see that Finn walks toward the counter. "Maybe you should offer Mr. Cullen a drink, too!"

Isabella McCarty's voice carries.

"Right." Finn faces us but remains over by the counter. "Can I get you a drink, Mr. Cullen?"

"Vodka and ice," I say with a nod. "Thank you."

The youngest boy trails after Finn, and then it's just five of us left. But Logan is sticking to the other side of the lobby, eyes glued to his phone.

"So..." Isabella turns to Jaden and Haley as she fluffs her hair. It makes the gold bracelets around her wrist clink together a little. And fuck, I need to stop staring at her. "Start talkin'." Her Jersey accent is thick, too, but she still sounds classier than Finn and Jaden.

Jaden opens his mouth first. "I love your daughta', Mr. Cullen," he says seriously. I stare back blankly and pull up my right foot to rest it on my left knee. My arms go to the armrests. "I swear I will give her everything I can, and I will always take care of her."

"It's not about money," Isabella says. "How the fuck are you gonna be there for her when you're on the road for months at a time, huh? You answer me that."

I frown. "On the road?"

"I'm in a band, sir," Jaden answers. At that, I scowl. Great. Just what my daughter needs—a musician without stable income. For the love of God. "And to answer your question, Mom...I don't exactly plan on bein' in the band forevuh. You know I wanna work more—like...you know, Uncle Em. Behind the scenes—whateva'. Without the travelin'."

"Dad, I know what you're thinking," Haley tells me. "And just so you know, Jaden's band was on Jimmy Kimmel a couple months ago. They're crazy popular."

"I KNEW I recognized the douche's name!" Logan shouts.

"Who the *fuck* are you callin' a douche, huh?" Jaden stands up and widens his arms. "Come'ea and say it to my face—I fuckin' dare you."

In other news, a migraine is being shoved into my head.

"Jaden, sit down. Now!" Isabella points to his chair. Then she turns to Logan. "And don't you call my son a douche—do I make myself clear? How would you feel if I called your sister a bitch?"

That's fair.

Jaden coughs. "Um, you sorta did, Ma."

"The hell?" I face Isabella, incredulous. "You called my daughter a *bitch*?"

As sexy and gorgeous as she—never mind. Who the fuck does she think she is to call my baby girl that?

"Excuse me for freakin' out when I saw Haley's name on my son's chest!" she shouts, fire in her eyes. "How would you react if Jaden's name was permanently inked on Haley's body?!"

"I would act like a goddamn adult!" I seethe, outraged.

"Daddy," Haley whispers.

"What?!" I shout.

Then I watch in horror as she stands up, lifts up her massive hoodie, and reveals her hip.

It has "Jaden, my love" written on it.

I see red.

"Did you force her?!" I shoot up from my chair, glowering at the motherfucker. "Answer me, asshole! Did you convince her—promise her bullshit?"

"How very mature of you!" Isabella explodes, also shooting up. "You callin' my son an asshole?! How fuckin' *dare* you?!" She pokes my chest with a red-painted fingernail.

I glare down at her. "I'm not stupid," I practically growl. "My daughter is innocent—a good girl. Your kid probably corrupted her—"

"AY!" Jaden shouts. "You watch how you speak to my motha'!"

"Stop!" Haley pleads.

That's when Finn and the other kid show up.

"Don't tell us what we can and can't do," Logan snaps, getting in Jaden's face. "I know exactly who you are, McCarty. Fucking guidos from Jer—"

Before Logan can finish, Jaden's fist connects with my son's jaw.

"Jaden!" Isabella screams. "Stop!"

I chuckle bitterly at her and make my way around the table. "So, now it's time to stop him, huh? You couldn't have done it before the first punch was thrown?" Right after Logan has planted an elbow in Jaden's gut, I reach him and try to pull him away.

"Oh, shut the fuck up!" she yells. "Finn, get your brother." She points.

"Fuck that!" Finn exclaims. "That preppy fucko needs to learn some goddamn manners!"

The youngest kid is laughing.

Haley's crying. "Stop, Logan!"

I've given up.

Logan and Jaden are throwing fists.

Isabella's shouting.

"Give me that," I say, pointing to one of the glasses in Finn's hand. As soon as I have the vodka in my hand, I swallow it down in three gulps. "I need a refill." I extend the empty glass to him.

He widens his arms. "Do I look like a fucking servant to you?"

I stare up at the ceiling, wondering...

Could this day get any worse?

{5}

December 2nd

BPOV

Once Jaden and Logan stop their fight, another fight erupts. This time it's between Edward and Haley.

"I hate you, Dad!" she sobs. "I love him—can't you tell?!" She gestures wildly with her arms. "A good dad would want his daughter to be happy!"

"Then I guess I'm not a good father!" he shouts back. "Because I want you to be fucking miserable right now!"

"Aaaahhh!" Haley wails, and Jaden comes to her rescue. He wraps his arms around her, hugging her tightly, and she continues to cry. "Iju-wan-wan-nabehaaaaaaa-ppy!"

Finn cups his ear. "What was that?"

Dylan hands me the drink Finn made me, and I smile. "Thank you, baby." I pull him down to kiss his cheek for good measure, and then I turn to Finn again. "She said she just wans'ta be happy."

I speak Girl.

I used to be just like her. Dramatic, a little bratty... She's a sweetheart, though.

"Good drink," I comment, peering down in my glass.

"Can someone give me some ice?!" Logan shouts. At least I think that's his name. Haley yelled it a lot when he and Jaden fought.

Sticking down my fingers into my glass, I pinch an ice cube and bring it over to Logan. "Here you go." Then I push it gently against his eye, snickering when he hisses and flinches. I guess ice coated in gin wasn't what he wanted?

"How fucking nice of you," he mutters angrily and takes a step back.

I cock a brow. "You hit *my* son." I point to my chest. "Why the fuck should I be nice?"

Once upon a time, I pushed Jaden McCarty outta my vagina. I had to have three stitches—two of those were necessary—and I don't even know all the pain I endured. So, I'll be damned if I'm gonna stand by and let someone mistreat the little fucker I was in pain for.

Thank God the other two boys were too fat for my small form. Both Finn and Dylan were eleven-pounders, so I was all smiles when they told me a C-section was the best alternative for me.

It's pretty clear that Logan wants to say something like, "Jaden threw the first punch!" But he's not *that* childish, I guess. And, truth be told, if he did go that route, I'd retort with the supposed-insult Logan spewed out, which started the fight, and I'm not sure Logan wants to have that particular convo with me.

He wants to clock the guy who's snatching up his sister? Fine. But don't insult our heritage. We may be a bunch of loud guidos, but who the fuck is he? Huh? Spoiled little rich kid.

"Stop crying!" Edward shouts at Haley, all while rubbing his temples. Now, he—that man—he looks like something to devour...his cock being the cherry on the sundae, of course. But he's also a Grade A prick. Hypocritical ass. "You know what you should do, Haley? You should go pack your bag, because we're going home—RIGHT THIS FUCKING INSTANT!"

I snort into my glass.

As opposed as I am to this whole wedding thing, it's obvious that Jaden and Haley aren't budging. Besides, they're eighteen. Young, but still adults. There's shit Edward and I can do.

"Oh, did I say something funny to you?" Edward turns his furious glare in my direction.

I wave him off. "Stop talking. You're annoying me."

That said, I walk over to the front desk and ring the bell. I kinda wonder why Maggie didn't come out earlier. It's not like she couldn't hear us. Then again, if I know my son, he probably warned her it could get heated once we all got here.

When Maggie appears, she's smiling carefully. She looks to be in her late sixties, but I doubt there's something wrong with her hearing. "Is everything all right, dear?"

I nod and ignore the fighting still going on fifteen feet away. "Oh, it's just fine," I assure her. "I'd like to check in—it's me and my two other boys. Separate rooms, please."

I have loads of work back in New York, but I can push it off for a few days. No problem. And I gotta guy in my building who can accept a few things I've ordered online—things that should arrive any day now. I also gotta guy who can move my car; I left it at my studio, but if I'm gonna stick around here, I want it in my garage at home.

"Of course—let's get you settled in." Maggie begins to type away on an ancient computer. "Would you like a cottage or a room?"

"A room will be fine, thank you. Same for my sons."

She nods and keeps clicking on the keys.

Looking to my left, I see that Edward is now collapsed in a chair, head tilted back, eyes on the ceiling, arms on the armrests, and the vein in his forehead dangerously close to popping.

Logan sits next to him, elbows on his knees, and face buried in his hands.

Lastly, there are my boys. Finn and Dylan are talking about something, both standing by the fireplace, and Jaden is still comforting Haley. Until he isn't. I watch as he slowly releases Haley and walks over to his brothers. I can't hear what they're saying, but they have their heads close, as if they're exchanging secrets.

"Ms. McCarty?" a timid voice asks, and it's Haley. Fuck me, I hadn't even noticed she'd approached me.

When her eyes are red from all that crying and her cheeks are stained with tears, it's kinda hard to be stern with the girl. "What is it?" I ask, managing to smile just a little. For her sake.

"I'm sorry," she whispers brokenly. "I'm so sorry for everything I've caused you."

"Oh." I pout. I have such a weak heart, I realize. This girl...*sigh*. I don't understand how Edward can resist those big eyes of hers. "Don't look at me like that." I touch her cheek. "Smile for me before I get all mushy." I fan my face a little.

If I had a daughter, I'd go bananas. I'm a sucker for puppy-dog eyes—not the fake kind. I was the master of pulling a fast one on my dad when I was in Haley's age, but this...I can see that she's genuine.

I need to make her smile. "You want your father's nuts ripped off?" I ask. "I gotta guy who can make it happen." This may or may not be a joke.

She giggles through her tears, and I finally get that smile. Though, it doesn't last long. Her face crumbles again, and then she throws her arms around me.

"Oh, okay." I go with it and hug her. "We're hugging." I pat her back.

{6}

December 2nd

EPOV

"I'd like to check in," I grit out with a fake smile.

Isabella's staying, stating that she's going to give Haley and Jaden a chance to show they're serious. And since Haley refuses to just get her ass in my car...

"Of course—would you like a room or a cottage?" the lady asks.

I have no desire to trudge through snow to get in here each day. "Room, thank you." Glancing over to Logan next to me, I ask, "What do you want?"

"Oh, I'm not staying," he chuckles bitterly. "This is insane, and I've got classes tomorrow. I'll just take a flight home."

I sigh and face the old lady with a little shrug. If he doesn't want to stick around, that's his choice.

I wish *I* had a choice, but such is the life of a parent.

"Wow, Haley really needs to learn what personal space is," Logan mutters, and I follow his gaze. Yeah, my daughter's still hugging the shit out of Isabella. Isabella's taking it like a champ, though. "Ms. McCarty can go to hell."

"Logan!" I scold and smack the back of his head. "Watch that fucking mouth."

"What?" He scowls and rubs his neck. "She's the devil. You know, she gave me ice from her very alcoholic drink for my eye? How very maternal of her."

I can't help but laugh. Ice from her drink... Good one. I'll have to remember that. But on a serious note, "Don't be so fucking rude. Ms. McCarty's under a lot of stress. We have kids who seem to want us to die."

He rolls his eyes. "Dramatic."

I shrug and accept the key to my room from the lady.

"Breakfast is served down here at nine AM," she says kindly. "My son and I will be here between seven AM and eight PM every day, so just ring the bell if you have a question. There's also a phone in your room, of course, and we have Wi-Fi, too."

I scratch my eyebrow. "You leave the place at night?"

"Yes, that's correct. Mr. McCarty ordered it that way."

Huh. I bet it's so he can kill me. Maybe he'll strike tonight. I swear Jaden has crazy eyes.

"All right. Well, thank you." I face Logan and ask, "How are you gonna get to the airport?"

"I've already called a cab. I'm just gonna say goodbye to Haley."

I nod in understanding. "Okay, I'm gonna go outside and grab my bag. By the way, why did I have to buy you a fucking toothbrush if you're not staying?"

He snickers. "Dad, no offense, but you're not gonna be able to talk Haley out of this." I glare, disagreeing. "Fine—be in denial. But I think you're going to be stuck up here for a while, and I was thinking I could come up next weekend instead. I could also bring Grampa and Masen."

Just the thought of being trapped up here for a week makes me shudder.

I'm going to need alcohol. Lots of it.

"I'll make it my mission to come home—with Haley—before Wednesday," I tell him confidently.

Now the little fucker laughs. "Right." He claps me on the shoulder. "Good luck with that." Peering behind me, he hollers, "Haley! I'm gonna go."

A sobbing Haley runs toward her brother.

I sigh heavily.

"Don't hate me," she cries, hugging Logan.

"I don't hate you, sis." He chuckles and touches her cheek. "You just have shitty taste in guys." She smacks him playfully in the chest, and Logan kisses her forehead. It's such a cute sight, I could just cry. They're really everything to me. "Have fun this week. I'll be here next weekend with Gramps."

"That's so sweet," I hear Isabella murmur, coming up next to me. "I have to bribe my boys to hug each other."

I smile—a genuine one. "It's different with girls. I bet they have no problem hugging *you*."

It's odd; Logan has no qualms telling people how he feels. But showing it is another matter. Whenever I tell him I love him, he grins and says it back. But if I hug him? Yeah, right. I have a handful of hugs each year to

cash in when it comes to my son. His birthday, mine, Father's Day, and Christmas. Oh, and major events like graduating.

Isabella smiles, too, eyes still on Logan and Haley. "You're right about that. I'm one lucky bitch."

I snort a laugh. The vocabulary on this woman... And I thought *I* was foul-mouthed.

"Hey, I'm sorry about before." She nudges my arm. "I was way outta line."

"So was I," I admit. "And I apologize for that." I still couldn't believe she called my baby girl a bitch, but I'm a hypocrite. I did call her son an asshole. "You and I—" I wave a hand between us "—we need to stick together. 'Cause those kids of ours...they're evil."

She nods seriously. "They're also manipulators, the bunch of 'em."

She just gets it. "Exactly. So..." I stick out my hand. "Partners in crime?"

"Hell yeah," she giggles and grasps my hand. "Although, I'd say the kids are the criminals."

"True." I nod in agreement, still holding on to her soft hand. "We're the law enforcement. Now we just need to lay down the rules."

She hums and smirks. "We need a plan."

I like how her mind works. "How do we start, Ms. McCarty?"

"With copious amounts of alcohol, Mr. Cullen. Copious amounts."

Now we're talking.

December 2nd

BPOV



After making all the calls I needed to make, I stand in front of the mirror in my room and think about what I should wear later. It's just drinks with Edward, and we'll be focusing on our children, but a woman's still gotta look her best.

A knock on my door interrupts, though.

"Come in!" I shout, turning to my bed. All the clothes I brought are laid out—six outfits in total. I'm thinking the new cashmere sweater I bought last week...and the-

My inner musings are interrupted by Dylan walking in. "Shit, Ma—you're naked!"

I roll my eyes, definitely not naked. I have underwear and a top on. "What do you want, baby?" I ask his back.

"Um—" he rubs the back of his neck, refusing to look my way "—I just wanted to say that I talked to Jaden. He's gonna call Uncle Em right now—talk shit out about the Detroit show." I nod even though he can't see me and reach for my black pencil skirt. "Uh, I also came to tell you that he's wondering what your plans are. Finn and I wanna know, too."

"Plans?" I zip up my skirt and then grab the red sweater. "You can turn around, by the way."

He does, slowly, testing to see if I'm full of shit. The faith my sons have in me is astounding. "Right. Plans—how long we gonna be stayin' here for?"

"A week, I'm thinking," I say, pensively studying my small collection of shoes that I brought. "Don't worry—I'll handle it with your teachers. Youse are never sick, anyway, and your grades are good."

He wears this silly little grin. "I love you. Had to say it."

"Aw, I love you, too, Dylan." I beam at my sweetheart. "Okay, so the rest—are you and Finn settled in?" They have their rooms one story up. "Oh, and did you tell Jaden to call his band members, too?" I'm pretty sure Emmett's gonna cancel the show tomorrow—or was it the day after?—so I want Jaden to call his friends and apologize for just ditching them. It's not only unprofessional, but also rude and, thankfully, uncharacteristic for Jaden. Still, he did it, so I want him to accept the consequences of his actions.

I'm so fucking mature.

"Yeah, all settled in, and I told Jaden all of that." He scratches his nose as I walk over to a mirror and start reapplying my makeup. "Why you gettin' all fancy for Mr. C?"

"I'm not—I'm not getting all *fancy*," I retort defensively, lying to my own son. "I just want to look presentable." Which I do with my smoky eyes

and transparent lip gloss. Hot mama, coming here. "What're your brothers up to tonight?" Diversion, diversion, diversion.

"Eh." He shrugs, sticking his hands into his pockets. "Finn's watchin' some old football game, Jaden and Haley are keeping their door locked, and I'm gonna set up my laptop."

I nod, knowing he's crazy about some online game. He always talks about it.

I should know the name of it.

World of war...something crafty.

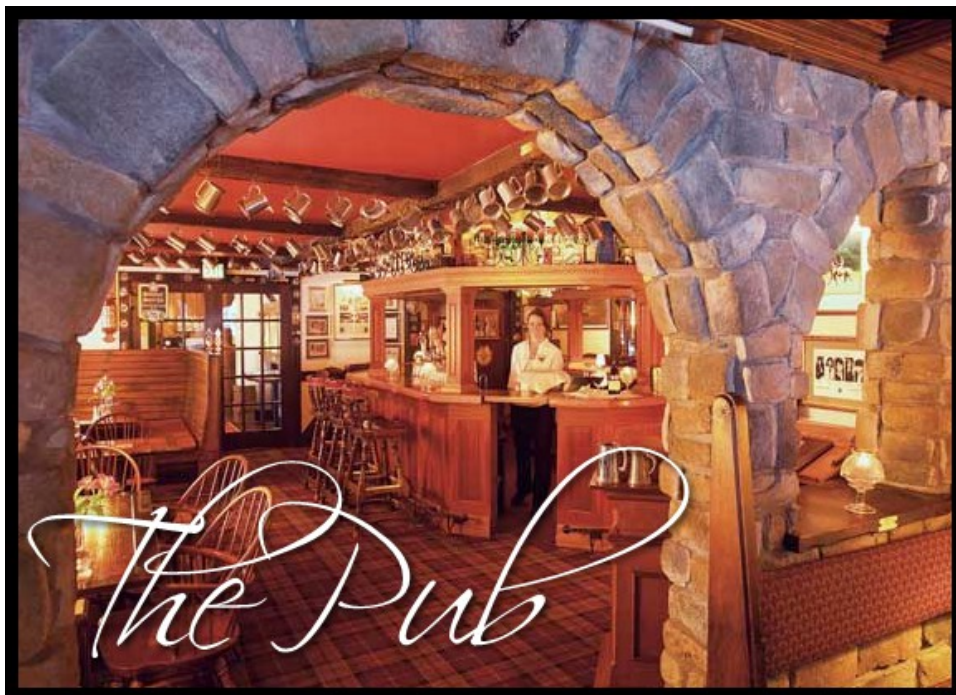
"Are you hungry?" I ask and step into a pair of black heels. "Maggie said there's a load of food in the kitchen, and we haven't eaten a lot today." Actually, we have foregone dinner altogether.

"Jaden hooked me up earlier." He nods. "So, what're you and Haley's dad gonna talk about?"

I grin and give myself a last look in the mirror. "Our kids."



Satisfied with how I look, I kiss Dylan on the cheek and usher him out of my room. I tell him he can find me downstairs, and then we part ways. He heads upstairs, and I head down.



I find Edward sitting by the bar—a bar that is completely empty—and he's nursing a glass of what I presume is vodka...seeing as there's a bottle of Grey Goose next to him.

He still looks to die for, now in a pair of black chinos and the same grey button-down he was wearing before.

The clicking of my heels alerts him to my presence, and when he turns a little in his seat and faces me, I think I die when I spot the black-rimmed glasses he's wearing now.

Sweet baby Jesus, there goes a pair of ridiculously expensive panties.

The way his eyes slowly roam over me doesn't help, either.

"Is-Isabella." He clears his throat, eyes nowhere near my face. I smile internally and thank God for the killer legs he blessed me with. "Wha..." At last, he meets my gaze. "What's your poison?" He waves a hand toward the bottles along the back of the bar.

I grin. "Gin and tonic, usually, but the vodka's lookin' good, too."

My closest family calls me Bella, but the way Edward says my full name...
ungh.

Wet season.

"Well, then." He leans over the counter and grabs another glass. I'm totally checking out his fine ass. While there, he also snatches up a few ice cubes and a tray of lemon and lime wedges. "Mixer?"

"No, thanks." I get comfortable on the stool next to him and cross one leg over the other. He holds up the ice and tray in question. "Yes, please—lime, no lemon."

After filling the glass with ice cubes and two lime wedges, he then tops it off with the vodka. "Your drink, Ms. McCarty." He slides the glass toward me and flashes me a curious smile. "Or is it Mrs.? I'm sorry, I just presumed when Finn told me only you were here."

Glass in hand, I smile over the brim and shake my head no. "It's Ms." I keep my eyes locked with his as I take a sip from my drink. *God, so good.* Just what I needed after today. "What about you?" I set down the glass again and trace the edge with my finger. "Is there a Mrs. Cullen on her way up here?" I kinda know there isn't, but whatever. Haley did tell me earlier that it's just her, Edward, and Logan.

"No," he replies and refills his own drink. "She passed away when the kids were three."

"God, I'm so sorry." I give his hand a friendly squeeze. "I don't want to pry—it's none of my business."

The right corner of his mouth turns up a little. "It's all right." Hmm, I don't know. "Really, Isabella." Flipping his hand over, he squeezes mine in return. "Actually—" he leans closer—"we were in the middle of a divorce when it happened."

"Oh," I mouth. "Still..." I slide free from his gentle grasp and go for my drink again. "That must've been a difficult time." I hesitate. "May I ask how she died?"

"Car accident. Charlotte—that was her name—she lost control over her car in a storm and drove into a tree." He doesn't seem very uncomfortable talking about it. Then again, it's been fifteen years. "Anyway..." He smirks. "Your turn. Where is your boys' father?"

"Fathers," I correct, and it's his turn to mouth an "oh". "Jaden's dad bailed as soon as I called him—it was just a fling. I met him down at Wildwood—

down the Shore?" I shake that thought away, chuckling. "I was still only sixteen, and Peter was seventeen."

"Shit. That's..."

"Young, I know," I laugh. "And then..." I blow out a breath, thinking back on how reckless I was. Still, I can't regret a thing. "I was with Alec for about four years—a little over—and during that time, I had both Finn and Dylan."

Edward frowns. "And he's...where now?"

"No idea." I shrug. "But it all worked out for me."

"Hmm." He looks pensive. "I have to say, Ms. McCarty...your taste in men..."

I cock an eyebrow, wondering if that's really true. After all, I wouldn't mind me some Edward Cullen on a platter.

"Oh, I don't know about that..." I trail off and give his body a slow once-over. When I meet Edward's eyes again, he looks a little surprised at my boldness. I smirk cheekily. "Maybe I just matured."

He snorts into his glass before taking a big swig. "Being mature sucks. Being an adult sucks. Being a parent *sucks!*"

"Hear, hear." I clink my glass to his and then drink that fucker down. It burns so good. "Whew!" I grimace. "Drink number two, please."

"In all honesty..." He pours me more vodka, grabs more ice, and two new lime wedges. "My kids are everything to me—I just don't understand why they want me dead."

I think Mr. Cullen was on his "drink number two" a while ago. His words come out a little slurred, and he's too fucking cute.

"That's just how it is, Edward," I tell him, throwing back my glass for a quick gulp. "Fuck—I remember once...Dylan was two, I think, and he took off his own diaper and smeared shit on our living room walls."

"Oh, sweetheart, that's nothing," he chuckles. "Keep in mind that Logan and Haley are twins—double trouble." He wags a finger at me, and I giggle. "When they were seven—we were at my sister's place in Philly—they took their three-year-old cousin out in the backyard, right?" I nod, listening. "My sister had said it was time for Linda's bath—that's the cousin. So, while Alice wasn't looking, my children led Linda out to the backyard and hosed her down."

"Oh, my God," I laugh behind my hand.

His own laugh is accompanied by a groan. "We weren't welcome in Philly for months after that. My sister was so pissed—said my children were raised by the devil."

"You being the devil?" A handsome fucking devil.

"I guess." He grins lazily.

Christ, he's sexy.

I could just...

Better stop there, honey.

"Drink number three?" he asks.

I hold out my glass.

{8}

December 2nd

EPOV

I think we were supposed to make devious plans on how to get our kids to understand that they're too young to get married, but...somewhere down the road, we got sidetracked. Actually, I don't think we ever started talking about Jaden and Haley. Instead this has become some parental confession party.

I fucking love it.

Like I love Isabella's body.

Seriously...her legs? God, her fucking tits. Her *curves*...

"We need more alcohol," I proclaim, standing up. *Shit*. I steady myself by grabbing onto the counter, and Isabella bends over in hysterics. She almost falls off her stool. "Laughing at an old man is rude." I shoot her a scowl and wobble my way around the bar, getting behind it.

"Old?" She snorts a laugh. "Please, honey. You fishin' for compliments or somethin'?"

"Hardly." I grab a bottle of gin this time. A bottle of tonic water follows. "Sometimes, I feel like I'm over fifty." That's actually true. It makes me fear what I'll feel like when I actually am fifty. "We men...we don't have it as easy as you women."

"Oh!" she shouts, slamming her hand down on the bar. She's still grinning, though. Her eyes are fucking gorgeous. "You fuckin' wid'me?" I shake my head no and pour us two GTs. I'm still behind the bar, which makes me feel like a bartender. "Don't get me started, buddy. Shit, the things we go through to—us women—to look good, to look young..."

Resting my elbows on the counter, I lean closer to her. "You look young, Isabella," I point out quietly and bring my drink to my lips.

Earlier, she said it was okay to call her Bella—it's what her family calls her—but something in her voice told me she likes it when I call her Isabella. And, truth is, I do too. Her name is as sexy as she is.

She smiles widely, also leaning a little closer. "I still can't believe you thought I was my sons' sister. That made my day, you know."

I chuckle. "I'm finding it hard to believe that you don't have countless men telling you how beautiful you are on a daily basis."

Fuck me, I think I'm flirting.

I haven't done that since college.

"Well..." Isabella lets out a little snicker. "I work in the fashion industry, so no, I can't say that I do. Although, I do have a few very gay friends who love to feel me up."

At that, I can't help but drop my gaze to her cleavage.

She's the epitome of woman. She's really short, kinda making me want to carry her around in my pocket and protect her from the big bad wolf, but she has an air of confidence that adds a couple inches to her height. Well, that and her sexy heels. And she's so voluptuous; she has an hourglass figure, one you rarely see these days amongst all the size zero garbage. But Isabella's got it. Big and round breasts, full hips, a narrow yet soft-looking waist, and a bubble-shaped ass that I just wanna grab and-

Time to stop.

I clear my throat and lift my gaze to her eyes again. Thankfully, she's busy guzzling down her GT, so she hasn't noticed my staring.

"Uh, fashion industry, you say?" I inquire, slowly making my way back to the other side of the bar.

"Yep." She nods and licks her lips. "I'm a photographer."

Huh. I sit down next to her. "Not a model, then?" Okay, that was bad. I grimace at my own line—so fucking lame. "Forget what I just said."

"Like I could!" she laughs and squeezes my bicep. "Oh, Edward." She cups her cheeks. "You're great for my ego—you know that?"

Unable to help myself, I reach over and tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. It causes her to drop her hands, and I may or may not linger for a beat before I pull back.

I blame it on the fact that I haven't been with a woman in approximately four years. I remember...it was on a book tour...I was in Florida, and after a day of signings, I'd gotten drunk and ended up with my one and only one-night stand. Before that—Christ...I don't know, there were a few women I had brief relationships with, though nothing became serious enough for me to even consider introducing them to my children. And the past four years, I've just ignored all things romance. It's too much of a jungle out there, and I have no desire to play games.

"Isabella, Isabella, Isabella." I sigh and lean back a few inches. "You're a gorgeous woman." I throw back the last of my drink. "Fuck." I cough a couple times, not used to the taste of gin. "And I think I've had enough for one night."

I don't know what tomorrow will bring, but I suddenly feel the need to get behind closed doors before I do something stupid—with my daughter's boyfriend's mother, no less. It's been a long day, and the last thing I need now is to turn this into a sad song about my lonely existence. That'd be the alcohol talking anyway. I may feel lonely at times, but I'm certainly not unhappy. However, once I get a few drinks in me...

"Maybe you're right..." Isabella ducks her head, a small smile playing on her luscious lips. "Unless I wanna look like a zombie at breakfast tomorrow, I should probably get some sleep."

Standing up, I offer her my arm. "Let me walk you to your room, then?" I grin down at her.

She giggles and links her arm with mine. "Whatta gentleman—a sexy one at that."

"Right," I chuckle, shaking my head in amusement. She's obviously had too much to drink.

{9}

December 3rd

BPOV

"You kiddin' me? Gimme that." I chuckle and steal back the piece of bacon that Finn stole from my plate. "Want Mommy to grab more food for you?" I run my fingers through his hair—for once, it's not all greased up.

"You smother, Mother," he laughs and drapes an arm around me, squeezing me tight. "I can get my own food, you know."

"You say that—" I nod "—but then you steal from my plate."

He just winks.

I sigh, content to have my two mama's boys next to me. That'd be Dylan on one side and Finn on the other. Jaden's sitting across from us, making eyes at Haley. It's quite sickening. But cute. They're so in love.

Maggie served breakfast at nine AM, as she said, in the bar...where Edward and I got hammered last night. Since there aren't many of us, she

claimed that this setting was better than opening up the dining hall, and I have to agree. This bar—it's like a British pub—is cozy and intimate, with Christmas music playing in the background. And the table, in the booth in which we're seated, is packed with food.

It's very casual, all of us dressed in pajama wear. Well, pajamas entail bottoms for Jaden and Finn. Only Dylan is wearing a t-shirt to go with his bottoms.



"Eat more," I tell Dylan, fussing a little.

"I'm eating!" he chuckles with his mouth full. "You should eat more, too."

"I am." I shrug and swipe a piece of toast from my plate.

If only Edward could come down...

It's twenty minutes past, so he should be here.

God, last night...I wanted him to kiss me so fucking badly. He walked me to my room, kissed my cheek, lingering, and whispered, "I had a great time" in my ear.

I almost combusted.

"You cold, Ma?" Finn asks, noticing my shiver. He's so adorable—a gentleman. And since I can't tell him the truth, I just nod and accept his arm around me again.

"Finally!" Haley cries out, making me look up. And there he is. "Dad, you're late."

I wanna ride him like a fucking pony.

He looks deliciously ruffled, like he literally woke up a minute ago. Bed hair, glasses, a cute little scowl... He's dressed for comfort, too—sweats, hoodie, and Chucks.

"Good mornin'," he grumbles, dropping a kiss in Haley's hair. "You know I'm not a morning person, baby girl." He plops down next to Haley and goes for the coffee. "Now, if you could stop licking Jaden's face, that'd be swell."

I burst out in giggles, causing him to look at me.

"Good morning, Isabella," he says quietly, amusement twinkling in his eyes. "How is it that you don't look hung over?"

I grin. "I dunno." Maybe because I've showered, shoved countless painkillers down my throat, and done my makeup?

"Oh yeah, youse two were down here last night, right?" Finn looks to us.

"Yeah." I nod and exchange a secretive smile with Edward. "We talked shit about our children."

"Ay!" Dylan and Finn shout.

Even Jaden perks up. "We're fuckin' angels, Ma."

I snort. "Keep tellin' yourself that, hon."

"You only said nice things about me, right?" Haley grits out, fiery eyes locked with her dad's.

Edward gives her a wry smirk. "Sure, baby girl. Sure."

"That's my future mother-in-" She drops her voice to a whisper. "That's my future mother-in-law, Daddy. How *could* you?" Realizing that we've all heard her, regardless of her whispering, she flushes bright red and ducks her head. "Dad, you suck."

"Suck," Edward says, nodding, "that's my last name. Don't ever have girls, Isabella."

"I think you're both too cute," I laugh.

"Anyway." Jaden speaks over me. "How about we decide what we wanna do today? Mom, Dee told me you're only here for a week?"

"I have a job, you know," I point out. "And your brothers got school." Taking one week off is doable, but that's it. Then, if there really is a wedding on the fifteenth, I'll push some things around again, obviously, but I can't be holed up in Vermont for a *month*. "I'm sure Edward's got work, too."

"He's an author—he can write anywhere," Haley pipes in.

I raise a brow at Edward, curious about his occupation. And a little impressed.

"Yeah, 'cause writing's all I do," he deadpans. "There couldn't *possibly* be anything else."

He's acing the sarcasm bit.

"This is my wedding," she argues. "Isn't that more important?"

"That's debatable." He picks up a piece of bacon and shoves it into his mouth.

My boys and I are watching them like we'd watch a tennis match. Actually, that's not correct, 'cause we'd probably fall asleep watching tennis. Even Finn, who's my sports freak.

"So, how long are you gonna stay, then?" Haley looks upset, close to tears. "Just a week, too?"

"If that." Edward wipes his mouth on a napkin, and then reaches for the maple syrup. Soon, his stack of pancakes is drenched. "We'll just have to see."

Haley's bottom lip quivers, but she hides it by lowering her head again.

I pout at the sight.

"So, what're we gonna do today?" Dylan asks.

I look to Jaden, not having a clue.

What the fuck do you do in Vermont?

{10}

December 6th

EPOV

Over the next few days, we let Haley and Jaden boss us around, though not without a few bitch fits from the 'rents. When Jaden suggests a walk in the woods on Tuesday, Isabella and I show our distaste for trudging through snow by scowling and cursing. When Haley suggests a night of playing games by the fire next to the lobby, Isabella and I say bluntly that we hate Monopoly and Trivial Pursuit. When Jaden suggests a trip into town on Wednesday, Isabella and I sigh heavily and just tag along. And when Haley, this morning, suggested that we'd all cook dinner together tonight, Isabella and I complained about lifting a finger on what's supposed to be a vacation.

We're horrible, horrible people.

But it's funny.

So...right now, she and I are sitting in the professional kitchen behind the Inn's restaurant, drinking wine and watching as our kids make dinner.

"Dylan seems to like cooking," I comment quietly.

Isabella looks proud, eyes on her youngest. "He's amazing in the kitchen, actually."

I smile.

He's the boss tonight. Dylan's giving orders to all the others. Finn looks bored but does as his brother says, which is to check on the potato wedges and stir the sauce. Jaden is standing by the vegetable station that Dylan prepped earlier, and he's there with Haley, of course. They're both preparing the salad quietly, only a few whispers shared between them. And Dylan's in charge of the lamb chops.

Since we got here on Sunday, I've learned several things about the McCartys. A couple things they have in common: they're loud as hell and very casual; they're a bunch of cocky sweethearts. Finn, he's the sports

nut. Baseball, football, hockey, basketball, soccer... He's also the jokester, always finding humor in something. For instance, when Isabella and I are arguing with Haley and Jaden, he's sitting on the sidelines laughing his ass off. Dylan, too, which brings us to him. Dylan is clearly Mommy's little ray of sunshine. While they're all mama's boys, he's the one who openly cuddles up with Isabella at night when we're having downtime by the fire or something. He's the quiet one, even though he can be just as loud as the rest. And according to Isabella, playing World of Warcraft and collecting Jordans complete his life.

Then we have Jaden... Oh, Jaden, Jaden, Jaden. I want to hate him, but he's making it difficult for me. Finn is obviously the muscles; he protects his mother with his huge frame, but Jaden...I bet he could talk an atheist into finding religion. He fights with words—um, punching my son in the jaw aside.

He's more serious than I originally gave him credit for. He has distinct plans for his future, and while he made a big mistake by ditching his band mates to elope with Haley, he's man enough to realize what he's done is wrong and make up for it. He also looks at my daughter as if she's everything to him. He doesn't leer or make crude remarks; granted, I've witnessed some disgusting foreplay—whispers that make my Haley blush and Jaden's pointed looks when my not-so-innocent girl takes it too far in public. But he's a gentleman. And he's not an ass-kisser. Make no mistake, he's definitely trying to get into my good graces, but he never crosses the line to brownnoser. He's honest, blunt, and comes without apologies.

I have to respect that.

Lastly, there's the woman who holds it all together.

Isabella.

She's amazing. She's funny, too. There's no stick up her ass, that's for sure, and she can hang with the boys without batting an eyelash. Nothing gets to her, it seems. Sure, she shouts, gestures wildly with her hands when she speaks; she gets very passionate. But she can go from screaming one second to fussing over her sons in the next. She doesn't hold grudges, she's genuine, she's all heart, and she's a mommy—not a mother. Like me, she sees her sons as little boys. Just like Haley's my baby girl and Logan's my little trooper. However, *unlike* me—well, I'm trying—she's aware her sons are growing up, becoming adults.

I feel like a fucking teenager with his first crush.

Dylan's voice brings me back to the present a while later. "Dinner's ready, and I'm thinkin' since we did the cookin', youse old people can serve."

"I don't like Dylan," I whisper to Isabella, unfortunately lying.

This would all be so much easier if the McCartys were awful people.

"I don't like him, either," she whispers back, her sweet perfume invading my senses.

I almost groan and lean closer.

"That sounds perfect, Dylan," Haley giggles.

I give her a blank stare. "I don't like you."

She stares right back. "That's okay—I don't like you, either."

Rude.

Five minutes later, Isabella and I are serving dinner to our kids in the pub before we serve ourselves.

Jaden, Haley, Finn, and Dylan are occupying the booth, Dylan at the short end of it, and Isabella and I sit across from the three oldest—in chairs—and they're not *nearly* as comfortable as the booth is. Shouldn't the parents be treated with respect? Like Dylan pointed out, we're the old people.

Old.

I hate that word.

And Isabella's not making it easy for me. Okay, seven years separate us, but it might as well have been seventeen. I'm not as carefree as she is, and I'm beginning to hate the old fart I've become. Hell, when I was thirty-five, I acted the way I do today, too.

"I wish Logan was here," Haley says, pouting at the empty chair next to me.

"He'll be here this weekend," I mutter, shoveling some food into my mouth. My son was unfortunately right; there's no way I'm gonna be able to get Haley home. At least not without that ring on her finger...and a new last name. "Damn—this is delicious." I wave my fork at the kids. "You did really well."

"But if you're going home after the weekend, why's Logan bothering to come up?" Haley's got an attitude. "And why bring Grampa and Masen with him, huh? That's what he told me—that he'd bring them."

"Don't be a brat, honey," Isabella says in a sing-song voice.

I could kiss the shit outta her, 'cause Haley couldn't look more chastened.

With me, Haley whines and bitches until I cave. With Isabella? Not so much.

"You can have her, you know," I tell Isabella.

She giggle-snorts. "Sure! If you take my three!"

Slowly, my eyes meet Jaden's. He's cocking a brow at me. Then Finn, whose smirk promises more grey hairs on my head. And Dylan...aw, he looks a little wounded by his mother's "willingness" to trade.

"Oh, baby." Isabella leans over, cups Dylan's cheeks, and kisses him soundly on the forehead. "I'd never get rid of you." The youngest grins all boyishly.

"Only us," Finn deadpans.

Jaden shakes his head at his mother.

Isabella sucks her teeth. "Pick your fuckin' battle, boys."

I laugh.

"Hey, Daddy, can I borrow your car tomorrow?" Haley asks sweetly.

I stop laughing. "No." Shoveling more food into my mouth, I make yummy noises at her.

She scowls. "I'm a good driver—a natural!"

"A natural born killer!" I shout.

I totally ignore the way her bottom lip trembles. By looking down at my plate. 'Cause if I looked up, I'd melt. I'm a pussy.

It's my fault she's a little bratty and immature.

"What Edward means is, what do you need a car for, hon?" Isabella asks, being all maternal and beautiful.

This time, I scowl, and it's at Isabella. "I meant what I said. There's no way she's driving my Lexus."

She waves me off, still wearing a go-on smile for my daughter.

"Well..." Haley chews on her lip, hesitating. "I was thinking I need to drive to Burlington and look for a wedding dress."

I drop my fork, glaring at my spawn. At the same time, another couple strands turn grey at my temples. "Why do you need a wedding dress? It's not like you're getting married."

"Edward." Isabella lets out a frustrated breath, and I give her a look, confused. "It's pretty clear that we've failed." She waves a hand at Jaden and Haley. "Those two are ridiculously in love, and they're getting married. End of. Do they have shit to learn? Hell, yeah. But there's little we can do about it. They've made up their minds."

I'm horrified. "You—you're giving up?" I ask, incredulous. "What's the matter with you?!"

"OH!" That'd be Finn. "Remember, that's *our* motha' you're talkin' to."

Jaden and Dylan nod.

I groan, exasperated, and drop my face into my hands.

"Ignore the cynical ass," Isabella says, definitely about me. "Haley, you can borrow my Volvo rental, but are you really gonna find something this close to the wedding? I mean..." She blows out a breath. "Wedding gowns—honey, you should've thought about this approximately eight to ten weeks ago. There are fittings to go through—"

"Mom," Jaden chuckles. "We'll be fine. Plus, Haley's gonna look gorgeous anyway. Doesn't matta' what she's wearin'."

I grimace into my hands. "Cheesy."

"Jesus Christ!" Aaand Isabella smacks the back of my head. *That* sure makes me look up, and then slightly down, 'cause she's so short. "Stop acting like a child, or I swear to God!" She waves her fist at me. I'm kinda afraid of her at the moment. "Look—" She points at Haley—"look what your words are doing to your daughta'. You gotta cool it!" She slaps my arm.

I flinch. "Fine. Sorry." I'm an ass, and I should probably show more remorse, but I still have my pride.

Meanwhile, said "daughta'" doesn't look hurt at all anymore. I'm willing to bet she's having a fucking blast watching her dad get scolded by Isabella.

"Okay, where were we?" Isabella's calm again. "Right—Haley, I have a suggestion. Hear me out, all right?" Haley nods eagerly. "I'm going back to the city on Monday—youse boys have school on Tuesday." She gives Finn and Dylan pointed looks before facing Haley again. "Anyway, I can probably help you find a dress. But we gotta hurry, 'cause..." She chuckles wryly. "There's really not enough time. I'll make a few calls—I gotta guy who can hook me up. I did a couple shoots for him last season. It'll be good."

"Oh, my God." Haley's close to tears. "You'd really do that for me, Ms. McCarty?"

"Baby, this is fashion." Jaden winks at her. "Ain't a lot my motha' can't do." I roll my eyes internally. *That* was ass-kissing. "But seriously, Ma..." He turns to Isabella. "You really don't have to."

"You don't know how girls work, do you?" Isabella cocks her head, curious. "Well, good luck to you, Haley."

Jaden gets defensive. "What's that suppos'ta mean?"

"It means that Haley's probably dreamed about her wedding dress since she was a little girl," she replies slowly, as if Jaden's mentally challenged. But what I'm thinking about is that Isabella has got to be the most caring woman I've ever met. She's willing to do an awful lot to make my baby girl happy.

And what am I doing to ensure the same?

Shit.

"Fuck it—you have my blessing," I blurt out.

Oh, I have everyone's attention.

"Word?" Jaden looks shocked.

I sigh and nod. "Yeah. Just..." I grit my teeth. "You better take care of her."

"With my life, sir," he vows.

Then I have a squealing Haley rounding the table to hug me. "Thank you, thank you, thank you, Daddy!"

Isabella shoots me a wry, amused smile. "Smooth, Edward. So smooth."

I smile sheepishly.

{11}

December 6th

BPOV

After dinner, I send Finn and Dylan off with a few bags of snacks and candy from the kitchen.

Now that the wedding is on—officially to us parents—Edward and I figured it's best we sit down with Jaden and Haley and talk everything through. My son is getting married; I wanna be involved.

With my day planner on the cleared table, I start off with the guest list. "Who's invited?"

Jaden motions for Haley to speak.

"Um, not very many on my side." Her eyes flick between her father and me as she speaks. "Aunt Alice and Uncle Jasper, of course." Edward nods, iPhone in hand. "They have four kids, too. Uh, Grampa Carlisle and his brother—Masen. Dad and Logan, obviously, but I think that's it."

Edward shakes his head. "You should invite Junior, too. And his wife."

"We barely see them." She scrunches her nose.

"Doesn't matter—they're family."

"Who's Junior?" I ask.

"My uncle's son," Edward replies. "Masen Junior."

I nod and write down the names, occasionally checking with Edward about spelling. I don't want any names misspelled on the place cards, if you know what I mean.

"And from our family, baby?" I raise a brow at Jaden.

He clears his throat. "Uncle Emmett, Aunt Rose, Henry and Lily..." He shrugs. "Aside from us, is there anybody else?"

"No grandparents?" Edward asks curiously.

I shake my head no. "My parents died when I was a teenager—also a car accident." I remember Edward told me that was how Haley and Logan's mother died. Only, my parents were hit by a drunk driver. Facing Jaden again, I ask, "What about your band? You should invite Sam, Paul, and Jake, too. With plus ones." I know that both Sam and Paul have girlfriends.

"A'ight." He nods.

"What about you, baby girl?" Edward refills his wine and then mine. I smile in thanks. "Don't you wanna invite your friends?"

"Um...maybe Meg and Angela. They're the only ones I'm really close to."

"How do I spell Meg's full name?" I ask, guessing it's a nickname, and she tells me it's Meghan—with an "h". "All right. Well, I have a few I need to invite, too." I give Jaden a look. "Eric, for instance. He would kill me—hell, he'd kill you, too, if he wasn't invited." Eric, my gay BFF, is also my assistant at work.

"My publisher—Marcus," Edward supplies pensively. "His wife and two kids, too." I write it down, and he also gives me the names of Marcus' family.

"Ugh—not Tanya," Haley whines. "She's always hitting on Logan, the poor guy."

"The poor guy?" Edward laughs. "Tanya's got everything a teenage boy could want. She's so skinny that she looks sick, she has a big—" he holds his hands in front of his chest, causing me to giggle—"you know, and she's blond. Trust me, Haley, Logan is *not* complaining."

"Did you just describe your dream woman, too, Edward?" I tease.

He actually shudders. "*God*, no. I'm not a teenage boy. I want a woman—emphasis on *woman*—who-" He stops himself abruptly, much to my dismay. Taking a big gulp from his wine, he waves for us to move on.

I sigh and face our kiddos. "Have you discussed music? Food? Entertainment? Bachelor and bachelorette parties? Honeymoon? Do you have a wedding license? Talked to a priest or whatever yet?"

Turns out that aside from getting a license and booking an appointment for a justice of the peace to come out here the fifteenth, Jaden and Haley haven't thought through this one little bit.

Mommy McCarty and Daddy Cullen swoop in, though, and the two of us help set up preliminary plans that we now have little over a week to hammer out in detail. And by the time our night is over, Jaden and Haley look shell-shocked.

It makes me chuckle to myself as I watch them head upstairs to go to bed.

"They really have no idea what they're getting themselves into, do they?"

I look to Edward, more than a little amused. "When it comes to weddings? No. Still..." I smile, thinking about our two lovebirds. "I have faith in them." Both Jaden and Haley have some serious growing up to do, especially Haley—if I may say so. But I think their love is true enough to believe they will grow together. "I can't say I *want* them to get married, but resistance at this point is futile." As reluctant as he is to admit that, Edward nods with a dip of his chin. "It'd be a whole other story if I couldn't see how serious they are..."

"But now that you see it, you'd rather be there for your son on his special day," he finishes quietly. "And make it a memorable one."

I grin and mock-punch his bicep. "See, you do get it! Atta boy!"

"Oh, funny you," he grumbles.

"Hey." I go with softness and seriousness. "I get it, you know? It's always harder for the father. My dad..." I chuckle. "I gave him a run for his money, that's for sure."

"I bet you were a hell-raiser." He smiles.

I cock a brow. "Three kids by the time I was twenty-one—what do you think?" I snort softly. "I sure as hell wasn't a good girl."

Damn, I wish my dad was here now. I was his princess—he spoiled me with everything he could. Good thing I showed how thankful I was, otherwise I'd hate myself. But...I still wish he could've seen me now—see the boys. He'd be proud. I know that.

"I'm kinda jealous," I say quietly, thinking out loud.

Edward tilts his head. "What do you mean?"

"My own son—who's eighteen years old—finds true love before his momma does." I smile ruefully. "How the fuck is that fair?"

He chuckles a little. "Hey, don't look at me for an answer. I'm in the same boat."

"Yeah," I sigh and sink a bit deeper into my seat. That was the first thing I did after dinner; I told Jaden and Haley to sit on the chairs. The booth is much comfier. "What time is it?"

He checks his watch. "Eleven forty."

I hum, sorta torn. One part of me is exhausted, but I'm not sleepy. "How 'bout a drink—or are you tired?"

Edward leaves the booth in a flash. "Drinks coming up!" he calls over his shoulder.

Feeling giddy, I quickly pull out a small mirror from my back pocket and check my makeup. With my jeans I'm wearing a snug button-down—it's black—and when I unbutton the first two buttons, I can also call it sexy. I push up my tits, fluff my hair, and fix my lipstick—it's the dark red one that Edward couldn't stop focusing on when we were hiking through the woods the other day.

By the time Edward returns with glasses, vodka, mixers, lime wedges, and ice, I'm not feeling any exhaustion anymore.

{12}

December 6th

EPOV

I throw back another shot of Jack. Isabella does the same, but with Sour Apple Pucker.

"It's your turn." She refills our drinks. Vodka and Coke for me; vodka and cranberry juice for her. Since we're doing shots, we thought it was best to use mixers for the rest. "This time I want you to admit somethin' really bad. Lying to your son about his favorite candy being sold out when you're really too lazy to go out and buy it—that's lame and tame, my friend. You gotta do better than that."

I nod guiltily, knowing just the thing. "Okay..." I blow out a breath. "I used to—" I cover my mouth with my fist to hold in a burp. "I used to read Haley's diary."

Isabella gasps, though she looks positively gleeful. I'm willing to bet she's a sucker for gossip. "That *is* bad. You, you...you bad man!" She points a

finger to my face. I crack up, even throwing my head back as I laugh. "Oh, my God—now I need to know if you ever read anything that made you, like, explode or somethin'."

Actually, I haven't. I think Haley stopped writing when she started having secrets. "Other than the occasional dream of hers to kiss a certain boy in school, it was innocent," I answer. "But what do I know—maybe she knew I was reading it." I snort. "I'm not very stealthy. And now it's your turn, but I want embarrassing now."

She giggles, looking so fucking cute. "Okay, embarrassing...hmm..." She taps her chin. And then her eyes light up. "Shit, all right, this definitely falls unda' that category." Fuck, I think I like gossip, too. "When Jaden was six, he found one of my dildos," she admits into her glass. My eyes bug out as I imagine Isabella fucking herself with a dildo. Then the dildo can watch while *I* fuck her. *Oh, God.* "He asked me if we could paint his peen, too, but not purple. He also told me very seriously that he didn't want to cut it off before painting it."

I physically hold my lips together and stare at her, torn between being horny as fuck and wanting to laugh so hard that I'd lose my breath.

"You can laugh, you know," she tells me, grinning, kinda leaning closer.

I nod slowly. "I am on the inside," I whimper in amusement. "Believe me."

But I'm also horny. My neglected cock is getting harder by the minute, and it's all that fucking dildo's fault.

Actually, it's Isabella's fault.

Here we go again.

I groan internally and grab my drink. While I chug on my vodka and Coke, I reach under the table to untuck my white button-down from my jeans. It wouldn't be good if she saw the erection I'm sporting.

"Hit me with another story," I say, not above begging. "But—" I put one hand up "—not one that involves dildos, all right?"

"Ha! I didn't take you for a prude, Cullen." She smirks. I roll my eyes; she has no idea how opposite of prude I can be. "Okay, a story without *diiiiildos*." I shoot her a playful glare. "Hmm, how about the first time I caught my son with a broad, huh? Lemme tell ya, the last thing I wanted to see after a business trip was Finn's lily-white ass while he fucked some girl on my couch. I loved that couch." She sucks her teeth. "I had to replace it." She slams down her fist on the table.

"Jesus Christ," I laugh. "When was this? Finn's only sixteen!"

"Oh, this was just a few months ago," she says. "Jaden—bless his heart—I've never had to catch him at anything. He's far from innocent, but he's not like Finn. What about you—have you ever caught your kids red-handed?"

I grimace as a couple memories hit me. "I walked in on Haley with her first boyfriend once. There was no ass on display, thank God—" I shudder and reach for the bowl of spicy nuts "—but let's just say that Haley's hand wasn't stuck down her own pants."

"Oooh, I bet that drove you nuts!" she guffaws.

I shrug. "Obviously, and then I crushed the boy's."

"Edward, you didn't!" Aw, she's in hysterics. "God, I can't breathe." I can see that; she's laughing too hard.

"That last part was a joke, sweetheart," I chuckle and rub her back. "I did physically throw him out, though."

"Christ." She wipes at her cheeks, giggling madly. "This is like a workout." She palms her belly. "You're too funny, and I'm too drunk."

"Maybe you should stick to water," I suggest, my hand still on her back.

"Hey, I'm *not* that drunk, mister." She wags a finger at me. "Phew... Gots'ta breathe a little."

I snicker. "Well, I'm glad my misery amuses you."

"Eh." She shrugs, grinning impishly. "The best laugh is always at someone else's expense."

"You're such a sweetheart," I deadpan, though I actually feel the same way. Pardon me, but others' fuck-ups are funny to me. "Okay, honestly?" I scoot closer to her. "Maybe I think so, too."

"I know you do," she chuckles. "I think we all do, but not all of us have the balls to admit it."

"I have the balls—big balls," I tell her seriously, wanting to see her laugh again. And she doesn't disappoint. Her laugh is beautiful, carefree, and makes me smile. Her dimples also appear, as do tears of laughter.

"Breathe, beautiful," I chuckle and lift her chin. Eyes bright, full of mirth, she looks up at me as she tries to calm down. In the meantime, I take the opportunity to study her face. My thumb follows my gaze with a light touch, first tracing her jawline, then brushing over her cheek...

When I realize that her humor is gone and that she's watching me closely, it takes every fiber of my being to pull away.

"Um, maybe..." I release a breath and rub the back of my neck. I hate the words I'm about to say, but I can't go on like this anymore. I'm ready to jump her, literally, and with the internal war thundering, I'll just run hot and cold, which isn't fair to Isabella. I need to keep my distance but still be nice and all that *shit*. We're here because our kids are evidently getting married to each other.

"Call it a night?" she guesses with a tight-lipped smile.

I offer a quick nod; it's all I can muster. "Sure thing."

Walking up the stairs, side by side, we don't speak.

If I've read Isabella correctly, then I'd say there's mutuality in our attraction, though I sincerely doubt she's obsessed with me, as I seem to be with her. But wouldn't it make things incredibly complicated to give in? I mean, what happens next? I've never been a guy who says "fuck it" and hopes for the best.

"Well, this is me..." Isabella stops in front of her room, key in hand. She looks up at me and smiles softly. "Thank you for another funny evening."

"Thank your son—he's footing the bill." I wink at her to let her know I'm kidding. I have no doubt in my mind that I will take care of everything once this month is over. He's a good kid, and he loves my daughter deeply—promises to honor their vows. I can't really ask for more than that.

"I was talkin' about the company, Cullen," she whispers with a glint in her eye.

"Oh." My eyes flicker to her mouth, but I quickly force them to her eyes again. It's really time for me to go, 'cause I have a rather large problem to deal with when I get to my room. "The pleasure was mine, so don't

thank me." Steeling myself, I take a step forward and press a kiss to her forehead. "Good night, Isabella."

Turning around, I walk carefully down the hall toward my own room, and I listen as she unlocks and opens her door.

I'm wound so fucking tight. Jaw clenched, teeth grinding, hands balled into tight fists, and a cock that could drill through diamond.

"Edward?"

Fuck.

I freeze, almost mid-step. "Yeah?" I turn around slowly, wondering how long I can keep this up without attacking her.

"Um..." Standing in her doorway, she shifts her weight from one foot to the other. "I—there's this coffeemaker in hea'." She points her thumb over her shoulder. "You wanna cup?"

I'm already walking toward her, having lost the last ounce of self-restraint.

I watch as her chest heaves once, as she swallows, as her eyes widen slightly, as she licks her fucking lips.

Then I'm there, dipping down, crashing my mouth to hers, and pulling her body roughly to mine.

So much for distance.

{13}

December 6th

EPOV

Gently pushing her inside her room, I kiss her hard and deeply, Isabella mirroring my movements. I kick the door closed behind us as she fists my hair and slides her tongue into my mouth. We're all groans, moans, and hands.

"Wait, wait! Gotta lock the doah." She rushes toward the door and locks it, and then she's back in my arms. Hands roaming and kissing wildly, we tumble toward her bed, clothes being shed as we go. "I really only asked you in for coffee," she pants, working to unbutton my shirt.

I go for hers, buttons flying when I just rip it. "Really?" I kiss her jaw, her throat, her exquisite neck, moaning at the sweet taste of her skin.

"No," she whimpers when I grab her hips and pull her so close that she can feel my cock against her stomach. "That was a lie—God...I want you, Edward."

"Four days—that's how long I've fantasized about you," is my response as we fall down on the bed, me on top of her. My button-down is long gone, and next is my undershirt. As I pull it over my head, Isabella squirms out of her tight jeans. "Christ," I groan, watching her body. All that's left is her sexy lingerie—dark purple fabric, silky and shiny, with some black lace trim. "Do you know how beautiful you are?" I honestly want to know if she has the slightest idea what she's doing to me, although I can be patient for an answer. There are far more pressing matters right now. "Body of a fucking goddess," I mutter, maybe to myself, as I kiss my way down her chest. Slipping my hands under her, she arches into my touch, and I manage to unclasp her bra. "Fuck." The curse leaves me in a whisper, my eyes glued to her full tits. Round, soft... I wrap my lips around her left nipple and suck it into my mouth, eliciting a moan from Isabella.

"You're the—oh, fuck!" She bucks her hips as I thrust. "*Ungh*—sexiest man I've ever seen."

I groan against her flesh and slip my right hand underneath the fabric of her panties. *Jesus Christ*. She's wet. Warm, so fucking *slick*. I cup her pussy firmly, my middle finger perfectly positioned to slide between her smooth lips. I want to smell her, taste her, drink her up. I want to nuzzle the neatly trimmed patch of soft curls, I want to suck on her clit, I want to sink my cock into her.

"I want you, beautiful," I moan, claiming her mouth again. At the same time, I finger her slowly. She whimpers as I push two inside of her and circle her clit with my thumb.

"Yesss," she hisses. "*God*, yes." She kisses me deeply, all while her hands roam down my sides. I push in a third finger when she starts tugging down my boxers. Her mouth moves to my jaw, down my throat. She sucks on my skin, her tongue swiping over to soothe the sting. "Please, Edward."

I nod, dropping my forehead to her shoulder. "I don't exactly carry around condoms."

"I do."

My head snaps up, and I can't help but wonder how sexually active she is. I mean, I get it. Not all adults are boring like me—nuns, monks... And I bet Isabella has countless men standing in line; she's that fucking stunning.

She grins a little. "Don't frown."

I cock a brow and apply pressure on her clit, which makes her moan breathlessly. My fingers had stopped moving before, but I resume my ministrations again.

"Three boys—I'm too young to be a nana. If they need a condom, I'm more than happy to shove it down their throats." At that, I can't help but

laugh and kiss her. "Lemme go. I'll get a condom. God—" she pulls me down for a hard kiss "—you're too handsome for your own good."

I blow out a breath and roll to my side, watching as she leaves the bed. Her panties barely cover her round ass, and when she bends over to dig through her purse, I palm my cock and give it a few quick strokes.

As she walks toward the bed again, toward me, I don't stop my hand moving over my erection. She watches me; I watch her. Her tits, her *amazing* curves, her rounded hips—all on display for me. All we need to do now is get rid of her panties.

"So sexy..." She crawls over my body, gently pushing me down so I'm flat on my back. "Back off," she giggles and bats away my hands. I grin and fold my arms behind my head instead, more than happy to let her take over. Though, she doesn't use her hands. After kissing her way up my left thigh, she lowers her mouth on my cock.

"Isabella," I exhale sharply. Fucking sensational—it's almost overwhelming. She's all over me. Licking the underside of my cock, she cups my balls at the same time, and it causes me to groan embarrassingly loud. Then she swirls her tongue around the head, wrapping her soft lips around me, too, only to suck me in completely a moment later. "*Fuck.*" One of my hands is quick to find her head, my fingers weaving through her hair. "Beautiful—you need to..." I bite down on my lip, staring down at her. I wouldn't say I have poor stamina, but it has been years, and I won't last long inside of her if she keeps this up. Her mouth is just too hot, too wet... My erection is coated in her saliva, and she hums and makes these too-fucking-sexy sucking noises. "Okay, fuck—" I fist her hair and give it a gentle tug "—time to stop."

She offers a salacious smile in return but says nothing. Instead she continues her way up my body, leaving open-mouthed kisses as she goes.

"You're ruining me." I sit up as she straddles me. "Too beautiful." Cupping her neck, I draw her close and cover her mouth with mine. She moves on top of me; I can feel her slick pussy the second it comes in contact with my throbbing cock.

"God, you're amazing," she whispers into the kiss. I shudder and kiss her harder, thinking she's the amazing one. Goose bumps appear on my skin, and I let out another moan when she slips a hand between us and grips my erection. Her other hand follows, and when I feel something scratching against my hip, I know it's the condom wrapper. I kind of expect her to back away so I can just roll it on already, but she doesn't. Throughout the most sensual kiss I've ever experienced—where our tongues mingle and teeth nip—Isabella takes care of it all. I hear the tearing of foil, and I sure as fuck feel when she rolls the condom onto my stiff cock.

Wanting to retake control, it's my turn to push her down on the bed.

I stare down at her, her long and thick hair almost covering her pillow, her eyes dark and filled with excitement, her cheeks a little flushed, her lips red and swollen from our kissing. With a soft kiss on her mouth, I lower my body fully to hers and slide my cock between the wet lips of her pussy.

"Oh, *Edward*." Her eyes close as I rub the head against her clit. Her back arches into me, too, and I decide enough is enough. I need to be inside her, so I hold the base of my cock and line up before I push in in one fluid motion. "Shit!" Her eyes flash open again.

"*Jesus*," I grit out.

In an instant, I go from breathing heavily to full-on panting.

"God blessed you—that's for sure," she moans, nodding to herself. I want to thank her for the ego boost, 'cause I actually need it, but I can't really

speak at the moment. "And I'm a greedy bitch." She nips at my jaw and lets out little whine. "Don't tease me. Fuck me."

She...she thinks I'm *teasing* her?

I shake my head.

Focusing on her instead works, though. Between kisses and touches, I manage to calm down enough to start moving inside of her. Deep but slow strokes fill her over and over again, and I make sure to never cease stimulating her clit with the pad of my thumb.

We pick up a steady rhythm, our bodies moving together.

"Fucking flawless," I whisper in her ear. Gathering both her hands in my left one, I hold them above her head. Her legs tangle with mine as she writhes under me, meeting my deep thrusts. She cries out when I swivel my hips, pushing impossibly deeper into her. "That feel good, sweetheart?"

"Yes!" she gasps, throwing her head back. "Jesus Christ—do it again, Edward." I kiss her neck and roll my hips again, grinding as deeply as I can. It has the desired effect when her breathing hitches and her pussy tightens around me. "God, don't stop. Don't stop, don't stop."

"I won't," I groan and lick the spot below her ear. Her whimpers and breathy moans spur me on, as do her heels digging into my ass. I want to ravish her for hours, consume her completely—if only I'd last. The only thing I can hope for is that I'll have more opportunities to be with her. And that revelation—that I want that, already hope for it—startles me a little. "Kiss me," I breathe out, resting my forehead to hers. Sliding out of her slick, hot pussy, I'm quick to slam in again. She cries out once more, only to pull me down and kiss me passionately, so fucking hungrily, that I can't catch my goddamn breath. Inside of me, everything is rushing,

surging, coiling. "Almost there, beautiful—" I stop abruptly when her inner walls clamp down on me and her eyes squeeze shut. She mouths something that looks like "Oh, my God", but I can't be sure. What I am sure of, on the other hand, is that she's suddenly hit by her orgasm. No warning.

"Damn," I pant, watching her face. My own chase is pretty much over, too, and I find myself pushing into her with quicker and shallower thrusts. I can feel my neck straining, my back muscles tensing, my thighs throbbing, and I end it all by ramming my cock as deep as I possibly can before my own climax takes over. It hits me hard, tingles rushing down my spine, causing me to go rigid. With a low moan rumbling in my chest, I bury my face in the crook of her neck as I release into her. I don't thrust; I just rock my body against hers, remaining inside her hot pussy.

"Edward," she gasps.

Her warm and sweet breath wafting over my skin makes me shiver.

Another moan escapes me when this serene calm washes over me; I feel relaxed and blissed out.

Feeling her soft kisses along my neck and shoulder, I slowly slip out and collapse next to her.

"I'm just..." Fuck, my breathing's too heavy. So, I just jerk my chin toward the bathroom, groaning as I sit up and leave the bed.

"Hurry back," she says, and I smile at her over my shoulder; she's gorgeous, stretching out her legs and arms.

Inside the bathroom, I quickly dispose of the condom, take a leak, and then wash up.

Isabella's still stretching lazily in bed when I return to her, only now her body is covered. But when the bed dips with my weight and I scoot over to her, she lifts up the covers, inviting me closer to her naked body.

I hum and kiss her lips softly. "You're all warm." I smile when she hitches her leg over my hip, and I place my hand on the underside of her knee—where her leg bends—and encourage her even closer. "Fuck," I whisper and kiss her again. "So soft." My fingers are brushing over the smooth skin on the backside of her thigh, and I can't get over how soft it is...like I said.

"Stay with me tonight?" she asks quietly, looking a little nervous, actually.

I nod and roll onto my back, pulling her with me. "Of course." I honestly doubt I'd be able to sleep if I had to go back to my own room now. "You tired?" I ask as she yawns.

She giggles, eyes a little moist as a result of the yawning. "Yeah." She hums and rests her head on my chest. When she begins to draw lazy circles through my light dusting of chest hair, I sigh in nothing but contentment. "God—you feel good. Like the sexiest pillow eva'."

I chuckle and squeeze her to me.

{14}

December 7th

Haley's POV

"Hey, we can always move a few things around," I say softly, brushing some hair from Jaden's eyes. "That way, you could have your bachelor party."

"See?!" Finn shouts, pointing at me. Though, his eyes are trained on Jaden. "She gets it!"

I giggle and grab a few more pancakes.

"I don't know..." My fiancé's hesitating. "What about you, baby?" He frowns down at me. "You don't wanna bachelorette party?"

I shrug, picking invisible lint off my pajama bottoms. "I dunno... It was never our plan."

"That's broad speak for yes," Dylan says, nodding.

"Word." Finn fist-bumps his little brother.

I blow out a breath, thinking. I mean...I wouldn't mind a little party with some girlfriends, but how would that even work? I'm not good at planning and stuff, and it's not like I can ask one of my friends to take care of it. Our wedding will be small, and since Jaden said it's impossible for him to pick a best man between his brothers, we just decided to skip all that. My dad will walk me down the aisle, but then it'll just be Jaden and me up there with the minister.

Gah, I can't wait!

"Mornin', baby girl. Good mornin', boys," I hear my dad say behind me, finally joining us for breakfast. Now we're only waiting for Ms. McCarty. Dad kisses the top of my head and then slides into the booth. We left that for him and Jaden's mom, 'cause they were, like, complaining about it last night. They don't think these chairs are comfy. So, that's why Jaden, Finn, and I are sitting on this side instead. Dylan's sitting at the short end of the booth.

"You look happy." I smile, watching my dad.

He shrugs and pours himself some coffee. "Do I have a reason *not* to be happy?" He arches a brow over his reading glasses—the clear, black-rimmed Ray-Bans I convinced him to buy. He wanted to buy these really boring and ugly frames, but I was there to stop him, thank goodness.

"No. Just... You're not a morning person—usually," I point out and wrap my hands around my mug of hot chocolate.

"Well, savor the moment." He grabs a newspaper from the table.

I chuckle. "Oh, I will."

"Right, and with that outta the way..." Finn gives Jaden a look before he faces Dad. "Yo, Mr. C, I think we should give my brotha' a bachelor party. You wanna help?"

Dad grins, eyes still focused on the newspaper. "Not really." He flips a page and sips his coffee.

"No cool points for you," Dylan mumbles.

Dad's about to say something back, but Ms. McCarty joins us then.

"Good morning, kids!" She kisses Jaden's hair, then Finn's forehead, and lastly, Dylan's cheek. She grins as Dad gets out of the booth to let her slide in. "Morning, Edward." They exchange some weird smile, and Ms. McCarty takes her seat.

"Good morning," he murmurs, pouring her coffee. "Sleep well?"

"Like you wouldn't believe." She giggles and then blows some steam off her mug. "Thank you."

She's so cool. Honest, she's like the coolest mom ever. Right now, for instance, she's wearing black pajama shorts and this awesome Led Zeppelin t-shirt. How many moms would look like a rock chick? Oh, and

she's got slippers with pink Sponge Bob on 'em. And she's always happy and funny. Well, when she's not shouting at her sons. Or Dad... Ha, that was funny—when she yelled at him.

"Ma, we wanna give Jaden a bachelor party," Finn says.

"I don't need one," Jaden says quickly, lying.

Ms. McCarty smiles brightly and faces Jaden. "Of course you're gonna have a bachelor party, baby!" She nods at Finn. "Great idea. Hey, I'm sure Edward will help you. Right, Edward?" She looks up at Dad.

Dad looks like he's stuck on stupid. "Um..." God, I want to laugh. He rubs the back of his neck. "Yeah...sure?"

"Excellent!" Ms. McCarty responds, having no clue that Dad was less cool about it five minutes ago. "Haley, do you have a bachelorette party planned?"

I shake my head no. "We talked about this yesterday—I don't need one."

"Liar." She smirks. I'm so busted. "Don't worry, hon. I'll take care of it."

At that, my eyes light up. "Really?" Jaden's mom has wicked connections—I know. Like, the annual party she hosts around New York Fashion Week? There are always celebrities there. She's really well-known in her business.

"Of course." She spreads some jelly on a piece of toast. "We'll talk more later." She pauses. "By the way, we gotta talk about food for the wedding." She nods at Jaden. "You remember Carmine—his place in Keyport we used to go to?"

"Yeah, whadabout'im?" Jaden's brows furrow, and I wanna lick him. And his nipple ring. Christ, my man never wears a shirt for breakfast, and it's really damn distracting.

"I could call him." Ms. McCarty takes a bite from her toast and nudges Dylan. "You love his pizza, remember?"

"WE WANT-A PIZZA PIE-A!" the McCarty sons shout.

It scares the crap out of me!

"Jesus," Dad whispers, rubbing the spot over his heart.

Ms. McCarty chuckles and continues. "Whaddy think, baby?" she asks Jaden. "Carmine wouldn't say no to catering your wedding."

"Pizza at a wedding?" Dad frowns.

Ms. McCarty gives him a look. "What the fuck do you take me foah? No. Not pizza at a wedding—Christ." She faces Jaden and me again. "He makes the best Italian food in Jersey. We could have a massive buffet of food."

Ooh, I like that. "That sounds perfect," I gush. "Like, it'll be fancy but still casual."

"Exactly," she says, nodding. "Lemme know and I'll make the call."

"I say we go for it." Jaden nods. "You think he'll be up for it? I mean... short notice and all."

She just waves her hand, dismissing Jaden's words. "Carmine won't say no to me." She grins cheekily. "He loves me too much."

"Oh—" Dad nods "—he does, does he?" Ms. McCarty looks confused, and Dad has this odd look on his face, but I ignore it and ask a question I have.

"Ms. McCarty, do you have any ideas on what I can do about flowers?" Now that our parents are on board, there are suddenly a million things I'm worried about. I don't know, but maybe it didn't get real until they "gave their blessing."

"First of all, I think you can call me Bella now." She winks at me, and I feel giddy, like some fangirl. Only her closest call her Bella. I read that in an interview. "Second of all, you bet your ass I have ideas. Don't worry about it, hon. I know a guy." She waves that off, too. "We'll take care of all that when we get back to Manhattan."

Dad harrumphs and mutters to himself. "Of course, of course. She *knows* a guy..."

He is so weird.

"Daddy, when's Logan coming up here?" I ask. It's been weeks since I saw Grampa and Masen, so I'm really excited about them coming.

"He left a message for me an hour ago," he sighs. "I'm supposed to pick them up at the airport around six."

"I'll talk to Maggie about rooms," I offer. At first, we didn't want everyone to come up until the fifteenth—not counting our parents and siblings—but things have changed.

"So, what're we doin' today?" Finn asks.

"I have a million calls to make, so I'm all set until dinner," Ms. McCa-*Bella* replies. "You kids can entertain yourselves."

Exchanging a look with Jaden, I know *just* how we can entertain ourselves. However, I wanna be there for Bella, too. It's my wedding; she's not supposed to do all the work.

"I have some writing to get done," Dad says. "I'll be in my room. But before then..." He faces Bella. "Can I have a word with you?"

{15}

December 7th

BPOV

"You sure you don't mind helping the boys with the bachelor party?" I ask, watching as Edward's sexy ass disappears into a pair of boxers. *Whatta shame*. But really, it's not like we can hide out in my room all day. I wasn't lying when I said I have a million calls to make.

About half an hour ago, I was pretty sure Edward had some reason to be pissed at me, not that I'd know what that reason could be. He stomped up the stairs, me in tow, and as soon as we were inside my room, he just stared at me with dark eyes. Which was a far cry from how sweet he was this morning when we woke up.

There had been no awkwardness, thank God. Instead there were soft kisses and some Grade A cuddling going on.

Anyway...I guess Edward wasn't pissed. 'Cause what he did was attack me, kiss me, squeeze me, and fuck me. Oh, he fucked me good and hard. I can still feel it. Literally. Since it ended five minutes ago.

"Edward?" Since I haven't gotten a reply, I repeat my question. "You really don't mind helping with the bachelor party?"

"Hmm?" He faces me and pulls on his t-shirt. At the same time, I pull on a pair of jeans. "Oh—no, of course not. We were actually talking about that before you came down for breakfast, and..." He's nodding. "Yeah, I was just about to suggest I could help...them...with the party." Still nodding.

I smile and walk over, reach up on my toes, and kiss his lips. "Thank you. You're so sweet." I hum in contentment as he kisses my jaw, and I lock my arms around his neck, my fingers weaving through his hair. He seems to like that, especially when I scratch his scalp. "God, you're a sexy man, Edward Cullen." He really is. He looks so manly, distinguished, rugged, yet very put-together. There's a five o'clock shadow covering his jaw, and his hair is a bit ruffled...*his sexy fucking hair*. It's brown, but with golden and reddish hues in it. There's also some grey along his temples, which I find incredibly hot.

"And you, Ms. McCarty—" he nips at my bottom lip "—are without a doubt the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

And he says things like that...

"Edward," I breathe out, overcome with want. The next second, he claims my mouth with his in a deep kiss that makes my knees all shaky. I whimper and press myself against him, wondering when we can put a third condom to use. Then again, I'm pretty fucking spent, and just kissing him gives me more satisfaction than I ever thought possible.

"Fuck," he groans, resting his forehead against mine. We're both panting and exchanging breaths. "Why does everything about you have to be so goddamn provocative?"

I grin, loving that I have the same effect on him as he has on me.

"Rhetorical question?" I guess.

He nods and squeezes his eyes shut. With a final kiss to my lips, he takes a step back. "You're dangerous, Isabella."

"So are you."

One hand on the door handle, he says, "I wish I didn't have work to do."

I point to my cell phone on the table next to the door. "I wish I didn't have countless calls to make."

It kinda looks like he wants to say something, but he never does. He just gives me a small smile and then leaves.

~oOo~

Hours later, I walk down the stairs, hearing Finn and Dylan hanging out in the little seating area next to the lobby.

"What was that?" Finn asks.

Me, honey. I guess he heard me on the steps.

Dylan chuckles. "Maybe it's zombies. But don't worry—you're safe. They're after brains."

Pausing on the final step, I snicker silently at my youngest. I swear, if he doesn't become a chef, he could always become a comedian.

Finn again. "I don't get it."

Oh, Finn baby. You walked right into that one.

"Like I said. You're safe."

Shaking my head at my boys, I pass the lobby and join them.

"Hey, Mom." Dylan wears a silly little smile as I sit down in the plush chair next to his. "What's up?"

"Is Mr. C comin' down, too?" Finn leans forward in his seat and stares toward the stairs. "We wanna talk to him about Jaden's party."

"He's probably still writing," I answer with a shrug. "Where's your brother?"

Finn laughs through his nose and sits back in his chair again. "On top of Haley? I don't know."

I suck my teeth. "Why you gotta be so crude, huh? It's always the same wit'chu."

"He was born that way," Dylan says, grabbing my hand. I smile at him and thread our fingers together. He's so affectionate, and I couldn't love it more if I tried. "Did you call Carmine?"

"Yeah." I nod and grin. "He'll be hea' two days before the weddin' with his staff." Which reminds me, I gotta make sure there's a cottage for him and his family, and rooms for his staff of six. I'm also saving a cottage for my brother's family and Edward's sister's family. With small children, they'll prefer cottages over rooms.

Suddenly, there's a crash coming from upstairs, and it's quickly followed by shouting and stomping on the stairs.

"I'm not goin', Haley!" Jaden yells. *Stomp, stomp, stomp*. "Stop bustin' my fuckin' balls!"

My eyebrows shoot up, and I pray to God that Edward didn't hear him.

"It's your band, Jaden!" Haley screams; they're both closer now. "Jesus Christ! You've already ditched them once!"

"Ooh, now I want popcorn," I say giddily. I have a feeling this is gonna be *good*. Jaden needs a woman who can put up with him when he floats away in dreamland. That's where he is now. Only the wedding matters; he's not thinking about the obligations he has.

"Why you gotta be so fucking difficult wit' me, huh?!" Jaden hollers.

Finn does some beatboxing thing. "If you're having girl problems, I feel bad for you, son," he raps.

Dylan and I go all silly and scratch the proverbial records like we're DJs behind a turntable. "I got 99 problems, but a bitch ain't one!" we shout before cracking up.

"Nice, Ma," Finn says with a wink.

I blow him a kiss, and that's pretty much when Haley and Jaden appear, both looking furious.

They freeze when they spot us, and Haley looks both flustered and embarrassed, but I can tell she won't back down from a fight just because we're here. That's good. All my boys will need women with big balls. Okay, that sounded all weird, but whatever. It's still true.

Amused and intrigued, I put on a solemn expression, wave a hand in their direction with a flourish, and say, "Proceed. Don't mind us."

Jaden gives me a bitchy look before facing Haley again. "I'm gonna cancel the show."

"The *fuck* you are!" Ooh, Haley's good. "You're just gonna regret it!"

"What do you know about it?" my son shoots back. "And why are you making me look like the bad guy, huh? Is it so fucking bad I just wanna focus on our wedding right now?"

No, but sometimes you can have the cake and eat it, too. His gig is the twelfth, I think, and he can easily fly down there before making his way back here to the wedding on the fifteenth.

"I'm not making you the bad guy," Haley spits out. "I'm just saying—I mean, you've been looking forward to the Philly show, and when I suggested you could fly down with the guys, have your bachelor party there, you just flipped!"

"I like her idea," I say, nodding and turning to Finn. "Wouldn't that be fun, baby?" I squeeze Dylan's hand; the question was meant for him, too.

'Cause if Edward's going with them, I trust him to take care of Dylan. Finn, though only sixteen, can take better care of himself, but my sweetheart's only fourteen. There's no way I'd let him—or Finn for that matter, really—go to Philly without adult supervision.

"That'd be cool," Finn replies casually, and Dylan agrees.

"Can youse shut up?" Jaden snaps at us.

"OH!" we shout.

I continue. "Watch your mouth, son. You have a room where you can fight. Don't storm down here where we're already sittin' and tell us to shut up! Gabeesh?"

"Word," Dylan mumbles, being my little cutie.

"Yo, what's your problem?" Finn bitches with Jaden. "Stop talkin' outta'ya vagina and do the Philly show—then we'll be back two days before the wedding. Simple as that." He wipes his hands clean.

Jaden groans. "You just don't fucking get it—"

"Enlighten us then, dammit!" Haley hollers.

"Go Haley, go Haley—go, go, go Haley," I cheer.

That earns me a glare from Jaden. "Who's side are you on, huh?"

"Yours, baby." I blow him a kiss.

"What's with the shouting down here?" Aaaand that'd be Edward joining us. His stare flicks between Haley and Jaden, and then he smiles. "Are you breaking up?"

"Daddy!" Haley glares.

"What the fuck is wrong wit'chu?" I ask him, cocking a brow.

He shrugs and comes over to sit down next to Finn. "Just asking. So... what's going on?"

Jaden and Haley speak over each other, telling Edward basically nothing about why and how, only that they're in disagreement about Jaden's Philadelphia show in a few days. In the meantime, I just sit back and listen...and ogle Edward's fine self.

"Huh," is his clever response once the kids are done. "Well...whaddya know?"

I nod and grin. "Nice. Good response."

He smirks. "Did you have a better one?"

"Hell, yeah," I giggle. "I cheered for your daughter."

"Mom," Jaden groans. "Stay outta this."

"Then don't fucking involve me." I point to my chest. "We clear on that?"

"Actually—" he ignores me and faces Edward "—can I speak to you in private, Mr. C?"

Edward looks to me, as if asking permission—or maybe he's just confused—but I shrug, not knowing what's got my son's panties in a bunch.

"Sure," he says, standing up. And Edward disappears with Jaden.

"Well, that was fun," I comment.

{16}

December 7th

EPOV

"So, lemme get this straight, Dad," Logan says, folding his arms over his chest. "Not only did you fail to break up Haley and Jaden—like I said you would—but now you're in charge of Jaden's bachelor party? *And* Haley's leaving for the city on Monday *with* Ms. McCarty?"

I rub the back of my neck, peeking behind Logan to see Isabella, Dylan, Haley, and my father talking in the lobby with Maggie. Uncle Masen is seated by the fire, shouting things he wants in his room, which includes a heating pad 'cause his ass tends to get cold sometimes.

"Things didn't really work out as planned," I admit.

Logan smirks. "Yeah, no shit."

I could glare, scowl, or bitch, but I'm a little distracted by what Isabella changed into while I was picking up Logan, Dad, and Uncle Masen at the airport.



Because now she's wearing this purple dress, and...Jesus Christ, those tits! Hell, even my own father is staring. But Isabella doesn't seem to notice that her body could stop traffic. She's happily chatting away with my family, which, I have to say, feels...good. Very good—and she's even getting along with them as if they've known each other longer than twenty minutes. Dad's cracking his tasteless jokes and Isabella's laughing.

"Dad—Christ!" Logan hisses.

My eyes snap to his. "What?"

He gives me a look. "Don't 'what' me, old man. Is there..." He huffs and looks over his shoulder. Then back to me, and he lowers his voice. "Is there something going on between you and Ms. McCarty?"

"NO!" I shout.

Yeah, that sure got me everyone's attention.

"Did someone say somethin'?! " Uncle Masen yells.

Isabella smiles curiously at me, those red and pouty lips another distraction, but I kinda snap out of it and start panicking instead. 'Cause *shit*.

"What's up, son?!" Dad shouts...even though we're only ten feet away.

"What was that?!" Uncle Masen cups his ear. "Carlisle! Did Edward say something?!"

Rolling my eyes, I ignore them and drag Logan into the pub. I can hear Jaden and Finn in the kitchen, talking to Maggie's son who's getting our dinner ready.

"Now, you listen to me, son." I'm going for stern, but maybe I'm failing. "I don't know what you're talking about, but you keep shit like that to yourself. Am I making myself clear?" I cock a brow.

My son smirks that smirk he inherited from yours truly. "She shot you down, huh?"

I blanch. "Wh-what?"

He pats my shoulder. "I understand, Dad. Ms. McCarty's certainly a MILF, but-"

"Stoptalkingrightnow," I blurt out quickly and clamp a hand over his mouth. "Jesus Christ, just stop talking, Logan." I blow out a breath and look up at the ceiling. A part of me wants to brag and tell my son that not only have I slept with Isabella once, but I've slept with her twice. The geek in me grins smugly, adjusts his glasses, holds up two fingers for emphasis, and mouths, "score". Although, the second time was not so much sleeping together as it was I-gotta-claim-you-right-fucking-now-against-the-door. But that's another story, in which the villains are all the

men Isabella "knows." Jealousy just took over—not my fault. And...that other part of me...well, he wants Logan to shut up because I want more with Isabella. Yeah, I fucking said it.

"Say no more," Logan says solemnly. "I'll keep your crush a secret."

I let out a weird noise, kinda wanting to punch my own little trooper in the fucking face, but...

I can be mature.

I think.

"Logan Carlisle Cullen," I start softly and squeeze his shoulder, "I love you with all my heart, but...get the hell out of my sight. Okay?"

He snorts a laugh. "Sure. See ya later, Pop."

I sigh.

~oOo~

"Are you gonna tell me what you and my son spoke about?" Isabella asks quietly, coming to stand next to me by the bar. I chuckle and take a sip from my scotch. "Yeah, don't think you've fooled me, Cullen." She smirks and playfully swats my chest. "You've avoided me."

I push up my glasses. "No, I haven't." Okay, so I have. But Jaden made me promise not to say a word about December 12th, and while I plan on keeping my promise, I don't know how to do that when it comes to Isabella. 'Cause I have a feeling she can detect lies miles away.

"Liar."

See?

"I'm not telling," I insist, glancing around us. Thankfully, everyone is occupied. Here in the pub, we're all spread out now after dinner. Logan is, surprisingly, talking to Jaden, and it looks like they're making an effort to get along, and Haley is there, too. A couple booths away, Finn and my father are laughing about something. And Uncle Masen seems to be teaching Dylan card tricks while they're on their fourth or fifth rounds of dessert.

"You're actually sharing a secret with *my* son," Isabella states, whispering, and points to her chest. Her eyes show amusement, surprise, and disbelief. "My son who is marrying *your* daughter—a fact you still seem to despise."

I laugh through my nose and look over at Haley and Jaden. "I guess I'm changing my mind," I admit quietly. Truth be told, I'm not thrilled they're getting married, but if it has to be someone? Then, yes, Jaden McCarty is the one. What he told me earlier kind of blew my mind, and I suppose I have a newfound respect for him. "The only thing I'm going to tell you is not to push him about his show on the twelfth."

"Really?" She scrunches her nose.

I nod. "Really."

"That's all you're gonna say?"

"Yes," I chuckle and look down at her. "Jaden has a plan."

"One you approve of?" she presses.

"One I approve of," I confirm.

"Hmm."

I shake my head in amusement at her expression, leaning my elbows on the bar top behind me. "You're thinking hard there, Ms. McCarty."

"I'm curious." She shrugs and lifts her wine glass to her lips. After taking a sip, she adds, "Okay, beyond curious. You're really gonna hold out on me?"

"Yep." I give one of her loose curls a little tug.

"MOM! MR. C!" I hear Dylan shout. He runs over to us, an excited grin on his face, and my uncle is following with his cane. That "Mr. C" thing has really stuck, I see. I've told them they can call me Edward, but... "I gotta show you what Masen taught me." He's holding a deck of cards. "Pick a card—any card." I smile. As do Isabella as she pulls a card from the deck. "Don't show it to me," he says quickly. "Just memorize it."

"Okay," she giggles, flashing me the ace of spades as I dip down to see.

"You got it?" Dylan asks.

Isabella and I nod firmly, humoring him, and the card is returned, which Dylan not-so-subtly checks before stacking it into the deck again. And this means he did it wrong; he's supposed to check the card in the deck on top of which our card goes.

This is Uncle Masen's thing—card tricks, and they all suck. But I remember when I was fourteen. I was just like Dylan, completely awestruck when my uncle succeeded in guessing my every card.

"Now you shuffle 'em, kid," Uncle Masen instructs Dylan. Pretty loudly, by the way. There are only three settings on Dad and my uncle: loud, louder, and loudest. Though, Masen's not as stubborn as my father because he actually uses his hearing aid from time to time. Dad does not. He says it's for pussies.

"Is this the card?" Dylan triumphantly holds up the ace of spades.

"How did you know?!" Isabella gasps theatrically.

I cringe, 'cause that was really bad. She's not an actress.

Dylan noticed it, too, and he scowls. "You suck, Ma."

I frown.

"OH!" Uncle Masen shouts. "You kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"Yeah, what he said." Isabella huffs, agreeing with my uncle. "You're the one who sucks, baby."

Well, that's one way to go, I guess...?

"All right, let's not fight." I pretend to be a peacemaker and throw an arm around Dylan's shoulders. "Say you're sorry, kiddo."

He stares up at me.

Right. I turn to Isabella. "Say you're sorry, Isabella."

She stares up at me.

"Okaaaay," I say, dragging out the word. "You two suck."

"YOU suck!" both McCartys yell at me.

Defeated, I look to Uncle Masen, but he just laughs and walks away.

"C'mere, my sweetheart." Isabella pulls Dylan close, and he's always ready to hug his mother. So, maybe I'm a little jealous. Whatever. "I love you."

"Love you, too." Dylan takes a step back and shuffles his cards again. "I'm gonna go practice." He walks away. "Yo, Finn! Lemme show you something."

With a sigh of contentment, I lean back against the bar again.

"What was that foah?" Isabella asks curiously.

"What?" My brows knit together.

"That sound. The way you sighed." She steps a little closer, our arms touching.

I smile at her perceptiveness. "I like this," I admit. Keeping my gaze locked with hers, I know she understands what I mean. *All* of this—not just this moment, tonight, the dinner we all shared...

"Me too," she whispers. "Um." She peeks at something behind me. "Okay, it's almost midnight..." She trails off with a meaningful look, half-questioning and half-pleading.

Silly woman. She never has to plead with me.

"It's been a long day," I comment, keeping my voice low. I set my scotch aside. "Maybe it's time to...?" I arch one brow.

The left corner of her mouth quirks up. "Yeah, I'm getting pretty tired."

"Yeah..." I swallow and my eyes drop to her mouth. "Time for bed?"

"Fuck yes," she breathes out.

"Jesus." I scrub my hands over my face, and then I lean down and whisper in her ear. "Say your goodnights, beautiful. My room—ten minutes."

She nods quickly, cheeks flushing.

{17}

December 10th

BPOV

"More," I whimper, throwing my head back against the pillow.

He drives into me forcefully as he sucks on my neck, kisses my throat, and nips at my jaw. My nails dig into his back, my legs are tangled with his, and his grunts are driving me in-fucking-sane.

"Oh, yeah," he moans and crashes his mouth to mine. "How the hell am I gonna go 'til Thursday to see—" he grits his teeth, slamming into my soaked pussy—"to see you again? Fuck!" We both groan and moan as we chase our climaxes, hands pawing, fingers digging in, and teeth fucking biting. God, we're all over each other, and then I'm suddenly on top, riding him while he sucks on my nipples. "Isabella," he pants and cups my cheek. Unable to speak, I kiss him hard and push myself down on him.

"Close," I cry out and bury my face in the crook of his neck. He keeps rubbing my clit and massaging my tits; he's the most attentive lover I've ever had. "Damn, damn, damn..." I roll my hips, placing my hands on his thighs behind me, and tilt my head back. God, so close, so close. "I'm gonna—*ungh*..." It feels like my entire body flushes, a light sheen of sweat covering both our bodies. Pushing forward again, I weave my fingers through the hair on the back of his neck, and I drop my forehead to his. "Oh, *God*." My mouth feels all dry, making it hard to speak, but it feels like I'm gonna burst if I don't tell him. Right now. "Gonna miss—I'm gonna miss you," I gasp into his neck, heart thundering in my chest. "Oh, *Edward*..."

"*Fuck, sweetheart!*" he all but growls, bucking his hips upward, and I sink down. That's my undoing, and it comes as a shock. "So gorgeous..." My lips parted and eyes squeezed shut, I fall apart completely in his arms. The pleasure assaults me from every angle, rendering me breathless and useless. I'm outta control, just riding out the waves of heat.

I'm vaguely aware of Edward coming, and I register the fact that I'm clamping down as hard as I can on his thick cock, but it's nothing I'm doing consciously.

It sounds like someone's chanting "Oh my God", and yeah, I realize it's me.

"Shit, I think I need a nap," Edward pants. "Does...does that make me sound old?"

I giggle out of breath. "We just woke up."

"I know—Jesus. I suck."

Still breathing hard, I laugh and lift my head to face him. "Actually, didn't I wake up you up by sucking?"

He nods and kisses my nose, a smirk forming on his perfect lips. "Sucking *on* something, though. Not *at* something. There's a difference." He's too cute sometimes. "Beautiful." He kisses me again, this time on my lips, and he gently cups my breasts in his hands and pushes them together. "Fuck, how am I supposed to say goodbye to you?" He's speaking to my tits.

"They won't talk back, you know," I say airily. "It'd be a cool trick, though."

"Um, sure." He's too distracted, kissing my chest and farther down. I wonder, if he'd been in his twenties, would his cock be hardening inside me right now? In that case, thank God he's forty-two. 'Cause I'm beat.

This past weekend...damn, we've taken every opportunity we could. Women in their thirties are in their prime when it comes to sex; this is a fact. And men are in their prime in their early twenties. However, Edward has confessed to me that he hasn't been with a woman in four years or something, so it's been like waking up a beast. Therefore, when we haven't been socializing and getting to know each other's families, we've found ourselves escaping to either his room or mine.

"I'm kinda surprised you're sticking around up here," I mention, watching my fingers as they disappear into his soft hair. First the reddish brown with grey at his temples, then his slightly longer hair at the top. And boy, does Edward like it. He hums and groans and closes his eyes whenever I scratch his scalp.

"What's another week?" he counters with a small shrug. "I can write anywhere, and Dad and Masen just arrived, so..."

"I love your father and uncle," I chuckle. This weekend has really been a lotta fun. After learning that both Carlisle and Masen were actually born and raised in Brooklyn, I was a little surprised at first since Edward is so different from them. I mean, he's a New Yorker; he's loud. But he's Manhattan-loud, which Carlisle explained is because they moved to Manhattan before Edward was even born. So, there you go. Manhattan can't compete with Brooklyn, Staten Island, Jersey...*come on*.

"They love you, too," Edward says softly, kissing his way up my neck. I guess he's done with my breasts for the time being. "Hmmm..." He hugs me tightly, pressing our chests together. "What time is it?"

A yawn slips out as I check the clock on the nightstand. "Almost seven-fifteen." That sucks. I gotta leave for the airport at eight. "Haley's probably up already." Finn and Dylan are probably not, though, so I really do need to get up.

Edward grimaces. "Please don't bring up my daughter when I'm still inside of you, okay?"

"Gotcha," I giggle and kiss his stubbly chin. "I should get up and take a shower." Not only is sex with Edward like the most amazing and spectacular work-out, but now that we're not using condoms, I'm the one who has to leave the bed to clean up.

That was a fun conversation we had on Saturday, by the way—about safe sex. Shit, I broke down in giggles two sentences into Edward's stammering about "previous partners", as he so *doctorally* called it.

He had thought that all the occasions I said "I know a guy" or "I gotta guy", I was talking about lovers.

Please.

Every Jersey girl knows a guy, but it has nothing to do with sex.

Edward had been frustrated to the point where he pulled me up to my room and asked me how much I dated. Kudos to him—he still phrased himself like a gentleman, stammering included...so a stammering gentleman? Then, through my wine-induced giggles, I told him it had been about eight months since I last had sex.

That calmed him down, and I added that I'm clean and that I get the shot.

Which led to a possessive Edward who, and I quote, said, "I wanna fuck you stupid without anything in the way."

He did.

"Shower," I sing when Edward hasn't responded.

"Not yet," he huffs and holds me tighter.

I'm about to call him adorable, but my phone chirps before I can, so I reach over to my nightstand and check the message. "Oh!" It's Eric, my assistant, and he has sent me a picture of Jaden and Haley's wedding invitation. Putting together a wedding in a week and a half ain't a piece of cake, but if you have enough connections and enough money, it's definitely possible. It was just yesterday that I did this with my assistant on the phone and designed the invitations, the place cards, the menu...all things paper, basically. "You wanna see our children's invitation?" I hold up my phone for Edward.



"Hmm?" He looks up from my tits. "Oh." He smiles. "That looks good. You really did all that yesterday?"

I nod and look down at the display again. "Yep." With so little time, we had to go with simplicity, but I think Haley and I pulled it off. The color theme will be vanilla white, dark red, and moss green—a Christmas wedding, but without *too* much Christmas. "Eric's gonna FedEx them

today." I'm gonna be late if I don't get up now, so I reluctantly leave Edward's lap and get off the bed, putting on my satin robe. "The invites will reach our families tomorrow."

Edward chuckles, a far cry from his earlier responses to anything relating his baby girl getting hitched, and sprawls out on the bed, the sheet only covering his delicious cock. *Whatta shame*. As for the evident amusement...sex has mellowed him, I think.

"I guess I'll have my sister calling me later tomorrow, then."

I widen my eyes. "Tell me about it. My sister-in-law is gonna *freak*." Rose is crazy overprotective of my sons, kind of like Emmett is overprotective of me, kind of like my sons are overprotective of Rose and Emmett's children, kind of like my sons are overprotective of me...the list goes on, really.

It's hard to believe that we'll all be gathered here on Friday, just a few days from now.

~oOo~

"Ma, you're a fucking goof," Jaden chuckles, hugging me to him. I only heard him since the music in my earbuds is pretty low, but, regardless, I ignore him and keep shaking my bootylicious ass to Lady Gaga. Which causes my son to let go of me.

After two quick espressos, I'm all jacked up on caffeine, so yeah, maybe I'm acting like an idiot. But what else am I gonna do while I wait for the rest of the kids to get ready, huh? Exactly.

My Louis Vuitton luggage is packed and waiting by the door here in the lobby, I'm dressed in skinny jeans, my ankle boots, and one of Finn's huge Giants hoodies, my hair is pulled up in a ponytail, my makeup is light, and I'm ready to get back to the city with Finn, Dylan, Logan, and

Haley. My youngest boys have school, as does Logan, and Haley and I have a lotta wedding business to get done. I also have some work that I can't postpone anymore. So, now I have three days to get some shit outta the way before we head back up here on Friday. Well, Logan is flying up again on Thursday, and Haley...well, according to Jaden and Edward—who still won't tell me about the secrecy going on—she's being picked up in the city on Wednesday night.

It's a fucking mess, but whatever. I'm ready to power through it, and then on Friday when everyone is here, there will be two parties. A bachelor party for Jaden and a bachelorette party for Haley.

"MOM!" I hear three boys shout.

"*What?*" I shout back, trying to calm my heart. Removing my earbuds, I see that they're all leaning against the lobby counter, smirking at me. "I swear!" I wave my fist at them. "You can't fucking scare me like that!"

Just then, Haley and Logan descend the stairs.

Haley's dressed like me, I realize, only she's wearing one of Jaden's hoodies.

"What'cha listening to, Bella?" She skips over to me, leaving her luggage for Logan to deal with.

I grin and hand her one of my earbuds.

She's my new BFF. In a bed and breakfast with seven boys, men, and old farts, us girls gotta stick together.

At my age, according to Finn and Jaden, you can only have BFFs if they're kids or they're gay. So, I have Haley, my daughter-in-law-to-be, and Eric, my flamboyant assistant.

"Oooh, this is a great song," she comments excitedly.

I definitely agree. "I bought her album on iTunes last night," I say, scrolling down on my iPhone 'til I reach my favorite Gaga song. "Just Dance" starts to play, and Haley bobs her head in—well, either to the beat or in agreement. And since I'm still flying high on my two espressos, I return to acting like a teenager. It's sad, really.

"I've had a little bit too much, much," we sing and bump hips. "All of the people start to rush, start to rush by." With the proverbial microphones raised, we have the boys laughing in no time, but we pay them no mind. Sometimes you just gotta be silly. "How does he twist the dance?" We keep singing, though as a woman I can do multitask, and I can't help but smile when I notice Jaden and Logan standing together. I like that Logan seems to fit in with us, too. "Can't find a drink, oh man... Where are my keys? I lost my phone, phone."

While Haley and I dip low and sing to the chorus, I see that Edward has joined the boys, too, and he's currently looking very amused next to Dylan. I stick out my tongue at him, and he whispers something to my youngest, to which Dylan bowls over in laughter. Then I get the Edward Cullen wink. *Yum.*

Since we're all finally gathered, not counting Carlisle and Masen, it's time to stop and get to the airport.

"Whew!" I place a hand on my chest and tuck away the earbuds. "That was a workout." Haley and I walk over to the boys; she's giggling like mad, and I can feel that my cheeks are flushed from the excitement of the morning. "Everyone ready to go?"

"Shotgun!" Dylan shouts and runs out with his bag.

Right.

A few minutes later, we're all standing outside in the freezing cold.

"That's the last of it," Edward says, slamming the trunk closed. I thank him and do a quick headcount; Dylan's in the front, Finn, Logan, and Haley in the back. And Jaden is wearing a sad face because he'll be here. Ah, to be young and in love. But then I sorta glance up at Edward who's walking toward me, and...

I smile a little to myself, 'cause I can see it happening now.

"You deserve a medal for traveling with all these yahoos," Edward chuckles, briefly touching my arm. It's not much, just a graze with his knuckles over my forearm, and yet it means a lot to me.

"Eh." I shrug and grin up at him. "If I can handle Finn, I can handle 'em all. On our way up here? Yeah, Finn was pulled aside when the metal detector went off, and he was like, 'Oh, that's just my abs of steel, sweetheart.'" A woman would've never searched him, but she was the one who took him aside, and my little juicehead didn't waste time. "It was just his belt, though," I finish in afterthought.

Edward just smiles down at me.

"What?" I ask.

He shakes his head, smile widening. "You're just..." Peering over my head, he looks to be calculating. I look behind me, too, spotting Jaden ten feet away or so busy on his phone. "You're just beautiful," Edward whispers in my ear. I shiver—not from the cold. "And when you return on Friday, I look forward to more dancing."

He makes me giggle and feel like a school girl with a crush on her teacher.

"Lady Gaga style?" I ask.

He scrunches his nose. "Let's think about it."

"Okay," I laugh. "So, what're you gonna do now?"

"*Mom!*" Finn yells from inside the car—all muffled. He bangs on the window, too. "*We gotta go!*"

"Shut up!" I shout back, and then I face Edward again with a smile. "You were saying?"

He chuckles. "Uh, I'm just gonna write. Spend some time with Jaden..." He trails off with a shrug. "I wish that kid was awful—it'd be easier to hate him."

"You're saying this to said kid's mother?" I smirk.

"That, Ms. McCarty, was a fucking compliment." He grins and gives a strand of my hair a tug. "I like him."

I beam at him.

"Hurry back to me," he whispers.

There goes my heart. "Miss me, please?"

"You know I will."

I won't cry. I won't cry. "Fuck." My eyes get all misty.

"Hey..." He's about to take a step toward me, but he catches himself and grimaces. "You're not allowed to get soft on me, Isabella. That's not you."

I chuckle and sniffle at the same time. "Um." I hold my belly, nervous, and look down. "I know we haven't talked about, um..." Us. We haven't talked about *us*. And I kinda want to—even though we're gonna be late. Fuck, I really have perfect timing, don't I?

"Isabella?"

I suck in a breath and look up.

He smiles softly. "This was never casual, sweetheart," he murmurs. "We do need to talk, but until then...unofficially official?"

"Yes," I breathe out, smiling so wide.

{18}

December 12th

BPOV



God, she's gorgeous. In the middle of my loft studio, Haley stands still, wearing her dress, as two women work on the final touches. The sun filters through, making her look as if she's glowing.

"She's beautiful," Logan comments quietly.

I smile to myself and bring my champagne glass to my lips.

It's taken a while, but Logan is definitely coming around. Like Haley, he can be a bit of a spoiled brat—okay, that's an understatement; they're both spoiled *rotten*, but...they're still sweethearts. Since we got back to the city, he's accompanied his sister to every appointment, not counting yesterday morning when I took her to a day spa or when he's had classes. And if there's one thing I've learned about Logan, it's that he's actually fiercely protective of his father. Being protective of Haley is one thing, but Edward? That's a whole other matter, one I find very sweet.

It's been difficult to get him to open up, but as a photographer I'd like to say I'm pretty good at reading people, capturing their feelings...and so on. So, yeah, I've definitely noticed him.



"It comes with your gene pool, honey," I chuckle and stand up. My studio is wide open, and aside from a small kitchenette and seating area—which is where I am with Logan right now—the place is empty. Well, it's packed with my studio equipment, obviously. Walking across the hardwood floors, I pick up my Canon and decide to snap off another few shots for Haley and Jaden's wedding album.

"What do you think, Bella?" Haley asks nervously, smoothing down her dress.

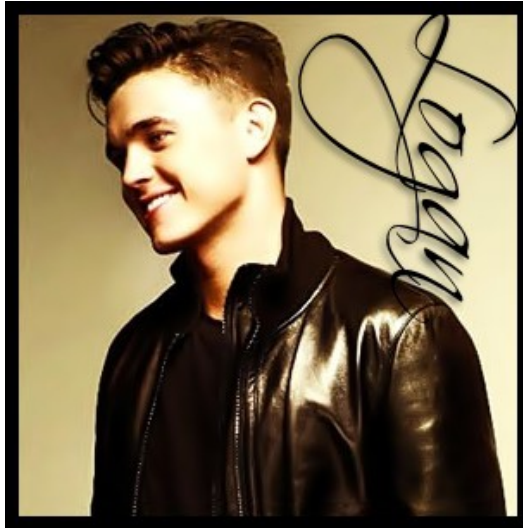


"It's perfect, sweetheart." I take a picture just as she ducks her head and smiles softly. *Beautiful*. "But your opinion matters more, you know." I lower my camera.

"I love it," she whispers. "I really do." Behind me, I hear Logan walking over, too. "What do you think?" She looks to her brother with hope in her eyes.

That's another thing I've noticed. Logan's opinion is important to Haley.

"It's beautiful," Logan says with a dip of his chin. He smirks. "Dad's gonna cry."



I can't help but laugh at that, and I sure as hell hope I get to see it.

Damn. I will cry, too.

This is really happening.

Blowing out a shaky breath, I pull out my phone and decide to text Edward, whom I didn't expect to miss as much as I do. It's crazy how much he's wormed his way into my heart, and just waking up without him now sucks.

Before I can type, I see that I already have three texts waiting. Two from Edward...

I just dropped off Jaden at the airport. He will pick up Haley at your place at six PM. The inn is empty without you and our kids, by the way. -E

"Aww," I whisper, feeling all mushy. This was from two hours ago, and then the next twenty minutes ago.

Both Finn and Dylan are texting me about Jaden's party on Friday. I'm popular! In other news, my sister will be here with her family on Saturday morning. -E

I chuckle and read the text Eric sent me before replying to Edward.

Paris and French Vogue confirmed for January 25th. You'll be back for your DKNY meeting on the 29th. I'll send itinerary. –Your humble servant, Eric.

"Humble, my ass," I giggle-snort. But this is cool. I thought my trip to Paris was gonna wreck my schedule. If you're into fashion, you know what New York is like in January and February. Fashion Week, is all I'm saying. The preparations are endlessly long, and the main event is a heart attack and a half.

Returning my attention to Edward, I reply to his texts.

One, I can't believe you still haven't told me what Jaden's surprise for tonight is. Two, text Finn and Dylan and tell them they're not allowed to use their phones during school hours! Three, I miss you something crazy. Four, Haley looks gorgeous in her wedding dress. –B

After firing off that text, I look up to see Haley and Logan speaking quietly to each other, and since they're being so freaking cute, I wanna show it to Edward. With my phone, I manage to snap two pictures of them, and then I attach them to a text and write a short message.

You know how to make cute children. –B

~oOo~

"Okay." I grab a pizza slice and look down at my phone. Logan and Haley are sitting on the couch here in my living room, both ready. "The dress?"

"Your assistant is bringing it on Saturday," Haley answers.

I nod, slowly pacing the floor while eating my pizza, and read the next item on my list. "Guest list?"

Logan has this one. "Masen Junior can't make it. Same goes for Dad's editor and his family—they're in Italy."

"The food?" I ask, though I answer it myself. "Carmine has prepared a lot in Jersey, and he'll do the rest when he comes up to Vermont with his staff. Good. Flowuhs?"

"Eric will bring my bouquet, and the rest is being shipped," Haley says with a nod.

"Place cards? Menus?"

"It's all on your kitchen table," she replies.

"Mom!" Finn shouts from...I don't know, his room? Since they'll be missing more school with the wedding business, he and Dylan are going to hand in a special project at school tomorrow—they've both been at it since we got back to the city.

"What?!" I shout back. "Okay, what's next...um, suits, shoes?" I look to Logan.

"I'm picking up Dad's stuff before I fly up tomorrow. My own, too."

And I'm packing my sons' suits, I note from my list. Good. Okay. Things are coming together just fine. Good. Fuck. I miss Edward. I check my watch; it's almost time for Jaden to pick up Haley.

"I'm done with all homework, Ma!" Finn—another round of shouting.

"Congratulations!" Unable to help myself, like some junkie, I type out a quick text to Edward. The phone was already in my hand, you know. Seemed like a shame to waste it.

I miss you, I miss you, I miss you. –B

I cringe right after I've sent it, hoping he won't think I'm lame. Or clingy.

"You don't get it," Finn groans, stomping into the living room. When I look up, he's standing there with the saddest face I've ever seen. "Do you love me?"

I narrow my eyes. "What do you want?"

He and Logan exchange a quick look, of which I'm instantly suspicious.

"What?" I tap my foot and fold my arms over my chest. "What's with youse?"

"Dee and I wanna fly up to Vermont tomorrow instead of Friday," Finn blurts out. "Logan's going. We could go wit' him."

Oh...

I puff out my cheeks, debating with myself. I shouldn't. They want to. They rarely miss school. School is very important. They never really beg for stuff. They work hard. Good grades. Ugh.

"It's fine with me," Logan adds quietly.

They haven't even brought out the heavy artillery yet. If Finn has really set his mind to something, this is how he starts, and if I say no, he'll bring out Dylan.

Dylan has the puppy-dog eyes—what can I say?

Regardless, I'm already caving, so...

I wave a hand. "Fine. I'll call the airline."

Finn fist-pumps the air, Logan chuckles, Haley giggles, and I hear Dylan cheering down the hall.

I suck.

Isn't it the parent's job to make their children miserable?

Well, here my kids are, all happy and shit.

And so am I when I read Edward's response.

I miss you, too, sweetheart. More than words can say, and I'm an author. Hurry back to me. -E

~oOo~

"You're really not gonna tell your own mommy?" I put my hands on my hips and give Jaden the sternest eyes ever. It's just us in the hallway—Haley's busy making a playlist for the reception; she didn't hear him come in—so I fail to see why my oldest son can't just tell me already.

"Mr. C can tell you," he chuckles and kisses me on the forehead. "Stop with the look!"

"I asked Edward—" I point to my chest and huff in frustration "—but he refused to tell me."

"That was before," he responds and takes off his leather jacket. "He can tell you as soon as Haley and I have left. And speaking of my fiancée, is she around?"

I sigh and jerk my chin toward the living room. "But before you go, can you tell me what you've been up to this week?" I gotta say I'm surprised he didn't come to the city with us. Instead he opted to stay behind with Edward, Carlisle, and Masen. He also said he had some stuff to take care of.

"I chilled with Mr. C," he says with a shrug. Then he grins. "He's actually a cool guy. A little dry at first, but... Oh, and Carlisle and Masen are fuckin' hilarious."

I smile up at my boy. "That's nice. Anything else?"

He nods. "I had a few phone interviews. Some German music magazine... and I spoke to Emmett and the guys—we're all good. It'll be nice to see everyone on Friday."

I definitely agree. While Rose and Emmett are still shocked about Jaden's nuptials, they wouldn't miss his wedding for anything in the world.

"So, that's two shows cancelled," I mention. "What happens after the wedding?"

"We don't have another gig planned 'til after New Year's," he reminds me.

"Okay, after New Year's, then?" I need to know that he and Haley are up for this. Our families are already meshed together, and not just because Edward and I are now unofficially official. The weekend we all recently spent together in Vermont resulted in some weird groupings. Finn and Dylan, for instance, can't get enough of Edward's father and uncle. Jaden and Logan have somehow buried the hatchet and are now pretty close. Haley and *I* are close. And Dylan told me just yesterday that he liked Edward as soon as Edward had stopped being "uncool."

"Mom," he murmurs and puts his hands on my shoulders. He also dips down a little so we're face-to-face. This is his I-gotta-reason-wit'chu-or-calm-you-down-now-Ma expression. "I may have said I've been in love in the past, but...I've been so fucking wrong. With Haley? I want it all. I don't see a fuckin' fairytale—I see fights, dirty dishes, and I imagine her yelling at me to put the toilet seat down." I smile, getting a bit emotional. "I see us making sacrifices, I see us compromising, I see us maturing together,

and I see us, you know, one day...old as fuck together. I love her so much, Mom."

"Oh, Christ." I sniffle.

He grins and brushes his thumbs under my eyes. "She's it for me."

I nod and hug his waist. "I believe you, baby."

{19}

December 13th

EPOV

Over the past few days, I've learned one thing about big families.

Plans. Change.

A lot.

Often.

Flowers, food, music, clothes—God, the *clothes*—menus, confirming orders, footing bills, signing for deliveries, picking up stuff in town, buying new shoes because there happened to be a scuff on the old ones—that's all Finn—and...I could go on and on. And this is only wedding-related crap. There's also Finn and Dylan coming up earlier, Dad and Masen bitching about the draft in their rooms, getting calls from Alice reminding me that JJ—her oldest—is allergic to peanuts, as if I didn't already know... He's my godson, for chrissakes. Then more travel plans change. Alice and Jasper were supposed to come up with the kids on Saturday, but that changed when Jasper managed to get off work on Thursday, so they're coming sooner—Friday morning. Isabella called me a few hours ago and told me her brother and sister-in-law were driving and were already on their way. Two children included. Another change: Jaden and Haley will return a little

later on Friday than planned. Oh, and I firmly believe Isabella's assistant already has me on speed dial. He's been calling a lot to confirm shit.

"We better hurry, boys," I say, checking my watch. The caterer will arrive soon, and I need to be back at the inn for that. But right now, after having picked up Logan, Finn, and Dylan at the airport, we're shoe shopping.

Good times.

But you know what? When you've endured buying tampons for your thirteen-year-old daughter in the middle of the night, there's very little that could kill you.

Don't get me started on the sex talk. Logan, that was easy, but Haley... Actually, I couldn't tell you, 'cause when that day arrived, I made sure my sister was in the neighborhood.

And I was *out* of the neighborhood.

In a galaxy far, far away.

"What about these?" Finn points down to the pair of Nikes he's wearing.

"I...I don't think they'll go with your suit, Finn," I answer patiently.

"Yo, they're black." He widens his arms. "Black shoes, black suit."

Dylan and Logan snicker in the background.

I offer a tight-lipped smile and pull out my phone. Then I scroll down 'til I reach Isabella's name and waste no time calling her.

What I'm met with is a shouting Isabella; however, she's not shouting in English. I'm used to *that* one, but this... Jesus Christ, she's shouting in French. Fluent fucking French. "*J'en sais rien, mais c'est pas grave! On se voit en janvier, on réglerà ça à ce moment là— Oui, je serai là le vingt-*

cinq— Ok, toi aussi, chouchou. A plus!" I'd say she's on the phone, but then again, she's on the phone with *me*. Although, maybe she's one of those important people who needs two phones. With a huff, she finally addresses me instead. *"I'm so sorry about that, Edward. I've just been swamped with work and final preparations for the wedding."* She lets out a gust of air, and I try to will down my cock, which evidently has a thing for French. Who knew? Finn, Dylan, Logan. Finn, Dylan, Logan. Finn, Dyl- There we go. *"What can I do for you, hon?"*

She sounds so tired, and I make a mental note to make sure she knows how amazing she is, has been, and...yeah. She's really gone above and beyond for Haley and Jaden.

Mental note number two: tell Isabella she's welcome to speak French any time.

Any. Time.

"Well, I'm out buying shoes with the boys," I say carefully. "And the pair Finn is trying on..."

"Oh, I swear to Christ!" she shouts. *"Put him on. He's wearing Jordans, isn't he? God—he's just like Dylan. Finn!"* I flinch away from the phone and hold it up; I'm sure the boys can hear her. *"If you're wearing sneakers, then I'm willing to bet ten G's you're in the wrong fucking stoah! You hear me, son?!"*

Finn cringes and looks down. "Fine..."

"What was that?!" Isabella yells.

"I said fine!" Finn throws his hands up.

"Edward!" Isabella yells next.

My eyebrows shoot up, and I wonder what the hell *I* did wrong. "Uh, yeah?" I bring the phone cautiously to my ear.

"What store are you in?" I imagine her tapping her foot or something.

I clear my throat. "Champs Sports?"

"Right." She blows out a breath. *"And what...in God's name...made you believe you'd find dress shoes in there, Edward?"*

Um.

Before I can say anything else and probably, most likely, definitely, embarrass myself further, Logan steps forward and takes the phone from me.

"Bella, it's Logan. We—yeah?" He pauses to listen. The kid actually stole my phone. "Downtown, got it." When did he get so chummy with Isabella, I wonder. "No, just send the directions to my phone instead." He chuckles at whatever she says, and I can hear her laughing, too. Just great. "Okay, see ya later." He hands me the phone again. "She wants to talk to you."

With a scowl, I snatch it from his hand. "What the fuck just happened here?" I wave a hand between us. "You just..."

He smirks. "For the past few days, I've learned more than enough about how Bella is when it comes to shopping and planning a wedding. I just wanted to help out, Dad." That smirk still in place, he claps me on the shoulder before walking over to Dylan.

Finn, by the way, is flexing his biceps in front of a mirror.

With a shake of my head, I bring the phone to my ear once more. "You there, Isabella?"

"Yeah," she sighs. *"Logan will tell you where to go."*

"You know, I'm capable of doing this, too," I point out—'cause I don't want to be outsmarted by my own son.

"What?" Isabella replies in an eerily calm voice.

And I was once married. I learned a thing or two back then. For instance, when a woman says, "What?" it's not because she didn't hear you. It's to give you a chance to take back whatever you just said.

I do just that. "Never mind," I say quickly. After all, we are here, at Champs Sports. There are no shoes in this store that go with a suit. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"Yeah, you can make time go faster," she suggests before sighing heavily again. *"I miss you so much."* Now she's whispering. And the smile on my face is instant. She has no idea how hard I'm falling for her. *"Tomorrow feels like a lifetime away."*

"I couldn't agree more," I say quietly. I wish I could elaborate; alas, I have three teenage boys within earshot.

"Wanna know exactly what I miss?" she asks before shouting, *"OUTTA MY WAY, YOU SLOW MUTHAFUCKA!"* I pull away the phone just as she honks the horn, so I assume she's in her car. More shouting follows, and I remember one night when she told me that if you're too slow on the road, you get the finger, the horn, *and* curses. She said this all while smiling innocently, and innocent she is not. Like a flip of a switch, though, she's back to whispering. *"I miss your handsome face, you calling me sweetheart, your kisses..."* I feel my mouth curving into a soft smile. *"I miss your fat cock."*

I cough and splutter.

Fuck me!

"God, I just wanna ride you like a—"

"Enough, Is-Isabella," I choke out.

As much as I'd *love* to hear more, I have our boys *right here*.

That *sweetheart* of mine just giggles.

~oOo~

That night, I gotta say I'm enjoying myself immensely with a few of my closest. With the inn now fully staffed and Carmine and his own staff milling about in the kitchen, we're still left alone in the pub where we're eating a spectacular dinner. Jokes are cracked, good and bad, and the laughs rain frequently. Even though I miss Isabella, not to mention my baby girl—okay, even Jaden...a *little*—this is hilarious, too. It's Dad, Masen, Logan, Finn, Dylan, and me, and there's no such thing as "class" or "grace."

Old men will be boys. Men will be boys. Boys will be boys.

Finn's pervy sense of humor rivals my father's, Dylan's witty as hell, Logan has a knack for dirty limericks, and Masen and I share a love for sarcasm.

"Aunt Rose and Uncle Em will be hea' any minute," Finn chuckles and exchanges a knowing grin with Dylan.

And Dylan, seated next to me in the booth, laughs. "Oh, yeah! Uncle Em tells the best fucking jokes!" He faces me with an excited grin. "Yo, Mr. C—I'm tellin' ya...you're gonna love our uncle."

I'm not so sure. I've found out that the McCartys are pretty protective of their women, and Emmett is Isabella's older brother.

Wonderful.

"I'm sure I will," I chuckle, lying, dying, and bring my beer bottle to my lips. At the same time, my phone vibrates in my pocket, and so while my father begins to tell a new joke, I read a text from Isabella.

Everything is done for tomorrow, and now I'm soaking in a hot bubble bath. Just me and my good friend, the detachable showerhead ;) –B

"Jesus Christ," I sigh, staring up at the ceiling. I'm not sure if Isabella is my angel or my little devil. Either way, she's beyond imperfectly perfect. While I was very much in love with Charlotte when we got married, our love disappointed me when we drifted apart so easily. It was steady, comfortable, and gave me a sense of *home*. With her, I was simply home. And that's a pretty amazing feeling; however...my gut tells me I'll feel so much more than that with Isabella. She's a storm, a fucking hurricane. Wild and carefree, but not flighty. She's mature, though very connected with her inner child. She also makes me feel alive. And younger. She's not the conservative mother. She's the shrieking banshee who curses one second only to smother her boys with kisses and praise the next. The perfect *Mommy*. She's probably the one you don't wanna run into at a Black Friday sale. 'Cause she will cut you. But at the same time, I can imagine her helping an old lady across the street.

When Charlotte and I decided to file for divorce, I felt a sense of relief. When she died before the divorce was settled, I could only mourn the loss of who she once was when we first got married. And the fact that my children lost their mother. I immersed myself in them—focused solely on Logan's and Haley's needs. Edward disappeared and was replaced with Daddy. That's who I was for a long, long time. Make no mistake, I was happy. But with Isabella, happy becomes *total-fucking-bliss*. With curses thrown in.

I know I need more time to let this settle, sink in...but there's no doubt about where I'm headed with Isabella. Hell, I'm more than halfway there, and I'm goddamn giddy about it.

That giddy expression is still on my face when I reply to Isabella's text.

Once everything has settled, sooner rather than later, I'll make it my goal to make sure you won't ever need the showerhead for anything other than showering. Well, unless I can watch you, sweetheart. –E

I'd go with something kinkier—God knows my Isabella loves it when I talk dirty—but not when her youngest son is sitting right next to me. Not that he can see, but it's just so wrong. On many levels.

"Are you Facefucking, son?!" Dad shouts.

My head snaps up, my eyes grow wide, the table goes deathly quiet, I think my heart stops for a minute.

"Oh, Gramps," Logan suddenly laughs. "You mean Facebook—if he's Facebooking."

I let out a weird noise, still shocked.

Dylan and Finn start laughing their asses off.

"No!" Dad insists. "I've seen those shirts—remember, Mase?" He faces my uncle. "We saw one." He nods. "That broad who had that tight little shirt, and her huge—" his hands gesture for a big rack "—you really don't remember?!"

"Oh, yeah." Mase nods, eyes lighting up as he evidently recalls.

Dad goes on. "Exactly! And it said, 'I like Facefucking' on that shirt. It was the same logo, the blue one—the one you showed me, Logan." He slaps

his hand down on my son's shoulder. "Which reminds me, I think I want a membership!"

I roll my eyes at what had obviously been a novelty shirt.

Deciding to mess with my father, I say, "You know, Haley's got Facefuck, too."

Dad's head whips in my direction so fast. "What?!" he yells. "You're allowin' your baby girl to have—" He clutches his heart; he has always been one for drama. "God, this is it. I can see the light." He pretends to sway in his chair. "Esme, I see you!"

While Logan and Finn are struggling to withhold their laughs, Dylan suddenly looks worried.

"Don't fall for it, kiddo," I tell him quietly. His eyes meet mine, wide and questioning. I smile and drape an arm around his shoulders. "He does this whenever he doesn't approve of something. I promise, there's nothing to be worried about."

"Um, okay." He doesn't look too convinced.

"Dad," I say warningly.

"What?!" he shouts, widening his arms. He almost whacks both Logan and Masen in their stomachs. "You don't even care I'm on my last breath!"

"Carlisle," Masen chuckles gruffly. "You're scaring Dylan."

"Oh." Dad quits the act, and Dylan finally relaxes in his seat. "I apologize."

I remove my arm from around Dylan's shoulders and rest it behind him on the back of the booth. "For the last time, Pop—it's Facebook," I tell him.

"Not Facefuck."

"But the shirt-"

"Someone was trying to be funny," I explain impatiently.

"Huh..." He rubs his chin. "Well, it sure fucking was!" He turns to Logan, grinning. "You lemme know if there'll ever be a thing called Facefuck. Hook me up." Then he faces me again. "So, what's with the face, son?!"

I frown. "What face?"

He points to mine. "That goofy shit-eatin' grin you wore before." He widens his eyes and snaps his fingers. "You met someone, didn't you?!"

I groan and rub my right hand over my face.

Jesus Christ.

"Dad wishes," Logan laughs.

"I can still ground you, son," I say flatly. As long as he lives under my roof, he follows my rules. "And for your fucking information: yes, I met someone." Oh, I feel smug for sure. For some reason, my son seems to think Isabella is way out of my league, and while I agree to some extent, she wants my boring ass and we're happening.

"To Edward!" Masen raises his scotch. "To Edward finally gettin' some!"

I puff out my cheeks and slump back in my seat while Dad, Masen, and Logan drink to my "gettin' some." Finn just chuckles and sits back with his Coke, and Dylan...huh, he's staring down at the table with a scowl on his face.

I'm about to ask what's up, but Dad interrupts before I can form a single word. "So, tell me about the lady! She hot?"

I sigh. "I'm not telling you shit, Dad. It's very, um...new. Nothing to tell just yet."

"Well, you're no fun at all," he grunts.

And then we all hear a woman shout, "HENRY EMMETT MCCARTY! GET YOUR ASS IN HEA'!"

To which Finn and Dylan run outta the pub like their asses are on fire.

"I think Isabella's brother and his family are here," I say and stand up to follow.

When I get to the lobby, I see four people by the door. Two children are shaking off snow like dogs would, and the two adults are wiping their boots off on the welcome mat. The man, as tall as I am but bulky like the Hulk, is the one who sees Finn and Dylan first, and his face breaks out in a grin.

"Well, if it ain't two of the three knuckleheads," he chuckles and bumps fists with his nephews. It's easy to see he's Isabella's brother; they share the same features. Although, he's the mountain and Isabella's the valley.

"Oh, get ova' hea', you two! My sweethearts!" The blond woman holds out her arms. I'd say she's in her late thirties or early forties, and her love for Finn and Dylan is evident on her face. There are hugs, kisses, and pinching of cheeks going on. "Henry, Lily, say hi to your cousins."

The little girl, Lily, looks like a tiny version of her mother, and she jumps right into Finn's arms. "We're in Vermont!" she cheers, and Finn laughs and says something along the lines of, "No shit, Lilybug."

Henry, on the other hand, takes after his father. He can't be more than eleven or twelve, but you can already see he's going to be as huge as the other McCartys.

Jackets, coats, gloves, mittens, beanies, and scarves are shed and bags are rolled over to the counter, and I figure I'm done with the creepy watching. I'm supposed to be the host, or so Isabella's told me, so I plaster a polite smile on my face and walk over.

"Mr. C, this is our aunt and uncle," Dylan says.

Emmett looks my way, just noticing me, and grins. "You gotta be Haley's dad. I'm Emmett McCarty." He extends his hand.

I nod and shake his hand firmly. "Edward Cullen. Good to meet you."

"You too, man." He pulls the blond woman close. "This is my wife—Rose." I greet her, too, and she smiles widely, saying it's nice to meet me. I honestly didn't expect them to be so pleasant. But maybe that's 'cause if they knew what I've been up to with Isabella, they wouldn't be? "And my troublemakers—yo, kids! Say hi to Mr. Cullen."

"Hi, Mr. Cullen," comes from two voices. They're too busy with Finn to really care.

I chuckle, and just then, Maggie appears behind the counter. After that, it's all about getting Emmett's family checked in to their cottage.

"Great—more snow," Rose huffs, though she looks amused. "Henry, no! Get down from the fuckin' bookshelf! Jesus Christ!"

It's insane.

"Daddy!" Lily shouts. "Finn tells me you won't marry me! Tell him he's a stupidhead!"

"Oh!" Dylan guffaws. "Check you out, little cuz!"

As if all this ruckus isn't enough, more people join. Not only my own family, but also Carmine and his crew of six, one of who I've learned is his seventeen-year-old daughter. Trust me—Logan's noticed her.

"It's been too fuckin' long, my friend!" Emmett and Carmine hug. Shouting. Laughing. Kids running around. More introductions. Dad and Rose get along right away. Masen approaches Henry with a deck of cards. Maggie looks overwhelmed. A waiter comes out with Irish coffee for the adults and hot chocolate for the kids. Logan and Finn crack jokes with two of Carmine's employees. Carmine's daughter slyly checks out my son. Dad shouts something about Facefuck, and Rose guffaws. Emmett picks up Lily and blows raspberries on her cheeks. Dylan tugs on my hand and drags me over to the seating area, and he asks if he can taste my Irish coffee. I hesitate. He tells me it will give me cool points. He also points out that Isabella has given both Haley and Logan champagne back in the city. But...they're eighteen. Dylan's fourteen. Just one sip. Okay. He likes it a bit too much, and I laugh and take the glass from him. He wears a silly grin and tells me I'm cool. With all these people running around in the lobby, it gets fucking hot, so I remove hoodie, exposing my Giants t-shirt. And suddenly I'm cool in Finn's book, too.

The McCartys are out to win hearts.

I just hope that come tomorrow, we Cullens have won a few, as well.

Because tomorrow? *Everyone* will have arrived.

Translation

J'en sais rien, mais c'est pas grave! On se voit en janvier, on réglerà ça à ce moment là — Oui, je serai là le vingt-cinq— Ok, toi aussi, chouchou. A plus! = I don't know, but it doesn't matter! I'll see you in January; we can sort this out then— Yes, I will be there on the twenty-fifth— Okay, you too, honey. Bye.

Thank you to Juliane for helping me with the French :)

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December 14th

BPOV

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" I apologize as I bump into a woman at the airport here in Vermont.

Edward is waiting for me outside, so I'm definitely hurrying. Who knows when we'll be alone next?



"It's okay," the woman chuckles. "Hey, wait." She grabs my arm. I arch a brow, willing to be polite, but...I'm in a hurry here. "You're Isabella, aren't you? Isabella McCarty?"

"Yes?" My eyes flick between her and the exit. *So close.* "Do I know you?"

She laughs a tinkling laugh, and I see that she's got quite the following behind her. A man and four children are barreling toward her. "Not yet,

but I'm sure I will." She grins and extends her hand. "Alice Whitlock—huge fan of your work, by the way. I'm Haley's aunt."

"Oh!" Now I feel a little stupid, because I knew Alice and Jasper were arriving at the same time. Edward offered to pick them up, too, but since there are so many of them, they opted to rent a car here. "It's nice to meet you, Alice." I smile and shake her hand. "I just spent a few days with Haley in the city, and she told me a lot about you." That's actually true. Haley told me about Alice, who's a stay-at-home mom, about Jasper, who is a sports agent, and about JJ, Linda, Joey, and Mary—their children. I think the oldest, JJ, is sixteen, and Mary is the youngest at seven. Linda is thirteen or fourteen—I can't really remember—and Joey is nine. And looking at them now as they reach Alice, I'd say they've created a gorgeous mix of kiddos. JJ—my guess is he's named Jasper Junior—looks exactly like his father, although twenty years younger. Linda and Mary are a mix—they've got Alice's green eyes and petite...ness...but Jasper's blond hair. Joey, he's all Mommy.

"There you are!" Alice notices her husband and children. "I rented an SUV—it's ready to be picked up, but first..." She ushers her kids forward, and Jasper follows obediently, smiling politely. "I want you to meet Ms. McCarty. She's Haley's fiancé's mom."

"Mommy, I gotta pee!" Mary complains and does the pee-pee dance.

So cute. I can only smile.

Alice puts her hands on her hips and stares up at her husband. "You just had to get her the Big Gulp right before we left Philly, huh?"

Jasper stares back at her for a beat, dumbfounded, at a loss for words, but then he turns to me with a charming smile and sticks out his hand.

"Hi. Jasper Whitlock. Nice to meet you, Isabella."

I chuckle and shake his hand. "You too, Jasper. And please, call me Bella."

"Dad, my phone is about to die, like, any minute now." That's Linda, and she looks like the world is coming to an end. The iPhone with a sparkly pink case is clutched tightly in her hand. "Can we just go already?"

"Manners, you brat," Alice spits out. "Jesus Christ. Had I acted like you when I was a kid, my parents would've ditched me outside a church."

Okay, so I think I love Alice.

"Uncle Edward!" Mary suddenly screeches.

My head whips around, and my heart starts thundering in my chest. There he is. Walking toward us, coming from the exit. Oh, have mercy on my panties, for La Perla's sake. I spent two hours getting ready before the flight, and since the journey isn't a long one between New York and Vermont, I still feel refreshed. However, if this man is going to ruin another pair of expensive panties, I might just start throwing punches, and I doubt I'll be looking refreshed after *that*.

Ungh, he's too hot. Jeans, construction boots, a Yankees zip hoodie, a black beanie, and his peacoat. His cheeks are a little flushed from the cold outside, and his eyes are bright and green. Yeah, I'm ready to combust.

"I thought I'd missed you," he murmurs with a smile to me before turning to his sister and her family. He greets them with hugs, handshakes, and kisses, though his right hand remains on my lower back. He smells so good, like snow and cologne.

"I still can't believe Haley's getting married." Alice sniffles. "I'm so happy for her." She gives me a wide smile. "Now I'm dying to meet your Jaden."

I grin. "They should be back here in a few hours."

Edward chuckles. "All right, well...shall we go?"

"Absolutely," Alice says. "How about we follow you?"

No!

I barely manage to rein in the panic.

"Actually, Isabella and I have some last-minute details to take care of here in town," Edward explains. "You know, for the parties tonight..."

Phew.

Alice hums, eyes flicking between us. "Okay. So, we'll just see you at the inn, then?"

"Yes," Edward responds with a nod. "We shouldn't be long. An hour or so."

"Maybe two," I correct.

"Two?" Edward looks down at me, his eyes widening slightly. "*Really?*"

I shrug and smile sweetly.

~oOo~

"Fuck, I've missed you," he groans and pushes me up against the door we just closed. I moan into his mouth, my hands fisting his hair and my legs going around his waist. God, I'm glad we thought ahead and rented this hotel room near the airport. Like I said, who knows when we'll be alone next? Tonight we have Haley's bachelorette party and Jaden's bachelor party; Edward and I will be separated.

"Clothes—off," I whine as I unzip his hoodie.

"The bed," he grunts.

Panting, we break apart and walk over to the bed, shedding clothes in our haste. We tumble down on the soft mattress. We grin, laugh, and paw at each other. I moan as he roughly kisses my neck and pulls down my jeans. His hoodie is gone, as are his pants.

"You're gonna leave a mark," I giggle breathlessly.

"I don't care." He nips and sucks on my neck, and then his hand has slipped under my panties. I cry out when he pushes two fingers inside of me. "You're mine now, sweetheart. Mine to *fuck*, mine to mark."

"Oh, God!" I gasp.

With his boxers pushed down and my panties slid aside, he grips his thick cock and slowly drags it up and down my slit. "So fucking sexy," he mutters gruffly. In the meantime, I unclasp my bra and let it fall to the floor. I'm ready to beg. "You want my cock, honey?" He cocks a brow at me.

"Yesss," I hiss and buck my hips. "Oh my God, just fuck me already, Edward!"

He gives me a feral look, a dark laugh, and then he slams in.

I choke on a breath.

"Christ, your pussy feels amazing," he grits out in my ear.

Shivers rip through me as he fucks me.

It's dirty, it's deep, it's fast, it's rough, it's exactly what we need after spending days apart.

And that Grade A cuddling follows, full of sweet words, tender kisses, tangled limbs, and roaming hands.

~oOo~

By the time Edward and I get back to the bed and breakfast, we're only waiting for Jaden and Haley. Even my son's bandmates, their girlfriends, and Haley's two best friends have arrived.

With the kids and the teenagers having fun outside, we adults gather in the pub after greetings and hugs. It's so good to see my brother again; I mean, I haven't seen him in months. When he's on the road with Jaden's band, he doesn't really prioritize me when he's only got time to visit home real quick. Understandable. But it's nice to have him here now, and it's next to him I sit at a long table. Edward's on my other side, and...then the rest. Alice, Jasper, Rose, Carlisle, Masen, even Carmine.

Lunch is served, and we all dig in, knowing that the kids will come in when they want. This is like a huge family reunion slash party slash meet-and-greet for them. Let 'em have fun.

"So, when're Haley and Jaden arriving?" Jasper asks, seated across from me.

Edward checks his watch and chews his chicken before answering. "They should be here within the hour."

A soft sigh slips through my lips as I pick up a French fry, and I'm still thinking about my son's surprise. Only now, I know what it is. 'Cause Edward told me on our way back to the inn. And...God, my son is a romantic.

Unbeknownst to us, while they were on tour, Jaden and Haley apparently went as far as to discuss where they wanted to live after they got married. Staying in New York was a given, but they even nailed down the exact neighborhood. So...the day before yesterday, when Jaden picked up Haley

at our place, he was taking her to a brownstone apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn. If Haley likes it, it's theirs.

I admit, the protective mother in me perked up when Edward told me, but I don't feel too bad about the thoughts running through my head at first. With their short relationship, it's only smart to cover all bases, and I couldn't help but worry about Jaden's willingness to pay for so much. Yeah, he's very successful, but his career is still so new. Many bands out there shoot through the roof with one album only to crash and burn—be forgotten—with the next. And buying an apartment, even if it's in Brooklyn, is *very* expensive. Hell, over the past few years, it's actually gotten more and more expensive to live in Brooklyn. I shudder to think about the zeroes. However...Edward calmed me down before I could even voice my concerns, and Haley won me over all over again when I found out she's insisted on a prenuptial agreement. By no means is she hurtin' for money—Carlisle and Masen are sitting on fortunes—but it still helped to calm this Jersey girl down a notch or two. Knowing my son, Jaden most likely argued with her, but whatever. He inherited my romantic side, not the realistic side.

So, in an hour or so I reckon I'll find out if I can turn Jaden's room at home into a gym or something. I wouldn't mind it, and I know Finn would be thrilled.

"Where are we women gonna be tonight, by the way?" Alice asks, reaching for her wine. "You guys are gonna be here in the pub, right?"

Edward and Emmett nod, smirks on their faces. God knows what they'll be up to. Well, since Finn, JJ, Dylan—not to mention Henry, who's only eleven—will be here as well, I sincerely hope they won't party too hard. Rose would chop off Emmett's balls in a heartbeat if he got too drunk while taking care of their Henry.

"We'll be in the dining hall downstairs," I tell Rose and Alice. I have Haley's bachelorette party all planned out, and I can't fucking wait. We're gonna have a blast, lemme tell ya. Right now, the inn staff is preparing downstairs for the reception tomorrow, but a corner is saved for us to party in. The devious smile on my lips causes Alice and Rose to grin right back. Alice might not know yet, but Rose sure does, and no one can beat an Isabella McCarty event.

For this particular party, there are outfits. Naughty ones.

And I have already paid Carmine's daughter a hundred bucks to watch Lily and Mary. Well, I haven't informed Alice that I have a babysitter for Mary yet, but there is, and I have a feeling Alice is going to be more than thrilled.

The booze is already down there, Carmine's taking care of the food, and my iPod is smack-full of goodies. I have Maggie to thank, 'cause she's the one who has signed for these kinds of deliveries. I mean, was I gonna ask Edward to do it? Riiight.

"What're youse gonna do tonight?" my brother asks with his mouth full of food.

I share another smirk with Rose and say, "Stuff."

Now we just gotta wait 'til Jaden and Haley get back.

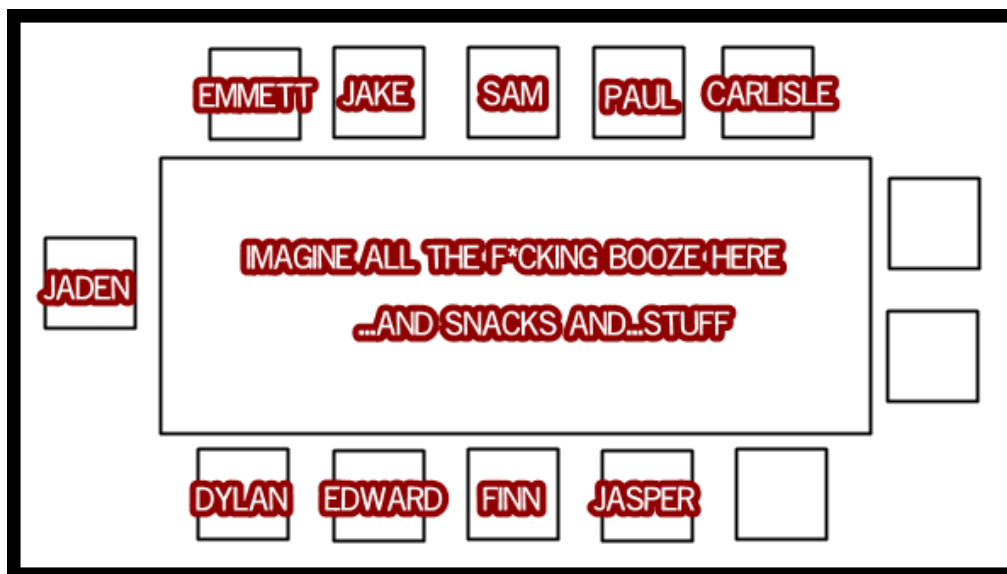
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December 14th

EPOV

"Okay, I'm ready," Jaden says, rubbing his hands together. He looks like he's preparing himself, taking deep breaths and whatnot. Three hours into

his bachelor party, we've lost Masen—'cause he was tired—and Logan and JJ, both crushing on Carmine's daughter, Nina. So, they're in her room as she watches the youngest kids. Isabella was smart, giving her a hundred bucks to babysit Lily and Mary. Yeah, Emmett and Jasper pitched in with fifty bucks each too, which is why Henry and Joey aren't here. And now there are ten of us left: Me, Jasper, Dad, Emmett, Jaden, his three bandmates—Sam, Paul, and Jake—Finn, and Dylan. Since the booths are too small for the entire group, we're sitting at the one of the tables.



"Who goes first?" Emmett asks with a smirk.

"Not my son," Dad snorts. I heave a resigned sigh. "What?!" he shouts, eyes on me. "You're divorced! Is it really smart that *you* give Jaden advice?!"

I could be insulted. Offended. And I could shout back at him. Alas, I'm a happy drunk this evening, so I opt for humor. Facing Jaden, I tell him very seriously, "Here's one thing you *shouldn't* do." I point my finger at him for good measure, and he's already cracking up. Lovely. "Don't ever—and I mean ever—go through your wife's labor and gag. And when the baby's crowning, don't look down there and say, 'Oh God, that's just wrong.'" I sit back, nodding to myself, liking my sound advice.

Emmett and Jasper appreciate my advice, too, 'cause they look like they know what I'm talking about.

Finn's laughing.

"Wait—you gagged when Haley and Logan were born?" Dylan asks me, smirking.

"Well, when you put it that way..." I grimace and look down into my vodka. "But really," I add nonchalantly and place my arm on the back of Dylan's chair, "I'm a good dad. Haven't killed them yet." I tip back my glass.

"And, uh—" Jaden clears his throat, trying to withhold his laughs "—I thank you for that, Mr. C. That you haven't killed them, that is. And leave out the 'yet'."

I shrug and grin, having a blast. "On a serious note, though—I'm too young to be a grandfather." I jerk my chin at my dad. "He ain't dead, and there's only room for one Pops."

"I'd be a grandpops, you fool!" Dear Dad yells.

I wave a hand. "Oh, shut up—that's a mouthful and a half."

"That's what she said!" Finn and Jake holler.

I snicker.

"Actually, this is good," Emmett agrees as he reaches for another bottle of Jack. A few days ago, I asked Jaden what he wanted for his bachelor party, and he said this was it: a night of drinking and having fun with his closest. Easy enough for me, I'll say. However, he's proven to be a nice kid in my opinion, so I do have something extra for him later. But for now, we have a table full of alcohol, snacks, mixers, sodas, and good music

playing in the background. "I think it's my turn now." Emmett burps. "Shit you shouldn't do. Jaden, my dear nephew, never ever ask your pregnant wife for a foot rub after a long day at work."

No shit.

"Youse're talkin' like Haley and I are gonna have kids soon," Jaden chuckles nervously while rubbing the back of his neck.

Without a single word, we adults come to a silent agreement: it's time to fuck with Jaden.

"Well..." I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table, and I level Jaden with a serious look. "We're all Catholics here, aren't we?" This may be true, but we're hardly churchgoers. On my mother's insistence, Alice and I went to Sunday school when we were kids, but that lasted about two weeks. And I sincerely doubt the McCartys are very religious. Hell, our kids aren't even getting married in a church.

"Yeah, birth control—outta the question," Jasper fills in firmly. "Why do you think Alice and I have four of them?"

I crack up. "Because my sister has a shitty memory!"

Each time they announced a pregnancy, it came with a sheepish smile from Alice. She always forgot to take the damn pill, and the thought of getting the shot crept her out. After Mary was born, Jasper got snipped.

"Can't deny that," Jasper sighs. "But thank fuck my swimmers don't come in twos!" He slams his fist down on the table. "You Cullens... You and your twins!"

"Yeah," I mutter, and I have nothing better to say.

"I'm not ready to be a father!" Jaden blurts out.

Poor kid. "And I'm thankful for that, Jaden," I chuckle and pour him a shot of Jack. "We were just messing with you. Frankly, I'd rather not think about anything leading to babies when it comes to my baby girl." I shudder.

Now his grin is back, and he downs the shot like a man. No grimace or nothing.

"Okay, who's next?" Emmett asks, rubbing his hands together.

"How about you gimme advice on what's actually *good*?" Jaden widens his arms. "I don't need a shitload of not-to-dos."

Emmett, Dad, Jasper, and I exchange looks.

"Um..." I scratch my nose.

Jasper purses his lips. "Well..."

"Just—" Emmett's brows furrow, like he's thinking hard "—yeah, just...be a good husband?"

I snap my fingers. "That's a good one!"

"You suck!" Pops shouts at us. "Jaden, don't listen to them. You want advice? Come to *me*." He points to his chest. "Esme—God rest her soul—was a perfect wife. And I was a perfect husband."

I snort a laugh. "Okay, Dad."

Make no mistake, my parents were happy; it was a marriage to admire. But my mother was a ball-buster, and my father was a doormat. Thing is, they got some sick thrill out of that. For all I know, he called her Mistress behind closed doors, and I don't think Jaden and Haley will get very far with whatever advice Dad can offer.

"What?!" He cups his ear. "Did'ju say something, son?!"

"Oh, come on!" Finn exclaims. "Youse are married—" he jerks his chin at Jasper and Emmett, and then he claps me on the shoulder—"and you got that girlfriend. You tellin' me there's nothin' you can tell my brotha'?"

"You got a girlfriend?" Jaden looks to me, surprised. "Haley never mentioned that."

I want to disappear.

No. Honestly. I do.

"No, he doesn't." Jasper barks out a laugh. "Well, unless hell has frozen over and pigs can fly."

"Jasper," I groan and palm my face.

Dad chuckles and wags a finger at my brother-in-law. "You know, Jasper—that was my first thought, too."

"Who gives a shit?" Dylan spits out, pushing his chair back. I frown at him. "So, Mr. C has a girl—what-the-fuck-ever. I'm outta hea'." He storms out.

"What's up his ass?" Emmett looks as confused as I am.

I shrug, not having a single clue, but...I'm responsible for him tonight. I should probably go check on him. "I'll find him," I mumble before I follow.

And find him I do—outside in the freezing cold, and I'm only wearing jeans and a fitted black pullover. It's ridiculously sobering, which I'm not sure is a good thing.

"What do *you* want?" He glares at me as I let the door close behind me.

"Hey—what's..." I shake my head, brows knitted together. "What's up with you? Have I done something wrong?" I place a hand on my chest.

Seriously, I want to know, because I'm really confused here. Bewildered, actually. Dylan...I've never seen him this way, and even though I haven't known him long at all, something tells me this is out of character for him.

He scoffs and looks out at the blackness of the night. "Whateva'," he mutters, sticking his hands into his pockets. "You don't get it."

"No, I *don't*," I agree and step closer to him. "So, why don't you tell me?" I nudge his shoulder with my own. "If I don't know what's wrong, I can't fix it."

"Why would you even care about fixing it?" he chuckles darkly. "You're just Haley's pops."

I narrow my eyes; meanwhile, he refuses to meet my gaze.

"I care, Dylan," I say honestly, shuddering when a particularly harsh gust of wind whips by. "Period." I pause, thinking about what to say, how to coax the problem out of him. "And I'm not just Haley's pops. You know? We're..." I purse my lips and stare out at the nothingness for a second. "We're about to become family." I add a shrug, despite the fact that I feel nowhere near casual.

In my periphery, I watch as he chews on his bottom lip. He looks oddly upset, though he's trying to hide it.

That worries me. "You want me to get Mom for you?"

"No," he responds stubbornly, voice cracking. He looks down at his feet and clears his throat. "It's... It's nothin'."

"I don't believe that for a second, son," I chuckle and give him a pointed look when he finally meets my gaze. But my amusement dies quickly

when I see that his eyes are glassy. "Hey—" I give his shoulder a gentle squeeze "—now you have to tell me."

He grits his teeth and drops his gaze to the ground again. "I don't wanna."

I sigh, remembering that Logan was exactly like this. Like pulling teeth.

Haley would shout her problem from the rooftops.

Logan would let it stew, bitch silently, and mope around.

"Just, um..." He clears his throat. "I want you to know something."

Oh, really?

"What's that?" I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling.

"Our family's already big enough as it is," he huffs.

My face falls. "What?"

He looks to me with cold eyes. "Yeah, so you can tell your broad there's no room for her."

I blink.

My mouth opens then closes.

I don't...I mean...what? "What?" I repeat dumbly.

He folds his arms over his chest. "You heard me."

"Uh, yes." I frown, swallowing. "I did, Dylan—but I'm not sure I follow you."

My heart is suddenly pounding; it feels like something big is on the line.

The word "family" rings so true to me, and not just because Haley and Jaden are getting married. Damn it, that's probably only a small fraction of it. It's not just Isabella, either; it's how we've *all* come together. And it'd be hurtful if Dylan doesn't want us in their life. Though, now...I gotta wonder what this "broad" thing is about.

"You...Haley, Logan..." He shrugs, once again looking away. "Youse can stay. But not your girlfriend."

"Oh," I mouth, letting *that* settle. Wow. Um. I don't know what to say, other than I'm incredibly relieved. "Well..." I clear my throat and try not to grin like a fool. "I don't think you have anything to worry about."

"Why?" Now he's suspicious. "You gonna ditch her?"

My eyebrows shoot up, and I want to chuckle at the absurdity. "No." A snicker slips out, and I look down at my shoes. "No, never. I..." Reaching up, I rub my jaw. "I'm pretty fucking in love with her, Dylan." It's the first time I've uttered those words. The truth of the statement doesn't hit me as hard as I thought it would; instead it just feels good as hell to have it out in the open. I scratch my eyebrow and tilt my head in Dylan's direction. "If I have my way, I'm marrying her one day." He looks upset again. "This is a good thing—we make each other happy." And then there's the fact that I have actually had quite a bit to drink, so I ramble on. To my Isabella's fourteen-year-old son. Awesome. "More than that—it's an amazing thing. One day you'll find that, too. I hope. I really do, kiddo. It doesn't matter if it comes to you when you're eighteen or—in my case—forty-two. Love will still floor you." I laugh to myself. "And believe me, you won't know it's coming, either. I mean, if I'd known just two weeks ago that I'd meet..." I trail off. I'm not *that* drunk, and I've already said enough. I don't even dare look Dylan in the eye at this point. Maybe had it been Finn; alas, this is Dylan. He's no fool.

"Wait...um. What'd you just say?"

"*Nothing*," I insist.

"*No*," he insists right back. "You said two weeks. Unless you're screwing that old lady—Maggie..."

And I figure, why not?

"I am!" I basically shout.

Then I cringe, because...really?

"God," I mutter and scrub my hands over my face.

This isn't happening.

"Whoa," he whispers, eyes wide in wonder. "Yo, have you and my-"

He's cut off by the door slamming open, revealing a frowning Jaden, a pissed Finn, a furious Emmett, a giggling Jasper, and my father who looks proud.

"We's been doing some thinking," Finn says, folding his arms across his chest.

"Did it hurt?" Dylan quips.

"No." Finn frowns in confusion.

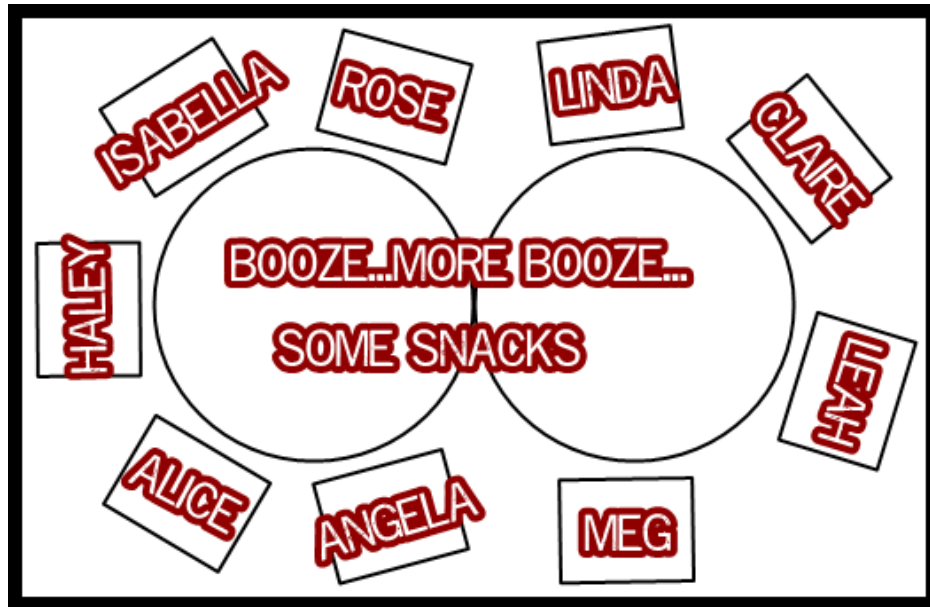
Oh, Finn.

Jaden slaps Finn's arm and takes over. "Mr. C." He levels me with a stern, annoyed, kind of nauseated look. "Is there something going on between you and our motha'?"

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December 14th

BPOV



Approximately three hours into Haley's bachelorette party, she's had enough champagne and Screaming Orgasms to admit things about my son that I *never* wanted to know.

Talking about the apartment they're moving into in Brooklyn after the holidays? Totally fine.

Talking about piercings in private places? Not so much.

"What's an apadravya?" Alice scrunches her nose.

I gag into my glass of GT before chugging that fucker.

"God," Rose whines. "That's my godson, Haley."

"I'm sorry!" Haley cups her cheeks and blushes fiercely.

"Well—" I cough and set down my empty glass "—the cock I'm fucking is divine. Beat that, bitches." I wipe my mouth and go for the gin bottle. Jesus Christ, people. Like I wanted to know that my son's *thing* is pierced. Knowing about his nipple is enough, fuck you very much.

"You back wid' Garrett?" Rose arches a brow.

I snort. "Hell no." That was like more than eight months ago. He was good, but he was no Edward Cullen. "The cock I'm wid' now is the one I want to marry." *Booze, booze, booze.* Sixty tonic and forty gin. "So, who's next on the cock talk?" I twirl a finger and look around the two round tables we're gathered around down here in the formal dining hall. Me, Haley, Rose, Alice, Linda, Jaden's bandmates' girls—Leah and Claire—and Haley's two best friends, Meg and Angela. Most of us are attached, so there should be plenty of cocks to talk about; however, most girls just look away and blush. Well, excuse me, but did they expect a bridal shower where you don't curse and talk about sex? Please. And it's safe now, 'cause Haley's already talked about Jaden. That's over with. I'm in the clear, so to speak. So, bring it on.

Our first part of the party was all about getting sexy. Us women, who are considered adults in every culture—which means eighteen-year-olds aren't included—are dressed in sexy Lolita dresses. And the girls are dressed in matching leggings and lacy corset-like tops.



Haley asked me earlier why they didn't get the sexy dresses, to which I said, "Honey, let's not give your father a heart attack. You're too young to dress like a prostitute."

Part two of the party was pictures. We all posed and had fun while I manned the camera. Some photos were individuals that we can give to a loved one—if you know what I mean—and some were just goofy group shots. The sexy ones are by no means too *porny*, but they're still more than enough to...well. Just some sexy pouts, fingers twirling hair, lip lickin', smoldering eyes, and certain assets pushed forward, out, or together...depending on asset.

Part three was a spectacular dinner down here where I also handed out goodie bags to everyone. Working in the fashion industry means I got a lotta connections, and I managed to throw together bags full of makeup, face masks, perfumes, body scrubs, and other pretty little things.

And part four... Drinking! So, we're definitely busy with part four right now. Part five will come soon enough, which is where we give Haley gifts and wise words. Okay, I don't know about wise. But words.

"Then, who're you with?!" Rose shouts, bringing me back to now.

I jut my chin out. "I fucking told you, hon. *Cock au divine*."

Get it? *Coq au vin*.

Alice giggle-snorts and slaps her thigh. "Good one!" I gotta grin at that, 'cause I thought it was pretty witty myself. "But—" she arches a brow "—I actually think I know who you're talking about."

"How would *you* know?" Haley asks her.

That's what I wanna know.

Edward and I have been stealthy.

Well, most of the time.

Okay, we've tried.

"You don't know," I laugh, waving her off.

In retrospect, I shouldn't have spurred her on. But what can I say? Booze relaxes me. I'm just chillin'.

"Hell, even *I* know, Bella," Angela giggles, to which I scrunch my nose at her, 'cause who the hell is she? I mean, aside from being Haley's best friend from high school. "What?" she asks innocently. "I have eyes, you know. You and Mr. Cullen weren't subtle at lunch. With the eyes and all."

I choke and splutter.

"*What?*" Haley squeaks.

"Mmhmm." Alice looks smug.

Rose gives me a wide-eyed look before breaking down in guffaws. "Damn, girl! That's fuckin' priceless!" She slaps my arm.

"Oh, fuck me," I mutter and tip back my glass. Then I slam it down on the table and point to Haley. "It's your fucking father's fucking fault. I'm fucking innocent." I place a hand on my chest and widen my eyes to show sincerity. "If Edward hadn't been so fucking fine and such a fucking sweetheart, there wouldn't've been any fucking issues. Gabeesh?"

"Cool it, hon." Rose squeezes my bicep.

"I'm just sayin' I'm innocent!" I shout, shooting up from my seat. "I'd like to see any of youse resisting that man—actually, hell to the no." I narrow my eyes at the girls. "Edward is mine. I'll cut a bitch for tryin'a-"

My obnoxious rant ends abruptly when my sister-in-law shoves me down in my seat again. "Easy there, tiger," she grits out. I huff a breath. "Jesus Christ, look at'chu." I can't if I don't have a goddamn mirror. Fool. "You're bein' all defensive, and you don't even have a reason to be. We're all happy for youse—you and Edward."

"Definitely," Alice says, nodding solemnly. "It's about time my brother scored."

"Um, Haley?" Leah, Sam's girlfriend, inquires, which causes me to face my daughter-in-law-to-be.

Uh-oh. She looks like she's ready to hurl.

"This is where you smile for me—and for your father," I say, pointing at Haley. "We're happy together, and though we planned on waiting to tell people about'us 'til after the holidays, there's no real reason to. We don't hafta hide."

Haley swallows hard and covers her mouth. "Oh, my God." It comes out all muffled by that hand. "Is my future husband going to be my step-brother?"

Oh, Jesus Christ. "Get real, honey." I roll my eyes. Counting on my fingers, I tick off each reason why she's got nothing to worry about. "You and Jaden met first. Youse're eighteen years old. There's no blood relation. And...well, that's it. Nothing to worry about." I wipe my hands clean.

I love children, so I will probably look at Haley and Logan one day and think of them as my children, too—hell, I already love 'em both—but Haley sure as hell doesn't have to see me as her mother. I'm more than happy to be her mother-*in-law*.

"Oh, my God," she repeats—and then she storms out of the dining hall, up the stairs, and...I suppose into Jaden's arms somewhere.

"Well." I puff out my cheeks and slump back in my chair. "I guess the jig is up."

This is why people usually don't tell me secrets, 'cause the minute I'm minorly drunk, the truths come flying outta my big mouth. It's a wonder I managed to keep Edward and me a secret this long. And it's *no* wonder Jaden didn't want me to know about his surprise to Haley earlier. I probably would've told her.

"We're gonna be sisters one day," Alice tells me with a smirk, nodding confidently.

I gotta grin at that. "I hope so, Alice. I hope so."

Which *means!* Which means Haley and Jaden will be the McCartys. Edward and I will be Cullens.

"And don't worry about Haley," she goes on with a wave of her hand, "she just needs to let this settle."

"Did'ju heard that?" Rose points to the ceiling.

"I did," Linda, Alice's daughter, says.

"Hear what?" I sit up straight.

Then I hear it. Shouting coming from upstairs. More than that, I hear my brother and Finn shouting, and that can't be good. They're the McCarty muscles, both juiceheads in love with their bulky bodies.

Safe to say, Haley's run her mouth. I mean, what else would it be?

I point up, too. "I think I'mma go save my man from Emmett and Finn."

December 14th

EPOV

"You disrespectin' my sister?!" Emmett yells, widening his arms. "How fucking dare you?!"

"How fucking dare I?" I laugh incredulously and point to my chest. "Who says I've been disrespecting her?" Shaking my head, I pass the Hulks in the doorway and enter the inn again, coming to a stop in the middle of the lobby. While I'm nervous about hashing this out now—with Isabella's brother and sons—I'm drunk enough to have my balls in the right place. I can fucking do this. I can hold my own. "As far as I know, Isabella and I are consenting adults. It's none of your damn business what we do." I fold my arms across my chest, staring flatly at Emmett and Finn.

"OH!" Finn shouts, glaring at me. "Who de'fuck do you think you are?!"

"Shut up, bro!" Dylan actually comes to my defense, standing next to me. Very sweet, I must say. Stuff like that melts my heart. "If you weren't so full of yourself, you'd'a noticed the silly fuckin' smile on Mom's face!"

I love Dylan. Seriously.

"God," Jaden groans; he's all green in the face, hands clutching his stomach. "This ain't happenin'."

"What I've noticed about Bella is, you know..." My father holds his hands up by his chest, talking about *my* Isabella's spectacular rack.

"OH!" That was actually me. But I can't believe the nerve that old fool has.

"AY!" Finn.

"Whoa!" Emmett. "Jesus Christ, Carlisle!"

"What?!" Dad hollers, eyes wide. "I'm just sayin'!"

"Oh my God, Daddy! Is it true?!" And welcome to the show, baby girl. Haley looks winded, just coming up the stairs. She also looks nauseous and pissed off. And...I can't stop staring, 'cause...

"What the fuck are you wearing?!" I shout.

The Daddy alert screams all shrill in my head: *Heart attack, heart attack, heart attack. Seek cover. Heart attack, heart attack. Daughter out to kill.*

She's practically naked! Just some skintight pants, leggings—whatever—and some corset-like type thing. And heels that belong on a whore. Unless Isabella's wearing them—she can pull it off and look sexy.

"Nice." Finn smirks at her.

I glare at him.

"That's my fucking fiancée," Jaden spits out and smacks the back of Finn's head. "Keep your eyes to yourself!"

"Step-sister, actually," Finn guffaws.

I cringe.

Jaden groans again, a picture of nausea. "God!"

Jasper looks away from Haley and twirls a finger. "Back to that other thing. Ed, you're with Bella?" He smirks lazily.

Thanks a lot, asshole.

Emmett and Finn are back to glaring at me.

"You're not touching Bella ever again," Emmett seethes.

"That's not fucking up to you!" I snap.

"She's my baby sister!" he shouts.

"My motha'!" Finn hollers.

"My girlfriend!" I point to my chest.

"My future mother-in-law!" Haley sobs, arms flailing.

And then the woman herself appears behind my daughter. "Okay, all my labels—established." Isabella smirks.

My jaw goes a little slack when I see what she's wearing.

Fuck. Me.

Tiny black dress...tits...those big tits shit all smashed together...tits...*Jesus...* high heels.

"What the fuck are you wearing, Bella?!" Emmett cries out. "*Madonn'*, cover yourself up! I can almost see up your..."

"Bookyak?" Carlisle supplies.

I frown; I don't even know that word.

However, it makes Dylan's eyes bug out, Emmett shout out an "Oh!", and Finn seethe.

"Shut the fuck up!" Isabella shouts back, holding out her arms. "Jesus Christ, what's wid' all the shouting up hea?! And," she chuckles darkly, wagging a finger at my father, "use that word again, you old fuckin' perv, and you'll see Esme real soon. I gotta guy who can make it happen."

"I'm standing right here!" Emmett growls.

My eyebrows rise. Did my father offend her? 'Cause if he did...

I crack my knuckles.

"Sorry, ma'am." Dad averts his eyes to the ground.

Good God, if my mother was alive...

She'd probably make him kneel now.

I shudder in disgust.

"Cute." Isabella jerks his chin at Dad. "But you're still a perv." Then she winks at him, so I doubt she holds a grudge.

Does she have to wear that, though? It's highly distracting.

"O' holy hell," I groan. "Woman, what're you doing to me?" That last bit came out as a whine. Very cool of me. But there's only so much a man can take—brother, sons, all the other men be damned.

She just grins salaciously and shimmies toward me.

"This is just too much," Jaden chokes out, and then he grabs Haley's hand and drags her upstairs.

None of us really care.

"I accidentally spilled the beans," I admit sheepishly as Isabella stops next to me. "Sorry."

Her eyes suddenly dance with amusement. "Well, aren't we a pair? 'Cause I accidentally spilled the beans to Haley. Actually, I was caught. Your sister and Haley's friend called me out."

Oh. Well, all right, then. "I said a bit too much to Dylan, and he did the math."

"We did the math, too," Jasper pipes in. "Finn and Carlisle said you were seeing someone—and that it was very new. And since I know you so well," he chuckles, "it wasn't difficult to take it from there."

Isabella hums in acknowledgement, but her eyes are focused on mine, head tilted up, a smile playing on her dark red pouty-as-fuck lips.

"You look..." I don't have words to describe her. She has me in a daze, one I'll live happily in for the rest of my life if she'll have me. "Christ, sweetheart." I shake my head and close the distance between us.

In the back of my head, I register more people joining us—the women from downstairs—but I can't for the life of me focus on that. Not when I have Isabella mere inches away from me, and definitely not when I happen to look down and see her impressive cleavage—up close. *My God.*

"So..." She smiles and trails a finger up my chest. Behind her sexy confidence, I detect a hint of anxiousness, but there's no reason for that. She owns me. "Everything is out in the open," she whispers.

I swallow, trapped. "Yeah." There's more shouting going on around us now, Alice and Rose scolding Emmett, Finn, and...who cares? For the first time in...maybe ever...Isabella and I aren't in the middle of who-can-shout-the-loudest. Well, we are, actually, but we don't give a shit.

"No moah hiding?" she asks, chewing on her lip.

"Don't look so nervous," I murmur and reach up to release her plump bottom lip. "You have to know by now that you've ruined me for anyone else."

"It's mutual," she giggles, melting into me when I put my arms around her. I hug her tightly and kiss her hair; she snakes her own arms around my midsection and looks up at me. "Um." Another giggle. I grin and rest my forehead to hers. "I'm pretty drunk—"

"Every good speech starts that way," I chuckle.

"—but there's something I want you to know. And I'll mean it tomorrow and every day that follows, too."

"What?" Noses touching. "Tell me."

She exhales shakily and licks her lips. "You make me love you."

"Fuck m-me," I splutter. My eyes grow wide; never in a million years did I think she'd say *that*. While I'm sure enough about myself, as well as our relationship, to know where I'm and we are headed, I guess I didn't expect her to fall as quickly as I did.

"That's...one way to put it," she chuckles awkwardly.

And I'm an asshole. I cringe. I want to smack myself.

"I'm sorry—my response should've been a bit sweeter than that." I grimace and squeeze my eyes shut. Can I perhaps blame the alcohol I've consumed? "If it makes you feel any better, it's very romantic in my head." I open my eyes again; then I frown, repeating the last words to myself. Nope. That didn't sound good, either. But judging by the little smirk on Isabella's lips, I'd say I'm at least amusing her. "Jesus Christ, rewind." I cup her cheeks and crash my mouth to hers. "I love you too, Isabella," I mumble into the kiss. "So fucking much."

"Oh, thank Jesus," she breathes out and fists my hair. Our kiss grows hungrier and hungrier, tongues mingling, and lips locking completely. She tastes so fucking good—there's no getting enough of her.

In the background, there's groaning, hollering, shouting, complaining, gagging, and cheering.

"We should—we should get behind closed doors," I suggest, groaning as she presses her tits to my chest. "Oh, fuck..."

"Mmm, yeah," she gasps.

"What the fuck?!" Well, of course. It's not a party until Logan is here. "I thought she turned you down, Dad!"

Isabella laughs breathlessly and drops her forehead to my collarbone; meanwhile, I scrub a hand over my face, trying to calm down my cock and my pulse, and look up to see my son standing on the last step of the stairs that lead to the second floor.

"Obviously you were wrong, son," I deadpan.

He grins. "No shit. I'm impressed—didn't think you had it in ya."

I give him a look. "The faith you have in me is astounding."

"I say that about my boys all the time." Isabella chuckles and reaches up to...I don't know, wipe some lipstick off my mouth, I think. "And look at'chu, Logan. Your father's not the only one scoring, I see."

That makes me take in the sight of my son once more, and I think Isabella's right. The buttons on his shirt are buttoned all wrong, his skinny black tie is crooked and loosened, and... "Is that lipstick on your collar?" I point to him, smirking.

Before Logan can reply, a sulking JJ—my dear nephew—trudges down the stairs, too, followed by all the kids and Nina. And JJ's look tells me that Logan obviously won...well, I'm not gonna say Nina's *heart*, but...her attention for the night? Hell, I don't know.

"You're the best babysitter ever, hon," Rose tells Nina with a wry grin. Isabella and Alice giggle while Nina ducks her head. Emmett scowls. I think he needs to get laid. "It's a good thing your fawtha's asleep, huh?"

"Good for *Logan* that Carmine's asleep," I point out, still smirking.

Carmine is like Emmett and Finn. My son will only stand a chance if he's drunk—meaning, he'll have the balls to stand up to Nina's dad. In other words, Logan is just like me.

"Okay, okay, enough of this," Isabella says. "It's getting late, and we all hafta get up early in the morning. Time for bed!"

"I can lead you to *your* room, sis," Emmett offers quickly with a glare thrown my way.

"That's okay, Em." Isabella waves him off as she drags me toward the stairs. "Edward sure knows the way by now—he'll take me."

Yeah, I'm so not looking Emmett in the eye after that one.

"What about Haley and Jaden?" My sister speaks up.

Isabella and I exchange a look. There's no way our children are up for an adult discussion about this right now, and neither are we. They need to let this settle for a bit before we talk to them.

"We have those breakfast plans with them tomorrow," I mention quietly.

Isabella nods pensively. "Yeah, we can deal with them then. Did you give Jaden that extra gift? Which, for the record, you still haven't told me about—what it is, I mean."

No, because Finn and Dylan advised me against telling Isabella secrets.

I shake my head. "Not yet—we didn't, uh, really get around to doing that."

"Same here," she laughs. "We'll just have to do that tomorrow, too."

So, it's done. No more partying tonight. I'm just going to take my sexy woman to bed, and everything is out in the open. Hot damn, my night just got better.

"Good night, guys," I call, keeping my eyes on Isabella. "We'll deal with everything tomorrow."

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December 14th

EPOV

Holding her hands in my right one, I keep them on the pillow above her head and drive my cock deeply into her pussy, our mouths never disconnecting. If we've been passionate before, it doesn't hold a fucking candle to this. It's raw, instinctual, sloppy, and goddamn glorious.

"I love you," she moans.

"Damn," I grit out, muscles tensing. Slamming into her, I kiss her harder than before; her actions and words make me feel all desperate. "I love you, sweetheart." I drop my forehead to hers and lock eyes with her. She's it for me. Even after only two weeks, I know. Life experience and the intensity of how strongly I feel—I'm just so incredibly sure she's the one I'll love beyond stupidity. To hell and back. Forever and a day. All that. "God, you're fucking beautiful."

"And you—fuck," she cries out when I start rubbing her wet clit. Her entire body tenses, back arching and head digging into the mattress. "Jesus, I'm

marrying your fat cock one of these days. I already," she whimpers as I nip at her jaw, "told the women at the party."

"Oh yeah?" I chuckle, out of breath. "But if you're gonna marry my *cock*," I whisper in her ear, at the same time grinding deeper and deeper into her soaked pussy, "then you're gonna have to marry the rest of me, too."

"Jesus Christ, Edward!" she gasps and claws at my back. I thrust harder, faster, deeper. "All of you. You're mine."

"No doubt about it," I mumble. Looking down between our writhing bodies, I watch as my erection sinks into her only to slip out glistening wet. I feel her contracting around me, her body trembling—heaving with heavy breaths. "I guess that means I'll have your yes when I propose, huh?" I smile and dip down to suck a nipple into my mouth. Whenever my teeth graze her sensitive skin, she moans and digs her heels into my ass, spurring me on.

"Hell yeah," she groans breathily. "In—In fact, lemme encourage you. Next month—" she kisses my throat, tongue snaking out over my Adam's apple; it makes me moan "—I'm going to Paris. Work thing. Come with me?"

"Motherfuck..." The woman actually causes me to whimper. Nodding, I claim her mouth in another hungry kiss. "Count me in, sweetheart." I've never really been a spontaneous person, but I feel it's time. It's time I focus a little more on myself and what *I* want. And what I want is to go to Paris with Isabella. Some time together—just the two of us. "But...for your information," I pant, feeling a bead of sweat trickling down my temple, "I hardly need encouragement to ask you—to marry me. *Jesus*, I'm close, honey." I squeeze my eyes shut; Isabella clamps down around me like a fucking vise.

It's only a few seconds later that we lose it and fall apart through erratic movements.

We groan, curse, and ride out waves of indescribable pleasure, chests heaving and muscles tensing.

"I swear," she pants, "religious muthafuckin' experience..."

I laugh breathlessly and collapse next to her, spots filling my vision. Christ. I blink a couple times. The word "spent" doesn't say half of it.

Then I feel something sharp digging into my back, causing me to flinch, and I reach behind me to pull out a... "The hell?" I hold up a book, one that happens to be written by me. It's one of my earlier thrillers.

"Hmm?" Isabella sits up and looks to me over her shoulder. Her eyes light up a little when she spots the cover. "Oh! Yeah—" she bobs her head and stands up "—I bought your books back in the city. You're crazy good, honey. Be right back—gotta go to the bathroom." She tiptoes hurriedly, naked and delicious, into the bathroom and closes the door.

Drawing the covers over my sated body, a smile stretches out over my lips as I place the book on the nightstand. That she went so far as to buy all those... That matters a lot to me. It's not only my livelihood to write thrillers, it's also my passion. I love the research, the gritty details, the solving cases, the chase of evil, the suspense... And if she says she's bought all of them, I'd say she's got her next year all booked when it comes to reading. Because in my fifteen years as a published author, I've released twelve volumes.

When Isabella reemerges from the bathroom, she walks back to me, slips under the covers, and snuggles up against me. In an Isabella move, as I've discovered, she slides her feet up my calves, warming them up. Her feet—not my calves.

"So cold," I murmur and hug her to me.

"Yeah, yeah." She waves me off as I kiss her on the forehead. "I got beef wit'chu. Explain yourself—you killed Colin in *Haunted Streets*. How could you?!"

"Oh," I chuckle heartily and bury my face in the crook of her neck. It's where she smells the sweetest. "I really fucking love you, Isabella." I doubt she understands how much I appreciate her right now. Back when I was still struggling, learning, and busting my ass to get something published, Charlotte was polite enough to ask me what my stories were about, but she never read anything. Honestly, I didn't offer, but I think that's because I held out hope that she'd ask—be curious and ask.

"I'm serious!" she whines. "You killed him! And don't get me started on that twist. Like, how that cop—Peter!—turned out to be Colin's crazy stalker dad. *Jesus Christ*." She's getting all animated, now sitting up and gesturing with her hands as she speaks. "I thought for shoah it was Marcus—since he was obsessed with Colin's girlfriend..." She shakes her head, lost in thought.

I just smile and kiss her hip, my hand squeezing and rubbing its way up her thigh.

~oOo~

December 15th

"I feel bad you gotta deal wit' Jaden and Haley on your own now," she chuckles sleepily against my chest. I laugh through my nose and kiss the top of her head; she smells so good after the shower we just shared. "I guess I should go downstairs, huh?"

"Mmhmm," I hum, still dropping kisses in her hair. Her assistant will be here in a few minutes, hence Isabella heading down. In the meantime, I'm

going up to the third floor and Haley and Jaden's room. I'm having breakfast with my daughter, but before that I'm handing over the gift I have for Jaden. "So, when will I see you today?"

It's hard to believe our children are getting married today.

"Well..." With a light sigh, she takes a step back and smooths down her snug hoodie. She's dressed for comfort; the ladies' immediate plans are all about the final preparations for today's wedding. No fancy clothing for that. Before that, she's meeting with Eric, and then she's got breakfast with Jaden. "The plan is for us to meet here—" she jerks her chin at the door to her room, which I have behind me—"at noon." I nod, knowing that. When I asked earlier, she gave me a long spiel about the beautification my daughter's going to endure, although she loves that crap. "And we won't be finished until the wedding starts." Which is at two PM. "Before that..." She blows out a breath and pulls her hair back in a high ponytail.

I smile a little ruefully. "I suppose I'll see you at the ceremony, then."

She mirrors my smile and nods with a cute pout. "If we didn't have so much to do..."

Yeah. Isabella's not the only one with a million things to do. There's really too little time, but there are plenty of people pitching in. Still, there won't be many breaks.

"I love you." I duck down and steal a quick kiss. "We'll see each other in passing." The inn isn't all that huge, and we're all going to be running around. "Wish me luck with the kids." I finish with a wry chuckle.

Truth be told, we aren't very worried at all. Dylan and Logan are already on board; the only question marks at this point, really, are Finn, Haley, Jaden, and Emmett. The last one is just being an overprotective brother,

and Isabella has assured me that Rose is more than qualified to keep him in line.

After wishing each other good luck on today's...obstacles...we part ways, and I head upstairs, pausing briefly for a deep breath or two, and knock on Haley and Jaden's door.

The envelope in the back pocket of my jeans might as well be on fire. It has nothing to do with his bachelor party last night; it's just something I want to give him since he didn't ask for anything elaborate for yesterday. But now, with everything up in the air, I'm beginning to doubt he'll accept anything from me.

A second or two later, a sleepy Haley opens the door. She's dressed much like Isabella—black yoga pants and a snug hoodie. The only difference is that Isabella wouldn't face the world without makeup. Don't ask me why; she's gorgeous with and without. But Haley, at least right now, looks like she couldn't give a fuck.

"Good morning, baby girl," I say, smiling carefully.

She gives me a look. "It *should* be a good morning, shouldn't it? My wedding day and all..."

"Oh, come on, Haley." I'm not above begging. Okay, I am, but I can play nice. This is her big day, and I have no intention of ruining it. "Isabella isn't a casual fling—I love her, baby."

While Haley looks down to the floor, Jaden appears in the doorway, dressed in plaid pajama bottoms. "You betta' love her." He jerks his chin at me. "And you betta' treat her wid' respect."

I smirk. "You have nothing to worry about, Jaden. And good morning to you, too."

He grunts. "Woulda been nice if you talked to me and my brothers first... She's our motha', after all."

I point to Haley. "That's my daughter—my baby girl. I don't recall you speaking to me before you decided to marry her." I cock a brow.

"Shit," he mutters, averting his eyes and running a hand through his messy hair. "Yeah, all right."

I purse my lips to keep from smiling. "So, we good? You treat Haley with the respect, love, and devotion she deserves. And I'll do the same with Isabella."

"My mother-in-law," Haley whimpers.

I sigh and roll my eyes. They really need to get over that. They won't be related, for Christ's sake. If I have my way, I will propose to Isabella in a month; she will be a Cullen soon. My little Haley is about to become a McCarty.

"We'll..." Jaden grimaces and kisses Haley on the forehead. "We'll get past this, I guess."

"Thanks," I drawl. "So, breakfast, baby?" I look to Haley. "Will you let your old man take you out?"

Isabella will have breakfast with Jaden in the pub, so I thought I'd take Haley to the quaint coffee shop a few minutes away from here.

"Yeah, okay," she mumbles. "Downstairs?"

"No, I was thinking that coffee shop down the road."

She nods with a dip of her chin. "I'll get my boots and jacket."

Once she's out of sight, I reach into my back pocket and hand over the envelope to Jaden. "Here."

"What's this?" He turns it over then looks at me in question.

I rub the back of my neck. "Just something extra. You didn't ask for a lot for your bachelor party, so..." I trail off.

"Oh. Thank you. You really didn't have to, Mr. C. I got what I wanted last night." He cringes. "And then some."

I just pull a face and look away. But when I hear him working on opening the envelope, I stop him. "Wait 'til I'm gone." This moment is already packed with awkwardness; there's no need to add to it by his opening that gift.

"'Til you're gone?" His forehead creases. "You know, if someone gives you a letter and then he says to wait to read it 'til they're gone..."

"Oh," I laugh a little, and the tension grows lighter. "Funny." Even Jaden cracks a grin. "Sorry, son. It's not a friggin' suicide letter."

"Okay, I'm done." A sullen Cullen reappears. "Let's go." Reaching up on her toes, she kisses Jaden's chin, says, "Love you", and passes me with a sigh. Great. This is going to be fun.

"I'll see you at the wedding, baby!" Jaden hollers down the hall.

That causes Haley to spin around, and there's the huge smile I've missed so much. "I'll be the one in white." She blows a kiss to Jaden.

"How cute," I mutter.

~oOo~

My Lexus is eerily quiet as we drive over to the coffee shop, and even as we enter the rustic, cozy little place, the silence drags on. We order some bagels and cappuccinos, find a corner with two big armchairs, and sit down, removing coats, beanies, and scarves; meanwhile, I'm trying to start a conversation that won't be all stilted.

The only thing I can come up with is, "So, you're getting married today."

She gives her cappuccino a small smile. "Yeah." And I wait, knowing this is going to work. It takes some time, but that little smile grows. That's what matters. Like I said, this is her day. "I can't wait, Daddy. I love him so much."

My eyes get a little misty, so I busy myself spreading some cream cheese on a bagel. My throat feels too thick—like it's closing up. And I admit that I hadn't really expected this day to come. Well, at least not this soon. She's only eighteen, and I still see the baby girl with pigtails, a bounce in her step, and summer knees. She always insisted on Strawberry Shortcake Band-Aids, and a kiss to her nose followed.

"I'm happy for you," I say, clearing my throat. "As long as you are."

"Oh, Dad." She pouts. I smile and shake my head. "Don't start. You'll just get *me* started."

I clear my throat again. "Ignore me, baby girl."

Haley will never know the feeling of giving someone away, but I hope Jaden will. Because it fucking sucks. I won't be number one for Haley anymore. Though, I suspect I haven't been for a while.

"Hey." She reaches over and squeezes my hand. "I'm still a daddy's girl, you know. That will never change." She makes a face. "Even if you're doing disgusting things with my mother-in-law."

I chuckle thickly and quickly blink away the moisture in my eyes.

"You're the best dad in the world," she whispers.

"Stop it," I warn. This girl knows how to melt me. She may be spoiled... bratty...but she loves with her whole heart. She's loyal, sticks up for her friends, and family has always been most important to her. Make no mistake, she's responsible for more than half the grays in my hair. She's hated me numerous times, screamed, broken curfews, gotten caught shoplifting once...she even got expelled from school one time when she punched a girl in the face. Long story. One that involves a volleyball team, some beef over a boy, and backstabbing the way only high school girls know. But aside from the downsides of growing up, she's also matured, learned from her mistakes, and owned up to it.

She's given me eighteen years of drama. Eighteen years of, "No one knows what I'm going through, Daddy!" Eighteen years of Father's Day gifts that range from ties, coffee mugs, drawings, kisses, money clips, cufflinks, and necklaces made with pasta, too much glue, and glitter. Eighteen years of slamming doors. And eighteen years of being the only one she turns to—sooner or later.

Picking up her hand, I kiss the top of it. "I love you, Haley." With a gentle squeeze, I let her go. "Just don't forget about me." I wink.

"Always with the drama," she jokes, rolling her eyes theatrically. "In all seriousness, though?" Her eyes soften. "There are still a few traditions that are ours."

I nod; there's no way I'm letting them go. Whenever I publish a new book, for instance, Haley and Logan have made it a tradition to take me out to dinner. When they were twelve, they gathered their savings and took me to my favorite coffee shop in our neighborhood, and when they got older, we went to a restaurant. Sure, their savings always had a weird

way of making their way back to their piggy banks, but that's not what it's about. Not all children would bother to celebrate their parents in any way unless it's a birthday.

"I suppose you could bring Bella along, though," Haley adds with a little smirk. "You really love her, don't you?"

"I do—but, baby?" I release a breath, phrasing my words. "Just like Isabella will save a special spot for her boys, I'm the same with you and Logan. There will be things we'll mesh together as a family..." Which I admit I'm very eager to do. I've always loved the idea of having a big family, and I'm looking forward to more of what I already have.

"There will be things that are only for the three of us?" Haley finishes.

I nod. "Exactly."

"I like that." She smiles. "So, um, are you gonna move in together?"

I ponder that, though not for long. The answer is pretty obvious. "Most likely. We know what we want, and..." I shrug. "We'll be a family." There's no rush, but I do see it happening in a very near future. Granted, I'd like to take out Isabella on dates, get to know her even better—as well as her sons—but we won't take any steps backward. We're in a committed relationship already—we love each other.

Thinking back, I realize that it wasn't *really* the short length of Haley and Jaden's relationship that threw me off when we first got up here to Vermont. It was their ages. Still is, if only a little. They're very young, and there's so much of the world and themselves still to be discovered. Obviously, as a parent, this raises red flags. But it is what it is. They're definitely in love, and they're adults; it's their decision. The only thing Isabella and I can do now is support them—guide them, help them.

"Are you gonna have a baby together?" she asks next, and...

What the fuck?

"What kind of question is that?" I croak, panicking. It suddenly feels like I have a tie that needs to be loosened; alas, I'm only wearing a Henley. No tie in sight.

Haley shrugs. "Valid question, me thinks."

"Oh, you thinks?" I scoff, dying inside.

"*Oui.*"

I guess I have more to discuss with Isabella now.

"Well, this is your wedding day!" I fake a cheery smile. "Let's focus on that, shall we? You excited?"

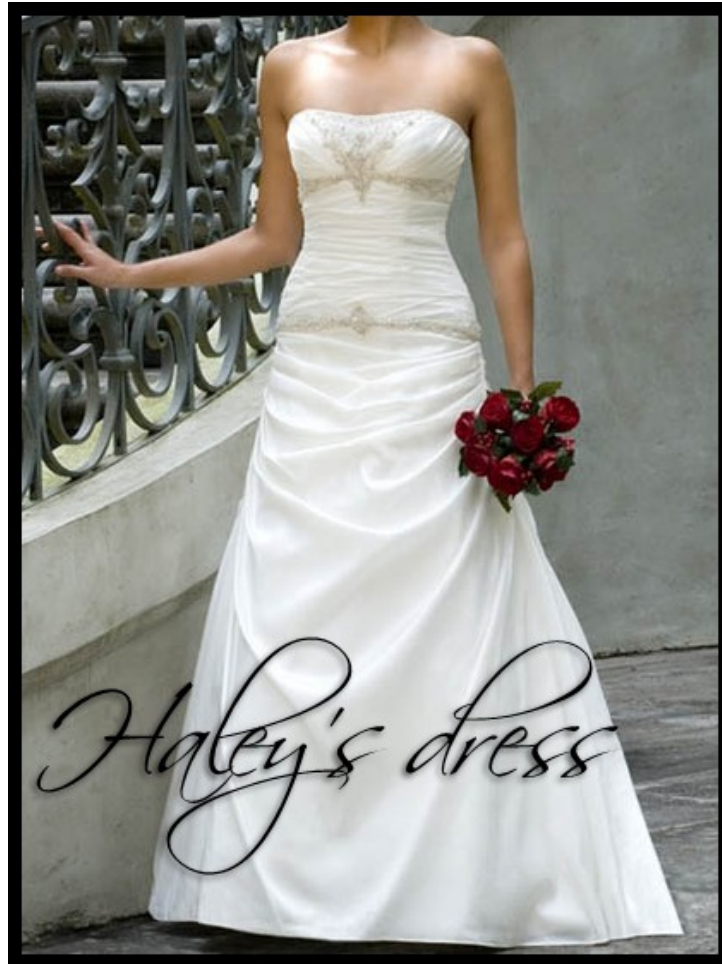
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December 15th

BPOV



"You look perfect, honey," I murmur thickly, standing behind Haley who's looking at herself in the mirror. A bit misty-eyed, I dab a tissue under my eyes, careful not to ruin my makeup.



It's just the two of us now in my room; the other girls have gone downstairs.

Edward should be here any moment.

"I'm nervous," she breathes out, and her wide eyes meet mine in the reflection. "What if I can't be a good wif-"

"Don't even go there." I shut her down fast. She will find her way with my son—I know that. I can feel it. "I have faith in you both." I nod along with my words and retrieve a small box from my nightstand. "And if you find

yourselves in moments of doubt, your father and I will be there to smack sense into youse."

Haley giggles through tears and nods as she checks her makeup in the mirror. "He's the most important person in my life, Bella."

"Good." I grin and take a shaky yet deep breath. "This is for you." I hold out the box to her, and she takes it gingerly, curiosity in her eyes. "It..." I clear my throat. "It used to belong to my mother." Ignoring her gasp as she flips the lid open, I trace the gold heart around my neck; it's the same one. "My nonna on my father's side started the tradition. All McCarty women, we have that necklace, that heart locket." I swallow my emotions and help her put it on. "Inside, there's a picture of Jaden." I smile tearfully; she mirrors my expression. Inside my own locket, there's a picture of my parents and one of my sons.

I don't wear it every day, but almost. And...I don't know, if...when...I become a Cullen, perhaps it's a tradition I can start as Edward's wife, too.

"This is too much," Haley cries quietly. "It's so gorgeous."

I shush her, wave her off, and say, "Just wear it proudly." I wink. "My mother, God rest her soul—" I do the Sign of the Cross—"—was a proud woman. She had balls. You need to have balls to live with our juicehead men." I laugh a little, thinking about my breakfast this morning with Jaden. Between a couple rounds of crying, I warned my son that my plan is to be here for Haley—to tell her all the dirty secrets on how to handle the men in our family.

"I'm ready for the challenge." Haley grins.

I smile. "I know you are, sweetheart." I cup her cheeks, staring into her bright green eyes, full of warmth and youth. "Okay. Let's get you married." Just as the last word leaves my mouth, there's a knock on the

door, and Haley draws a shaky breath outta nervousness, though she looks so excited. "That should be your father."

Heels clicking on the floor, I make my way to the door and open it to see not only one of my boys, but two. Although, one of them is certainly a man.

"Hey." Dylan's fidgeting with his tie. "I'mma escort you." He gives me a goofy grin and holds out his arm.

I'm both touched and amused by his cuteness. "How sweet of you, baby." Flicking my eyes to Edward, I sigh in contentment at the mere sight of him. He's wearing a black suit, a crisp white button-down, a black tie, shiny shoes, and a sexy watch. His hair is somewhat tamed, and he looks...well, to die for.

"You look so beautiful, Isabella," he murmurs as he gives me a slow once-over.

"Thank you, my handsome man." I reach up and kiss his cheek, wiping off the lipstick that remains afterward, and then I hold out a hand in Haley's direction. "But there's someone here who's even more beautiful."

Edward looks over to Haley, and he melts my heart when his eyes well up a little. I know it's an emotional day for him—the symbolism and all that... Only a father and a daughter can understand that kind of bond.

"You know what?" he asks quietly, clearing his throat behind a fist. "Just this once, I'm not going to disagree with you." With a whispered "I love you" and a kiss to my forehead, he walks over to Haley and presses his lips to her temple. "My baby girl." It suddenly feels like Dylan and I are intruding on a special moment, so I point to the door, and my son gets it. "You look stunning, Haley." That's the last thing I hear before I quietly click the door shut behind us.

"Christ." I place a hand on my chest, about to cry. "That was so sweet."

"What?" Dylan's clueless.

But I grin up at him, knowing that he'll get it one day. "Nothing, baby," I chuckle, linking my arm with his. "Let's get this shindig started."

And when we reach the first floor, it feels like I'm gonna cry all over again. The patio at the back of the inn that was once dreary-looking and covered in snow has been transformed into a fairy tale—the perfect spot for a winter wedding.

Dylan and I walk down the aisle in the white tent, red and white roses all over. Candles and heaters are lined up along the walls, and four billowy swags of fabrics in creamy white hang from the center of the ceiling—with a chandelier—and end in the corners of the big tent.

Friends and family surround us on both sides of the aisle, but I pay them no mind as I spot my oldest son at the end, smiling nervously.

Kissing Dylan's cheek, I tell him softly to take his seat at the front, and then I walk up to Jaden.

"Nervous?" I smile knowingly as he grasps my hands in his.

"Yeah." He swallows and nods. His eyes flick between me and the doors behind me. "Is—*is* she okay?"

"Better than okay," I assure him. "Are you ready?" Big question, but I already know the answer. In fact, we covered all this at breakfast.

Another thing we covered—talked about—was Edward's gift to Jaden. Or two, actually. The first one, while extremely generous, didn't blow my mind simply because I've already discovered how giving Edward is. The gift was that Edward has picked up the tab for the wedding, and it's

something I'm going to argue with him about soon enough. 'Cause I'll be damned if we don't go halvesies. We've already bought Haley and Jaden's wedding gift together, so why on earth wouldn't we share the bill on our stay in Vermont? Right?

Anyway...the second gift was what blew my mind.

In the envelope Edward evidently gave my son this morning, there was only a note about the two gifts; Edward wrote that Jaden was to seek out Logan for the second one when it was time to get dressed. Which my son did. And Logan was in his room, waiting with a very sentimental present.

Apparently, back in the day when Edward's ex-wife was pregnant, Carlisle and Edward had made a bet on the pregnancy. Edward was convinced he was having twin boys, and Carlisle was sure it'd be a boy and a girl. But in his conviction, Edward went out and bought two pairs of identical cuff links, stating that his *sons* were going to wear them for their first high school dance one day.

Alas, Haley is very much a girl.

But Edward never threw away that second set of cuff links, and today he gave them to Jaden, along with a note that said,

Logan will tell you the story about a bet I made once.

It's taken eighteen years, but now I can tell my father that I won.

—Edward

I may or may not have shed a tear or two...*or countless...*over that note.

My guess is that Logan brought the cuff links up here at Edward's insistence.

"Yes," Jaden answers firmly, bringing me back to the present. "It's just a big day." He clears his throat as the justice of the peace joins us. "Maybe you should take your seat, Ma."

"Okay." I kiss his cheek, too. "Mommy loves you, hon. God—" I gotta pinch his cheek a little "—so fuckin' handsome." My eyes flicker to the man—Tyler—who's officiating. "You're not a priest and we're not in a church—I can curse." I point to my chest and arch a brow, daring him to disagree.

He just chuckles.

"Bella, get over here." Logan's grinning at me, seated in the first row.

Finn's smirking. "Yeah—c'mea', Mom."

Undeterred by their amusement, I smile and walk over, sitting my ass down between the two. Dylan's on the other side of Finn, and Logan's closest to the aisle. "Handsome boys." I pinch Logan's cheek and then Finn's. I can do that—I'm Mommy McCarty. I have rights. Peering over Finn and Dylan, I see that there's plenty of room, so I say, "Let's scoot down a little. Gotta make room for Edward."

"It's been what, ten minutes since you saw him?" Logan chuckles as we scoot away from the aisle. "And you already miss him?"

"Switch places wid' me." I stand up and wait as Logan slides over to Finn. That's better. Now I'll have Edward next to me. "It's not my fault, you know—that I miss him, I mean," I point out and sit down again. Looking behind me, I exchange smiles with Rose, Alice, and Haley's friends. Eric, my assistant, is standing by the door; he's ready with my camera. My brother's wearing a bitchy look. But he'll get over it. Nobody wants to see their little sister with some guy, but he has to realize that he's being

stupid. I hope Rose will enlighten him. If she doesn't, I got two fists very willing.

"So, whose fault is it?" Logan smirks his father's smirk.

I wink. "Edward's, obviously." This is true. Had my man not been so wonderful...

"When does it start?!" I hear Carlisle yell somewhere behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I see him and Masen on the other side of the aisle, a couple rows down. "I'm hungry!"

"Stop being such a fucking baby, Dad!" Alice hollers back.

"Oh!" And now Masen's getting in on it. "You kiss your husband wit' that mouth, Ali?!"

I laugh.

"It's okay. I like her mouth dirty," Jasper says, the smirk evident in his voice.

Rose is about to say something next, but the music begins which shuts us all up mad fast.

"Holy shit," I breathe out, clutching Logan's arm as we all turn toward the doors. "This is it."

Fuck butterflies; the winged creatures in my belly are like huge birds.

And when I see Edward and Haley, it's like those birds are trying to fly outta me.

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December 15th

Dylan's POV



Coming to a stop next to Jaden and Haley, I loosen my tie and shuffle with my feet. "Um, we gotta dance." I wave a finger between Haley and me. Looking over my shoulder, I see Mom's encouraging smile and Mr. C's smirk; they're sitting with Aunt Rose and Uncle Em.

"Oh, we do?" Haley's grinning as I turn back to her. I nod quickly; it's what my mom said. She wants Eric to get photos of us all dancing, and I'm the only one who hasn't danced with Haley. Even Finn has.

"Take care of her for me, little bro." Jaden smirks, slaps me on the shoulder, and leaves the dance floor.

Releasing a breath, I step forward and awkwardly raise my arms, and Haley clasps my left hand, resting the other one on my back. *Jesus Christ.* Dancing ain't for me. Instead I'd rather get more cake and play on my iPhone. See, I downloaded this mad cool app—

"So, what did you think of the wedding?" Haley interrupts my thoughts.

"Uh." I look down at my feet, making sure I don't step on her toes. "It was good, I guess." The food was fucking delicious. Carmine knows how to cook is all I'm saying. And the cake Carmine's wife made...*fuck me*. She's not here, Carmine's wife, 'cause she's in a wheelchair—something about diabetes or whatever—and opted to stay back in Jersey, but Carmine brought the cake, and I want more.

My cousin, Henry, and one of Alice's kids dance into us, so I shout, "Watch it!" Like focusing on this isn't hard as it is—we gotta add a damn obstacle course, too?

"You're so cute, Dylan." Haley snickers.

I shrug and look down again. *One, two, three...one, two, three...*

"So, what do you think of our parents being together?" My brother's new wife obviously feels the need to converse.

I bet she's part of the obstacle course.

"It's cool," I say casually. But honestly? I'm happy about it. Mr. C is cool, and I never had a father figure in my life. I know my mom was dating some guy named Garrett or something—like a year ago—but we never met him. She wasn't that serious about him, and when she told us he didn't like any type of sport whatsoever, Finn and I thought he had to go. Thankfully, Mom dumped him a couple months later, though I don't think it was about sports. I think she just thought he was boring.

But Mr. C can roll with us. He was a little dull at first, but he got his shit together eventually. I like him—he's nice. And he's sweet to my mom.

"You don't speak much," Haley observes, smiling.

I nod. "Okay."

Across the dance floor, I see Mom talking to Carmine; he's staring daggers at Logan and Nina—his daughter. They're dancing, and I'm thinking it's a dad thing. Mr. C didn't like Jaden at first, either, so maybe Carmine needs to calm his tits for a while before he approves of Logan dancing with Nina? I don't fucking know.

Finally, Eric appears with Ma's camera. "Smile!" he says in his gay singsong voice.

Haley's beaming like the sun, and I plaster a smile on my face, too.

Next to me, Mr. C joins us on the dance floor with his sister—Alice. She's kinda cool, too—like Mom and Aunt Rose.

Carlisle and Masen toss candy out on the floor, yelling "Get!" and "Catch!" to the kids.

They crack me up.

"They're not dogs, you old fools!" Jasper cackles.

But the kids crawl on the floor to chase the candy...

Finn's POV

"Ten bucks on Carmine deckin' Logan," I say quietly, leaning closer to my big brother. "Just look at him." Across the floor, I see my mother trying to calm Carmine down. Aunt Rose is on her way over, too.

Logan and Nina are dancing, oblivious.

"No bet," Jaden chuckles. "And if Carmine won't do it, JJ might." He jerks his chin at Jasper and Alice's oldest son. JJ looks just like his dad—it's fucking freaky.

"Go fetch!" Carlisle shouts, seated at the next table, and throws out what looks like candy canes.

Henry, Lily, Mary, and Joseph dive for the candy.

I shake my head.

"Jesus Christ, Dad!" Alice waves her fist at Carlisle and Masen.

Mr. C, who's dancing with Alice, just mutters something I can't hear and shakes his head.

I glare at him, just 'cause.

"Cool it, bro," Jaden whispers to me.

I face him with wide eyes. "What'd I do now?"

"You're thinking of ways to clip Edward," he says frankly, reaching for his Jack and Coke. I grunt and wiggle my toes, hating these fancy fuckin' shoes. I want my Jordans. "Mom's happy, you know."

"Oh, not you too!" I groan and palm my face. Then I face him with an incredulous expression. "And what—now it's *Edward*? What happened to Mr. C? Huh?"

Jaden shrugs. "I'm weirded out, too, but...I don't fuckin' know. Dee's right." He nods at our baby bro on the floor. "This is a good thing. Like I said, Mom's happy." He gives me a look. "And he's my father-in-law now. We's family—might as well get along." He fidgets with his cuff links, some weird little smile on his face. "Ma could do worse."

"She could also do betta'," I point out, speaking with my hands. "Jesus Christ, she's got us. Ain't that enough?"

Fine, I guess I can admit that Mr. C's pretty cool, but dating my mother? I don't fucking think so. For all I know, Mom's only had sex three times, and that's to create me and my brothers. End of fucking story. She's got us. She don't need nobody else.

"What if they have babies?" I whisper, paling.

They'll...what if they forget the kids they already have?

Jaden scrunches his nose. "I don't think so. Mom—I guess...I mean, she's only thirty-five, but Edward's over forty."

"Still." I glare at Mr. C again.

"Look—" my brother faces me fully "—you're just scared—"

"The fuck I am!" I shout, then lower my voice. "I ain't fuckin' scared."

"You are." He purses his lips and nods. "Edward's already close wid' Dylan, and—he's my father-in-law. You're scared you'll be left out."

I stare at him, gritting my teeth. What he said...that's not true. Is it? No. Fuck that shit.

"I know I'm right." He smirks. "But you don't got shit to worry about." He leans close. "I heard them talking at dinner." My brows furrow, anger still boiling under the surface. "Edward was talking about you," he tells me.

"Some shit about getting to know you—I don't know. They're all gonna do it. Ma's gonna help Haley and me decorate our place in Brooklyn, and Mom was talking about finding something that could be hers and Logan's thing, too."

"What's that gotta do wit' me?" I point to my chest.

"Edward mentioned Giants' tickets." He shrugs. "Like, youse could go to games together."

Huh. I sit back in my seat.

"I think he's legit—genuine." Jaden sits back, too, and sips his drink. He makes googly eyes at his wife, who's now dancing with her uncle—Jasper. "Think about it, Finn." He speaks to me, but his eyes remain on Haley. "He wouldn't try if he didn't really care."

I guess...

"Finn!" Lily, my youngest cousin, appears next to me, outta breath.

"How you doin', hon?" I grin and touch her flushed cheek.

"Dance wit' me!" She tugs on my hand as a hip-hop version of "Drummer Boy" blares outta the speakers. I guess it's time for Christmas songs?

"Oh. I don't really dance."

She puts her hands on her hips. "You danced with Haley."

My brother chuckles. "Go dance wid' Lilybug, for fuck's sake."

I groan and let my cousin drag me away.

Aunt Rose and Mom are on the floor, too, and they're making a Jasper sandwich, something Mr. C seems to bitch about with...fuck, he's being all civil with Uncle Emmett. They're both gesturing at Rose and Mom, and when Jasper grins at them, Mr. C and Uncle Em flip him off. What, does that mean they're all buddy-buddy now?

Mom blows Mr. C a kiss which thaws him up. He's so whipped. *Christ.*

"Wait, who's this?" I point to the ceiling, talking about the music. Aw, man, it's that goddamn Bieber. "This sucks." Busta Rhymes is good and all, but he loses face by doing a song with Bieber.

"I'mma marry Justin when I grow up," Lily says matter-of-factly. "Dance now, Finn!"

Jesus.

"Lemme stand on your feet," she adds.

I shoot Jaden a pleading look, but he just laughs as Jake and Sam join him.

Logan's POV

"Your cousin's gotta staring problem," Nina whispers, peering at JJ—I presume—behind me.

Spinning her around in the dance floor, I make sure that I'm facing JJ instead. Sure enough, he's staring. I smirk at him, to which he flips me off. I chuckle. "He's just crushing on you." I dip down and kiss her softly, loving that little sigh she lets out each time I pull her close or something.

"You crushin' on me, too, Mr. Cullen?" She smiles coyly, but I know she's anything but. 'Cause Nina Rizzi is going to be the death of me, I swear to God. Her dark brown hair, eyes just as dark, and spectacular curves will do the job. I mean...last night, when she was watching the kids? Well, she didn't really watch them as soon as they'd fallen asleep, that's for sure. After a night of flirting, she practically jumped me—pushed me into a linen closet on the third floor.

It got a little wild...

She blew my mind, amongst other things.

"For me to know, baby." I wink at her. She giggles and sucks her plump bottom lip into her mouth, something that goes straight to my dick. "Stop

that," I warn quietly and release her lip. "Dangerous girl." *Dangerous Jersey girl, to be correct.*

"Excuse me, lovebirds." Bella appears next to us, smirking.

I clear my throat, willing my semi to die down quickly. "Yes?"

There's no denying that being around Nina makes me forget where we are.

"Lemme cut in, hon," Bella tells her.

Oh, shit. *Grampa's balls, Grampa's balls, Grampa's balls, Gramp-*

That did it.

"Sure thing. I better get back to the kitchen, anyway." Nina hops up and gives me a smooch before walking away, shimmying her ass as she goes.

I hold back a groan.

"Boy, are you in trouble," Bella chuckles as I place my hand on her back. I don't know the song that's playing, but it's pretty calm. "Answer quick—what's the color of her eyes?"

"Brown." I frown, wondering why she'd ask that. "Dark brown." I change my mind, thinking back. And there's a ring around the brown which is almost gold. "Um." I shake my head. "Why?"

She just grins up at me and shakes her head. "Another one bites the dust."

"Sure..." Why even bother deciphering women? "So, what's up?"

"Two things—twirl me," she says, and I do, making her laugh. I crack a grin in return. "You dance betta' than my three."

"Dad taught me," I admit with a shrug. Okay, he didn't teach me personally, but he made sure I learned. Aunt Alice was the teacher. "You mentioned two things," I remind her.

"Oh yeah." She nods. "You hear anything from Maggie?"

I shake my head no. For today, I'm on paparazzi duty. Apparently, there are already pictures of Jaden and Haley on Twitter—pictures taken here in Vermont—and Bella and Dad want to make sure no one finds us here. And if they do, they want to secure my sister and Jaden's privacy. Since Haley's been with Jaden for a few months now, she's already been exposed to paparazzi, but it's a new concept for the rest of us.

Anyway, Maggie's been asked to keep an eye on the front of the inn, and if she sees anything, she'll go to me. But so far, nothing.

"Good." Bella smiles in relief. "Hopefully, the guys can get out without any paps finding them, too." She's referring Jaden's bandmates as well as my sister. "And the second thing—" I spin her again, 'cause that shit makes her happy—"Dammit, Logan! I wasn't prepared," she laughs.

I laugh through my nose. "Go on. Second thing."

"Right," she chuckles. "It's almost time to start with the gifts." I nod in acknowledgement, knowing that she and Dad are giving Haley and Jaden a two-week vacation to Bermuda for when Jaden's tour is over. And since the wedding came so suddenly, without warning, we all just agreed to bring the gifts up here as opposed to send them to either Dad's place or Bella's. "So, your father and I were thinking that you could give your gift first."

That could work. Back in the city, I was struggling like hell to come up with something to give them, so Bella suggested a few things, and I finally

settled on a new digital camera. I also bought two of those digital frames that change pictures every now and then.

"Cool." I nod.

"Yeah, and a third thing." She grins slyly, and I arch a brow. "You gotta talk to Cawmine, hon."

Shit.

"I've managed to calm him down for now, but..." She shakes her head in amusement.

I gulp and nod quickly. "Got it." Can't wait. For that. Christ, is it hot in here or what?

"Son." Dad's suddenly here and claps a hand over my shoulder. "Mind if I...?"

"Nope." I take a step back, my hands clammy. I should probably run and hide—plan a great speech that will make Mr. Rizzi like me. "Uh, I'm just gonna..." I jerk a thumb over my shoulder. "Yeah." I turn toward the exit and leave.

I ignore Dad's chuckles and Bella's giggles.

Jaden's POV

Much to Jasper's chagrin, his oldest daughter, Linda, catches Haley's bouquet.

As crazy as my mother can be, I'm a little surprised she wasn't in the damn mosh pit of broads wanting to catch the roses, but she'd backed away, mumbling something about "fuckin' dignity at my age."

And now it's time for the garter...

Totally ignoring Edward's muttered curses right now, by the way.

Mom's consoling him, though.

"Get to it, hubby." Haley's seated on a chair and lifts her leg a little.

Kneeling down in front of my wife, I shoot her a wink before I disappear under her dress and kiss my way up her smooth leg. Hoots and hollers can be heard from most of the men who aren't related to Haley—Carlisle being the exception. He cheers for me to "get it" before he catches himself—that this is, in fact, his sweet little granddaughter—but then he says fuck it and starts cheering again. Wacky old man.

"Jaden!" Haley whimpers as I drop an open-mouthed kiss where her knee bends. That's one of her spots, if you know what I mean.

"You lost, Jaden?" Sam guffaws.

"I can help you, buddy!" Paul shouts.

"AY!" That'd be Paul's girlfriend. "You gotta death wish, Paulie?!"

"You're stalling, son!" Edward snaps.

Nuh-uh. I'll fear him later, but he's not taking this moment from me. When I reach Haley's thigh, I groan under my breath when I see the white lacy garter. Not only do I see that, but I also see her fucking panties. White, frilly, satiny, almost see-through. *I'm a dead man*. With another quick peek at the goods, I bite down on the garter and begin to slowly slide it down her thigh.

I resurface, victorious, with my wife's garter between my teeth. Standing up, I face the crowd of guys and stretch out the fabric between my right thumb and left forefinger, firing it off as if it was the old slingshot I had when I was a kid.

Shouts, curses, flailing arms, shoves—all from those in the middle of the floor. And then we have cackling from the sidelines.

"Got it!" Jake yells.

"No, you don't!" That's Logan.

I laugh, and Haley buries her face against my hip, giggling madly.

"I fucking got it!" JJ hollers.

"It's a wedding, son!" Alice shouts. "Watch your fucking mouth!"

Then the garter is flung into the air, landing on Finn's head.

That cracks us all up; his expression is priceless—like he's just been sentenced to die. "Oh, I don't fucking think so!" he cries out.

I'm bent over in hysterics as he quickly shoots it across the room, and that's when Sam jumps up and catches it. That suits me just fine, 'cause I know he's getting ready to pop the question to Leah. Though, different traditions say different things about the man who catches the garter and the chick who ends up with the bouquet. But whatever—this was fun.

Judging by the look on Eric's face—he's still in charge of Mom's camera—it's going to be a riot to sit down and watch these photos later.

I know that opening gifts is next, but I think I need a small break first. This day...fucking hell, it's been overwhelming. The best day in my life—no doubt about it—but overwhelming.

Haley and I got everything we wished for. Families and friends gathered. We exchanged our "I do"s. Our siblings get along. Our parents support us. And...something we didn't wish for but happened...Mom and Edward doing the nasty.

Mom's silly smile for the guy makes it worth it, though.

"What'cha thinkin' about, hubby?" Haley stands up and hugs my bicep.

I grin and kiss her hair. "It's been a good day, Mrs. McCarty."

"*Amazing.*" She smiles up at me.

I nod; she's right. Beyond that, even. "Love you." I wrap my arms around her and kiss her nose.

"I love you too."

Forehead to forehead, I ask her, "Wanna sneak away for five minutes and make out?"

Kidding aside, we could use a few minutes to come up with a speech to thank our parents for everything they've done for us, something the wife has already reminded me of.

"With you?" she chuckles. "Always."

{Epilogue}

December 31st

EPOV

6 years later...

"What do you think you're doing?" I chuckle, shoving Dylan out of the way. "Leave Mom alone when she's cooking." See, if he's next to her, that means he gets to taste the food first, and that's just not right.

"You don't fool me, Pops," Dylan laughs and shoves back. "Outta my way!"

"Boys!" Isabella shouts, wagging a wooden ladle at us. "I swear to Christ! You want dinner or not?"

"Sorry, Mom."

"Sorry, sweetheart."

Taking a few steps back, Dylan and I end up by the kitchen island instead. Safe distance and all. Well, I actually think I'm the only one who needs it. Dylan and Logan are her favorites now that they're home over the holidays—they can do no wrong. But I'm always here...

"Is dinner almost ready, Ma?!" Finn hollers from the living room.

"Patience, son!" I shout and adjust my glasses.

Kids these days. Where are their manners?

"Youse can set the table in the dining room," Isabella says, pointing to Dylan and me.

I nod dutifully and steal a kiss before walking over to the cabinet where we have the fancy china—a wedding gift from my sister and Jasper when Isabella and I got married five years ago.

"How many?" Dylan asks, about to take down glasses.

Pursing my lips, I do the mental math. Our house is like a bed and breakfast; we always have people coming over for dinner, but it's not all that often that our entire family is gathered. Tonight isn't an exception, and it means I have to count heads. Dad and Masen say New Year's Eve is a day to stay at home—away from the "mad fuckin' ruckus"—so they're a few streets over in their condo, most likely thinking about possibilities for the ball to descend on Ryan Seacrest's head. Jaden and Haley are in Manhattan; his band is playing in Times Square before the ball drops. It's

their last gig, so all the wives are with them. Alice and Jasper and their kids celebrated Christmas with us in Vermont, so they're with Jasper's family for New Year's. Emmett surprised Rose with a family vacation to the Bahamas—children, too. It was his gift to her before he starts the new year with his new business. He will no longer be the busy band manager; instead he's going to produce music right here in New York. With Jaden. They've started McCarty Beat together.

So, tonight...that leaves Finn, Annabella, Logan, Nina, Dylan, Isabella, me, and...

"I'm hungwy wight now!" Sierra appears in the doorway.

"Oh!" Dylan grins down at the two-year-old. "Check you out with the attitude, spitfire."

And my little pistol just puts her hands on her hips, dark brown curls bouncing, stink-eye directed at Dylan. Not that it lasts. They're both putty in each others' hands. In fact, I'm pretty sure Sierra's the reason Dylan comes down from Massachusetts so often. Mr. MIT is all about computers by day, but when he comes home to visit here in Brooklyn, he'll have tea parties with Sierra.

"Almost, baby girl," Isabella promises with a wink.

"Finn!" I call. "Come set the table with Dylan!" I have much more important things to do now that Sierra's up from her too-late nap. Picking her up, I turn to Dylan and say, "There'll be eight of us."

"You're such a..." Isabella chuckles and shakes her head at me.

I grin and step closer—within the ladle range. "Such a what?"

"Sush a what?" Sierra mimics and starts to play with a strand of my wife's hair. "Sush a what?"

"You just wanna chill," Isabella giggles, failing to hold a scowl. "Every holiday, Edward." I kiss her jaw, her cheek, her luscious lips... "You just sit around and act boss—play with the kids and eat." Sierra and I are both giving her smooches now; it's the way to thaw her up. "Okay, so you clean afterward." I nod and kiss. I do clean. I also— "And you keep me sane." Yeah, that too. "Ugh, fine. Go play."

"I love you," I whisper against her cheek. And with one last kiss, I take Sierra, who's bouncing on my hip, and walk to the living room. It's where I find those other boys of mine, but I wonder where the girls are.

"Hey, Dad." Logan jerks his chin, though his eyes remain on the flat screen.

"Mom let you outta the kitchen, huh?" Finn smirks as I sit down on the couch between them. He quickly leans forward and kisses Sierra's cheek.

"Eeww!" She buries her face in the crook of my neck. "No you, Finn!"

I laugh. "That's right, baby. No Finn."

"Oh, shut up," Finn mutters.

"I will—" I nod and make faces with Sierra "—if you go help your mother like I said."

"You know, ever since you married Ma, you've turned into a ball-busta'," he tells me and stands up. And that's when Nina and Annabella walk in, seemingly coming from upstairs. "Come on, bro." He slaps Logan's shoulder.

"Daddy!" Annabella squeals. "I peed all by myself!"

I laugh.

"That's my girl," Logan chuckles, holding out his arms for his three-year-old. Damn, she looks just like her daddy, although she has Nina's dark eyes and cute nose. I wouldn't want Logan's nose—and mine, really—on a little girl. "You can sit here with Daddy while Mommy and Uncle Finn help Nana."

Like father, like son.

"I heard that, honey! Nice try!" Isabella shouts from the kitchen. *"Logan, Finn—get out hea'!"*

"Come on, hubs." Nina shakes her head in amusement at Logan. "Let's go help."

"Annabella, you can come sit with Grampa, too," I say as Sierra scoots over to sit on my right thigh. To which Logan scowls before Nina drags him out of the living room. Finn follows. "Yeah, my two princesses." Life is good with my two little ones on my lap. "Let's see if there's a game on or something."

"No!" Sierra huffs. "Tawtoon, Gwappa."

"But cartoons aren't funny."

They both give me the look.

So, I lose and put on the Disney Channel.

But it feels pretty damn good when they snuggle up against me, heads on my chest.

And you know what? When they start crying, I'll just hand them over to their parents. Well, Jaden and Haley aren't here, so I'd hand Sierra over to Dylan.

Back when the baby question came up for Isabella and me, we were relieved to find ourselves with the same thoughts on the subject. We felt that we were all for the idea of having a child together if that's what the other one wanted. And then we talked more about it; I stated my concern about the fact that my generation in our family is stuck with the twin making. The boys, not the girls. Alice lucked out. So, after some consideration, we agreed that we wanted to focus on ourselves—travel the world, have fun, work, settle down in our house here in Brooklyn... We were simply done with diaper changing and nighttime feedings.

We don't need another baby to tie us together.

We're married, and we have five grown children—that's more than enough. And now we have two precious grandchildren, too. I may even admit that I cried a little when each was born, but they're just so fucking cute. For the record, though, Carmine cried, too. Sometimes we argue over who loves Annabella the most, which makes our wives shake their heads at us. But it's okay. Carmine and I are used to it. Every time Isabella and I drive down to Keyport to visit Logan and Nina, Carmine and I go at it over nothing.

"Dis one's funny," Annabella giggles. "Stitch is so cute."

"*You* are cute," I counter and kiss her hair.

"Daddy say so also," she responds frankly.

"Well, Daddy's smart." My son got that from me.

"Wheu's Dada?" Sierra looks up at me, pouting. She takes after Jaden the most, but her personality is all Haley, including that pout. "An' Mama?"

"He's playing music," I remind her softly. "Remember? Mommy's with him. They'll be here tomorrow when you wake up."

"Tay." She settles against my chest again, her thumb going into her mouth.

~oOo~

"I'll take care of this later, sweetheart," I murmur against Isabella's neck. My hands are firm on her hips, and knowing that she's wearing sexy lingerie under her dress doesn't help with the problem I'm developing in my slacks. It makes me wish everybody would pack up and leave, though I know that won't happen. Finn has an apartment a few blocks over, so he'll probably go home, or maybe he's going out with friends later. Dylan might go with him; however, he usually sticks around here. But anyway, Logan and Nina are staying over with Annabella, and then they'll head home to Jersey tomorrow after dinner. And if I know Sierra, which I do, she'll end up between Isabella and me tonight. I don't like it, but Isabella never tells that little pistol no.

One of Sierra's and Annabella's favorites are sleepovers with their nana. Because Isabella spoils them rotten.

I would *never* do such a thing.

"I just wanna clear out a little," she chuckles when I kiss a ticklish spot. The dishes in the sink clank, and she tries to push me away, but she doesn't mean it. "Stop it, Edward. Go sit down with the others in the living room."

"No, I'm good here." I press my semi against her and nip a little on her earlobe. "Christ—you drive me crazy, woman." It's funny. At forty-two, I was boring and predictable, but now? At forty-eight, I'm living, and I prefer to do so with a couple handfuls of my sexy wife.

"Jesus, stop molesting my motha'!"

I groan and drop my forehead to Isabella's shoulder. "Hello to you, too, Finn."

That young man loves to cockblock me. Even though he lives on his own since a year back, he comes over for dinner a couple nights a week...and stays so late that I tend to fall asleep in my favorite chair in front of the TV. Granted, Isabella has no issue waking me up—every part—but still.

Finn thinks he's funny. I do not. Now, I love that kid as if he were my own son—Actually, that's not really correct, 'cause I see him as my son, but you don't have to like someone just because you love them. This is a fact.

Isabella says that I'm the one who often calls him over for dinner.

I call her a liar, which may or may not be the truth.

"This is our house, baby," Isabella points out with the bitch-brow cocked.

Finn shows his palms. "Jeez, I was just fucking wit'chu." He winks at me.

"She's all yours, old man. I'm on my way out—gonna see Mary Teresa."

Oh, we've heard of her. "And why is it that you never bring her home so your mother and I can meet her?" I arch a brow behind my glasses.

"That's what I'd like to know," Isabella huffs.

"Because youse're my parents!" He widens his arms. "You don't bring a girl home to your parents unless it's really fuckin' serious."

"You've dated this girl for months," I point out.

"Yeah, step on it." Isabella nods. "'Cause we want more grandbabies."

I nod.

When we found out last month that Haley and Jaden are expecting again, Isabella and I were over the moon. My wife even decided it was time to turn one of the guest rooms upstairs into a playroom for the kids. There are now bunk beds for four children—with room for a third bunk bed—more toys than in a toy store, and the bathroom next to that room is fully equipped for newborns, toddlers, and so on.

I've discovered that it's fun to buy baby socks. They're just too damn cute.

"Grandbabies," Finn chokes out. "I'm only twenty-two!"

Isabella and I shrug. Fuck being responsible nowadays. We just want more grandchildren to cuddle when they're smiling and cooing, and it's not like Finn's a struggling student. After studying business for four years, just like Logan did before him, he's now going into business with Carmine—again, like Logan has.

Rizzi is now a restaurant chain in the tri-state area. Nina and Logan run the catering business together; my boy is all about boring paperwork. Carmine still manages his first restaurant in Keyport, and Finn is running the one that just opened up here in Brooklyn.

"Your brother and Haley were twenty-two when they had Sierra." I fold my arms over my chest. "And Logan was twenty-one."

"I was nineteen when I had you," Isabella adds pointedly. "I had Jaden on my seventeenth birthday."

"Yeah, too young!" Finn argues. "Jesus Christ! Listen to yourselves!"

I look down to the floor and shuffle my feet. "All the cool kids have babies when they're young," I mumble.

Finn snorts a laugh. "Youse're just too much. I'm outta hea'." Walking over, he kisses his mother's cheek. "Thanks for dinner, Ma." And he shakes my hand. "See ya next year, old man."

Funny.

~oOo~

"Three minutes to go," Nina announces with a smile, sitting down in Logan's lap. Annabella and Sierra are asleep next to them on the couch; Dylan's seated in the armchair to the right of the couch, and Isabella and I are seated on the loveseat to the left. And the flat screen shows us what's happening in Times Square right now. "Any New Year's resolutions?"

I smile down at Isabella and shrug a little. Other than losing the holiday pounds, there's nothing on my agenda that would constitute a resolution. We're damn happy about what we already have. We'll just keep it up—the way we live now.

"Yeah, mine is to have more grandbabies," my wife quips.

Okay, that's a good one. "Sign me up for that one, as well." I nod and tighten my hold around Isabella's shoulders.

Logan huffs a chuckle and Nina whispers something in his ear, and whatever it was makes my son smile softly and nod.

I hate secret keepers.

"My New Year's resolution is to kick Caltech's ass more," Dylan says firmly as he fills up the champagne flutes on the coffee table. "They got shit on MIT."

I grin, knowing all about the two schools' rivalries. There's always something going on between them. Whether it's hosted by the

administrations or it's just unofficial World of Warcraft tournaments between the students...it's the East Coast versus the West Coast, and Dylan's passionate about it, to say the least.

"Hey, when are you off to Canada, Dad?" Logan asks.

"February first." My six-week book tour begins in Toronto and ends in the States—in San Diego. Isabella's accompanying me, as usual. Just like I usually follow her when she's working out of the country.

"Youse're always on the road," Nina says, snickering. "Logan and I bought my folks a weekend to the Keys this year for Christmas, and my dad is already bitching about leaving Jersey behind." She shakes her head and sighs. "But at least Mom's over the moon."

It's no secret that Carmine is a homebody.

I used to be the same, but maybe that's because I didn't have anyone before that I wanted to see the world with. Now is a whole other matter, and Isabella and I love to travel. Every year, we go back to Paris and stay at the hotel where I proposed six years ago, for instance. We also go to Vermont each year to celebrate Christmas. And this past summer, Isabella and I started a tradition where we take our grandchildren on a weekend trip; this year we just went to Coney Island, but we're going to Disney World next June. It's easier when the kids are a little older, and by that time, Annabella will be almost four, and Sierra will be three.

Then in November, we have our annual trip to celebrate the date we got married. Two weeks on some exotic beach.

That's what we can do with grown children.

"Ooh, only one minute to midnight!" Nina bounces on Logan's lap, causing him to groan.

"Hey." Isabella nudges me, and I look down at her. She smiles. "So handsome." She kisses my chin.

I smile. "Beautiful." Cupping her cheek, I dip down and kiss her softly on the lips. "We don't need New Year's resolutions, do we?"

"No." She sighs in contentment and snuggles closer. "What can top this?"

Nothing.

"I love you," she whispers.

Yeah, sometimes she can whisper. It doesn't happen very often, and it's the way I like it. We're a loud family. We take up space, and we're always getting into each others' business. My wife is nosy. So am I. We get on our children's nerves; they get on ours. But it's how we roll.

"Right back at you," I murmur.

"Ten...nine...eight..."

"Screw the countdown," I mutter. Tilting my head down once more, I kiss Isabella and wish her a happy new year. After all, patience has never been my strong suit.

"...four...three..."

In the background, our phones explode with incoming messages from friends and family.

"Happy New Year!"